



# THE SUDD INSTITUTE

RESEARCH FOR A PEACEFUL, JUST AND PROSPEROUS SOUTH SUDAN

P. O. Box 34, Juba, South Sudan • Tel: +211 (0)956 305 780  
Email: [thesudd.institute@gmail.com](mailto:thesudd.institute@gmail.com) • [www.suddinstitute.org](http://www.suddinstitute.org)

## Weekly Review

April 1, 2013

### South Sudan: Do We Have A Culture Of Peace?

*Jok Madut Jok*

Recently the government of Angola and UNESCO convened a conference, “Pan African Forum on the Sources and Resources for a Culture of Peace” in Luanda, Angola. This conference, which was attended by scholars, government officials, culture specialists from UNESCO, teachers and representatives of women and youth networks from across Africa, has spurred a question about whether South Sudan, a new country that is plagued by conflict, could embrace this relatively new movement as a possible way of mending ethnic relations that were wrecked by liberation wars. Are there any valuable resources that can be harnessed to help find a homegrown cultural philosophy that could be deployed for peace? The movement aims at using UNESCO’s motto about war and peace being both in the minds of people as a springboard to a continent-wide discussion on how Africa could use its own human resources in the area of culture as a way to forge relations that promote peaceful coexistence.

Many presentations by invited guests, including the opening address by the President of Angola, Jose Eduardo Dos Santos, group discussions, comments and questions from the audience, identified a number of issues, problems and how a “culture of peace” as a new paradigm could contribute to the solutions of Africa’s many conflicts and sources of violence. Among the main issues raised were the tragic wars from Angola’s own history to Congo, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea, North African uprisings, religious radicalism in northern Nigeria, Mali and Somalia, the long wars in the Sudans, elections-related violence in Kenya, the scourge of rape such as the alarming rates in South Africa and eastern Congo, and countless other violent encounters. Many participants observed that it is not just the number of wars occurring across Africa that alarms them, but also the type of gruesome acts that take place during these wars, such as amputation of limbs by Sierra Leon’s rebels, the mutilation of women’s bodies in Eastern Congo and other similar practices in other wars. Reflecting on the severity of the aforementioned war-induced horrible activities on the affected communities, the conference audience was of the view that these acts point to a rather new trend that drastically departs from traditional ethos and ethics. The conference also discussed the violence of poverty and deprivation that is rooted, for the most part, in all these conflicts and the type of governments these wars produce. Above all, the issue of most concern for the participants relates to youth as Africa’s largest population

category. Youth, it is maintained, is an asset—a resource that is vitally needed for development. However, this group could also be a serious liability if governments and communities do not significantly invest in their welfare. It is the actions of the youth that can make or break the future of Africa, the conference observed, and that African societies can only ignore the young people to the detriment of peace in their own communities as doing this potentially puts the future of the entire continent at risk.

The conference concluded with recommendations that include the need for governments and societies to invest in the kind of education that reveres the history of Africa, restores the moral values of traditional Africa and valorizes African arts, culture, wisdom and literature. So in addition to the new technologies and scientific methodologies, African governments need to emphasize on education for a culture of peace, perhaps by coordinating the work of the ministries of education, culture, communication and defense. Resources are limited but “we have to decide whether to invest more in militaries or in schools,” noted one participant.

The conference, however, has missed the mark in so many ways, at least in terms of first identifying and correctly describing the nature of the problem before designing the solutions. For example, it is no longer a mystery in Africa that some of the leading causes of conflict include the dual impact of bad governance, i.e., the ever more narrowing political space for the majority of people and inequitable distribution of resources. If Africans are going to speak about building a culture of peace on the foundation of African traditions, there is certainly a need to take a look at the way African political leaders have often ignored the openness that exists in their own village communities, choosing to govern with a totalitarian attitude that has no roots in traditional Africa. Whereas the political leaders of our time abhor criticism, in traditional African political systems, it is not uncommon for an ordinary person to criticize the chief to his face and there would be nothing the chief can do, other than trying to incorporate the views of that critic into his/her own policies. To the contrary, many African ruling politicians will be quick to denounce calls for democracy, claiming that it is a Western import, and in the process deny the African people something that is inherently African – the idea that critique of the systems of governance and the personalities that run them is a necessity as this helps enhance good governance.

