TO EAT IN PEACE, SHARE WELL: A VISION OF A RELATIONAL PEACE FROM THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

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ABSTRACT

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is well known for incidences of violence, human rights violations and injustices. Indeed, ever since its formation as the Congo Free State (1885 to 1908) under King Leopold II of Belgium, the Congo has been imagined as a site of savagery, barbarity and extreme violence, embodying the primal heart of the dark continent of Africa (Dunn 2003). It is less well known that here, like elsewhere throughout Africa, a rich tradition of Búmùntù (authentic Personhood) endures – calling individuals and communities towards a relational peace (of social harmony alongside human dignity for all). Drawing from dialogues conducted in Kamina, the Haut-Lomami Province, this article explores a vision of peace arising from such a tradition. It asks the question – what might the struggle for peace look like if the challenge is understood not as a negative one of ending an "inherent" violence, but instead as a positive one of extending an existing peace?

KEY TERMS: Búmùntù, Ubuntu, Peace, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

This article appeared in a special issue of the African Journal of Social Work (AJSW) titled Ubuntu Social Work. The special issue focused on short articles that advanced the theory and practice of ubuntu in social work. In the special issue, these definitions were used:

- *Ubuntu refers to a collection of values and practices that black people of Africa or of African origin view as making people authentic human beings. While the nuances of these values and practices vary across different ethnic groups, they all point to one thing – an authentic individual human being is part of a larger and more significant relational, communal, societal, environmental and spiritual world.*
- *Ubuntu social work refers to social work that is theoretically, pedagogically and practically grounded in ubuntu.*
- *The term ubuntu is expressed differently is several African communities and languages but all referring to the same thing. In Angola, it is known as gimuntu, Botswana (muthu), Burkina Faso (maaya), Burundi (ubuntu), Cameroon (bato), Congo (bantu), Congo Democratic Republic (bomoto/bantu), Cote d'Ivoire (maaya), Equatorial Guinea (maaya), Guinea (maaya), Gambia (maaya), Ghana (biako ye), Kenya (utu/munto/mondo), Liberia (maaya), Malawi (umunthu), Mali (maaya/hadama de ya), Mozambique (vumuntu), Namibia (omundu), Nigeria (mutunchi/iwa/agwa), Rwanda (bantu), Sierra Leonne (maaya), South Africa (ubuntu/botho), Tanzania (utu/obuntu/bumuntu), Uganda (obuntu), Zambia (umunthu/ubuntu) and Zimbabwe (hunhu/unhu/botho/ubuntu). It is also found in other Bantu countries not mentioned here.*

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In the last few decades, as stories of the Congo wars of the 1990s and their smouldering aftermaths have crept onto the back pages of international newspapers, the image of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) as a perennial "heart of darkness" has been affirmed and reaffirmed. Ascending from the pits of this apparent "hell on earth," these reports have emphasised the particular savagery and barbarism of the forms of violence being perpetrated on Congolese soil. Whilst such accounts speak to the reality of an immense violence, deeply problematic has been the uneasy fascination with these most "grotesque" and "abhorrent" aspects of the wars, accompanied by adjectives such as "unimaginable," "incomprehensible" and "insensate." Not only do such accounts reinvigorate long serving colonial imaginary of the Congo as a site of savagery, barbarity and extreme violence (Dunn 2003), but more dangerously, such accounts can lead to a deep pessimism which reduces our curiosity in exploring the roots of violence and our creativity in responding to it (De Zulueta, 2006). Indeed, writing of the international peace-building effort during Congo's transition from 'war to peace' (2003-2006), Autesserre (2010) identifies a widespread view amongst international actors that Congo was "inherently" violent (p. 74-81) and that the ongoing violence in the east of the country was not seen as evidence that war was continuing, but instead was viewed as a "normal feature of a peaceful Congo" (p. 67). It can be argued that such a pessimism can be used not only to justify inaction and apathy, but can also serve to reinforce a dominant view characteristic of a "liberal peace" - that decentralized violence remains a problem of the absence of a common power. The result – an emphasis on exclusively top-down interventions applied at the national and regional level. It is worth then reflecting on the argument that: "it matters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what knowledge knows knowledges. It matters what relations relate relations. It matters what worlds world worlds. It matters what stories tell stories" (Haraway, 2016, p. 35). If dominant narratives positioned firmly within Eurocentric paradigms appear to tell a story which begins with the irreducibility of violence and the impossibility of peace, what might alternative narratives arising from Afrocentric paradigms offer? What might an engagement with *Bumuntu* (authentic Personhood), a rich humanist tradition shared throughout Africa, contribute in the struggle for peace and social justice? Drawing from dialogues conducted in Kamina, the Haut-Lomami Province of the DRC as part of a doctoral thesis (Sephton, 2018), this article explores the relationship between humanness, violence and peace from another angle. More specifically, it explores a vision of peace arising from the *Búmùntù* (authentic Personhood) paradigm of the Luba tradition (Baluba Katanga) and invites reflection on the implications of this for conceptions of and approaches to peacebuilding.

BACKGROUND

Before entering into the Luba (DRC) context, it is worth noting that it is the equivalent concept *Ubuntu* in the South African context that has received substantial global attention for its potential for conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Africa (Akinola & Okeke Uzodike 2018; Murithi 2006). It was in this context that leaders like Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu actively drew on the concept to build a new consensus in post-apartheid South Africa. As a result, there has been a rich and substantive discourse on *Ubuntu* and its potential as a productive peace-enhancing and -maintaining concept, as well as a powerful critique of its resurgence (and reinvention) applied alongside the reinvention of South Africa as a nation (Hailey, 2008; Mantolini and Kwindingwi, 2013; Marx, 2002; Praeg, 2014). In contrast, in the Congolese context, there has been a relative silence - with the exception of a small collection of contemporary Congolese scholars who have argued for its potential to promote dialogue and peaceful coexistence, to resist tyranny and human rights violations and to enhance human flourishing (Muyingi, 2013; Nkulu N'Sengha, 2002, 2008, 2011; Yanga, 2006). Building on these voices, my own work (Sephton, 2018) led me to the city of Kamina in the Haut-Lomami Province of the DRC to engage in a dialogue on *Búmùntù*. Over a period of 6 months (a preliminary field trip of one month in 2014 and a secondary field trip of five months in 2015), over 80 dialogues were facilitated with individuals and communities in and around Kamina - in search of a better understanding of the place and meaning of peace associated with this concept, and in search of a better understanding of the struggle for such a peace in the contemporary context. In stark contrast to the representation of Congo as "inherently" violent and the idea that ongoing violence in the DRC is "normal" even in a peaceful Congo, these voices instead testify to the *endurance* of this rich humanist tradition which, I suggest - ultimately places the struggle for peace as a defining characteristic of "being," or more precisely of "becoming" human.

A VISION OF PEACE

In the Kiluba language of the Baluba Katanga (DRC) this is captured in the proverb: "*Bwino bonso ke Bwino, Bwino I kwikala ne Bantu" (*All knowledge is not knowledge, the only true knowledge is to know how-to live-in harmony with our fellow human beings). Explaining this, one participant commented that: "No matter what profession you might learn in the world, it will not suffice. No matter who you might be, it will not suffice. But what completes you, is the knowhow to live in harmony with others." (Longwa Banza Gary, dialogue #4, June—July, 2014). Importantly, in articulating *Búmùntù* many individuals expressed the view that the foundation of this

is the deep belief in the sacred and inviolable dignity of the human being by way of its creation. This is captured in the Luba proverb "*Muntu I Kipangwa kya Vidye*" (a human being is a divine creature). Accordingly, a *Muntu* (human being) is said to signify one who is born, who respires, who thinks, who feels etc. By "being" *Muntu* (human being) one is naturally deserving of a deep respect. This belief then serves as an onus for other articulations of *Búmùntù* which move beyond this innate dignity, towards instead the earnt dignity associated with the "*savoir vivre avec les autres" (knowhow to live with others)*. Accordingly, *Muntu* (human being) was also said to signify one who exemplifies a plethora of moral qualities (or virtues) including: *Kanye (Kindness), Kutambula Bantu (Hospitality), Buntu (Generosity), Sangaji (Joy), Kwishipeja (Humility), Kwilemeka et kulemeka (Respect (for oneself and for others)), Kwilunga pamo ne bantu (Solidarity), Bunvu (Shame/Modesty), Bubinebine (truthfulness), Kanemo (Respect)* amongst others. In contrast to the emphasis on "being," here the emphasis was instead placed on a "becoming." Accordingly, one can "become" *Muntu* (human being) by way of one's behaviour, one's ability to live in harmony with others.