In a sense, the “Pan African forum” on the culture of peace was disappointingly devoid of clear definitions. The phrase “culture of peace” itself was presented as an abstract concept whose premise remains opaque. Equally unclear is the concept of Africa and what is African about the people who live on this continent. Attempts to explain the African identity did not go beyond the geographical reality of finding ourselves in the same place. This raises a question of whether sharing a continent is enough in itself to unite the continent’s inhabitants as one people to embrace a culture that can be described as “African.” What are some of the commonalities, besides geography and the history of slavery and colonialism? Identifying a positive common ground might help in genuinely forming a foundation that the movement would need if it were to create a culture of peace. But that discussion was missing from the gathering in Luanda, not even a reflection on what the word “culture” translates into in African languages.

Furthermore, the high-minded speeches about the beauty of traditional African cultures, the romanticism attached to its values, and the lamenting of the increasing loss of African way of life, have all missed a very important point. While there is, undoubtedly, so much value in respecting, maintaining and promoting cultures and indigenous knowledge systems, as they are the markers of one's identity, it is important to acknowledge that too much violence and too many wars across the continent and throughout the world, are carried out in defense of culture. Even in the pitch of war, much of violence against women therein is often blamed on the madness of wartime, but men's violent acts are actually still built on cultural ideas about the woman's station in society. Many communities across Africa socialize their boys and girls into unequal individuals, which then becomes a license for men to be aggressive and for women to be seen as mere appendages to their men counter-parts. So, to the extent that culture is a solution to the scourge of violence, we must be conscious of the reality that culture is also part of the problem. Not to speak of the misuse of the name of culture to justify certain behaviors such as child marriage, domestic violence and ethnic chauvinism, is to obscure cultural challenges. This conference would have done well by honestly addressing the problems of culture as well as identifying positive common cultural practices that promote a culture of peace. Unfortunately, the Luanda affair was romanticism writ large.

As for South Sudan's position in this debate, we are in a suitable place to build something that the rest of the continent can take a leap from. A country with a long history of war that was waged partly in defense of culture and identity, this newly established independent nation which is building its institutions for the first time, has a great deal of indigenous knowledge systems that so many people are proud of. Do we have the will, leadership and vision to use that knowledge system to transform our experience of suffering into something positive for the future, to celebrate peace in our interactions with one another, to reach out to each other in recognition of the horrors we have caused to each other during our struggle for freedom, and to make South Sudan an example the world can be proud of? As we now consider the possibilities of a national peace and reconciliation exercise, do we have the capacity to reach out to our northern neighbors in a mighty exercise of forgiveness while remembering the history? Hope is unmistakable throughout South Sudan, that we may avoid another experience of war, that stability is our future and that a culture of ethnic understanding, good neighborliness with Sudan and peace in our families, become the norm. What do we need as a country to achieve this? These are not questions whose answers are readily available, but those that we must ask and discuss in the spirit of openness and mutual respect, for we all love this country, wishing that it becomes a peace maker in the region and beyond. A movement for a culture of peace, a Pan African endeavor or not, must begin with each individual, community and country, before the rest of the continent can benefit from it.

---

### **About Sudd Institute**

The Sudd Institute is an independent research organization that conducts and facilitates policy relevant research and training to inform public policy and practice, to create opportunities for discussion and debate, and to improve analytical capacity in South Sudan. The Sudd Institute's intention is to significantly improve the quality, impact, and accountability of local, national, and international policy- and decision-making in South Sudan in order to promote a more peaceful, just and prosperous society.

### **About the Author**

Jok Madut Jok is the Executive Director and a co-founder of the Sudd Institute. He is the author of three books and numerous articles covering gender, sexuality and reproductive health, humanitarian aid, ethnography of political violence, gender-based violence, war and slavery, and the politics of identity in Sudan.