It is in line with such articulations, that I have suggested that the struggle for peace (expressed as social harmony alongside human dignity for all) can be understood as core to the task of "becoming" human. Indeed, the central place of peace amongst the Luba is expressed as follows: "*Búmùntù*: this is to mean the way to live socially with other people. It is not division. Here, amongst the *Baluba*, it is to live in harmony with others, in peace with others. This is *Búmùntù*" (Rev. Ilunga Mwepu Dikonzo Edmond, dialogue #28, September, 2015). Such a peace was described as a "real peace" which speaks not only to the absence of violence, but instead towards a broader relational peace. This was expressed through numerous proverbs. For example, "*kudja talala ikwabana biya*" (to eat in peace, share well) which through the metaphor of sharing food, is said to express the value of the equal distribution of wealth/resources as a key element of a peaceful and harmonious society. Another proverb, "*kwa mukulu kikaiko ke kubulwe kikakutwala*" (never neglect anyone in society, in the community or in the family) reminds that everyone is indispensable and admonishes against the rejection or exclusion of anyone in society. Finally, "*dyabutula ngulungu, ki.mungu nandi ka.same butombe*" (the hyena rejoices at the antelope's birth) uses a story of a hyena and an antelope as a criticism of *nshikanyi,* a term in Kiluba which has varying translations as *la haine (hatred); la jalousie (jealousy); la sorcellerie (witchcraft); la mauvaise foi (bad faith); and mauvaise intention (bad/evil intention).* Ultimately, it speaks against both thoughts and actions which cause the suffering of another, thus disturbing the harmony in society. According to Lwala Kazadi Hypolyte (dialogue #46, October, 2015) "with this proverb, one is asking people not to harm the weak, or those who are inferior. They must be considered as human beings just like you. One must respect their dignity, although they are weak." I argue that such proverbs speak to the vision of a "relational peace" with an emphasis on social justice, social cohesion and human rights amongst other factors.

THE STRUGGLE FOR A "REAL PEACE"

Of course, the existence of such a vision does not negate the reality of everyday incidences of violence, human rights violations and injustices. Nor, I should add, does it negate the possibility of a violence existing alongside, or even within *Búmùntù.* Whilst Kamina as a city has been largely protected from the more explicit "savagery and barbarism" associated with the Congo wars of the 1990s and their aftermaths, this absence of direct violence is not seen as indicative of peace. Instead, individuals and communities described a contemporary reality in which a "real peace" was "very far." Beyond the many indications of this at the national level, this was also associated with a dominant narrative found throughout our dialogues regarding a more local "relational peace:" that the vision and practice of *Búmùntù* is being "lost," "forgotten," "hidden," "threatened" or "trampled on" in the present moment and that there has been a paradigm shift of the basic values informing society - a departure from the communitarianism, solidarity, and unity of a life lived in harmony with others towards instead the "*chacun pour soi*" (everyone for himself/herself) where *"nshikanyi"* (bad faith) reigns. Whilst at times this seemed to be a simplistic narrative which emphasized a loss of social behaviour at the local level as a cause of violence, in the context of our dialogues as a whole, this was not the case. Instead, there was an awareness of the immensely complex and inter-penetrating local, national, regional and global systems which render seemingly "impossible" the struggle for such a "relational peace" (social harmony alongside human dignity for all.)

CONCLUSION

Unfortunately, it is not in the scope of this article to enter into an analysis of such complex and inter-penetrating systems. Nor, is it in scope to enter into the many complexities and contradictions of applications of *Búmùntù* on the contemporary terrain. The purpose of this article is therefore not to promote *Búmùntù* as an inherently peace-enhancing and maintaining concept that should be restored, revitalized and regenerated. Indeed, as a more thorough analysis can show, one can find evidence of *Búmùntù* being stretched, reconstructed, redefined and critiqued to both justify and condemn forms of violence (Sephton, 2018). Instead, the purpose of this article is simpler. It asks us to reflect on the relationship between humanness, violence and peace from another angle. If,

as noted earlier, a dominant narrative appears to be one which begins with the irreducibility of violence and the impossibility of peace, then what might that narrative look like if it begins with *Búmùntù* as a foundation?

Far from the image of violence being a 'normal' state even in a peaceful Congo, I suggest that a dialogue on *Búmùntù* offers a humanising narrative of violence and peace in the DRC. It asks us to begin the struggle for peace from an understanding of the existence of rich traditions of peace; the presence of a rich language for articulating the sacred and inviolable dignity of the human being; and the agency of local actors who continue to utilise local concepts, such as *Búmùntù*, to resist and condemn violence and to promote and restore peace. It asks us to go beyond peace as the absence of violence, to instead a broader peace which incorporates social justice, social cohesion and human rights. Most importantly, however, if "to be is to be in harmony with our fellow human beings," then the true gift of *Búmùntù* is that it demands a story that not only begins with the possibility of peace, but indeed the necessity of peace. It "encourages us — no, insists — that we constantly ask this question, perpetually return to it" (Praeg, 2014, p.29) — how indeed do we "live in harmony with our fellow human beings?" *Búmùntù* obliges us to be curious, to be creative, and to become "authentically" human no matter how challenging the circumstances may be.

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