

Peace and Conflict in Africa: Reflections from an African Peacebuilder

I Causes, Dynamics and Implications for the Emerging Global Order

Dr. Assefa: The discussion of large scale social conflicts, such as civil wars, is liable to be tragic, depressing and, at times, outright pessimistic, because it is about brother against brother, neighbor against neighbor, and children against their parents. And for some reason, Africa seems to have a large share of this tragedy. But it will be very presumptuous of me, or for that matter, anybody, to talk about African conflicts, their root causes and their implications in so short a time, and be definitive about it. Instead, I'm going to make some preliminary remarks and observations on large-scale social conflicts -- focussing on civil wars in Africa -- and look at three underlying causes. These are the breakdown of African institutions, issues surrounding leadership in Africa, and the global context and its impact on African conflicts.

When one looks at the continent of Africa, compared to many continents and peoples, it is a continent that has been deeply traumatized. It has been robbed, massacred, degraded, discriminated against, and brutally exploited, not just once, twice, or thrice, but successively over generations, and for centuries. And I will talk about three traumatic episodes in recent African history that have had significant impact on the breakdown of African institutions, and thereby on the incidence and the intensity of conflicts in Africa. And these episodes are slavery, colonialism, and the modernization process.

I know these days it's not very fashionable to talk about slavery and colonialism in discussions of African conflicts. People want to talk about the here and now. However,

I also believe that one cannot understand the deep sources of conflict in Africa without understanding the deep traumas that have come from its history. And talking about these events does not mean that there are no other explanations for these conflicts. What is happening in current economic, political, and social life in Africa has a lot to contribute, but the advents of slavery, colonialism, and the modernization process provide a deep insight into the present situation. Secondly, I also notice that many accounts that I have seen of this era -- particularly of slavery -- seem to be very intellectualized. And I've found it is personally very useful to come face to face with the little evidence that we have of this dark period in human history by visiting museums or some historical sites that remind us of the transactions during this time. Then one begins to have a glimpse of what the human, social, political, economic, and spiritual consequences have been.

Recently, I had the opportunity to visit the old slave markets in Zanzibar. And about a year ago, I was in Senegal at the port where most of the slaves from west Africa were exported to the New World. Some estimate that forty to sixty million Africans have been exported from west Africa alone during this time of slavery. In these Zanzibar markets, they were telling me that about twenty thousand people were sold every year. And the twenty thousands were only ten percent of the catch. The other ninety percent died along the way to the market. So about two hundred thousand people were captured yearly. And when you think of the number of years, of centuries, that slavery has prevailed in that continent, you can imagine the incredible amount of human displacement that happened during this time. Some historians talk about it as one of the greatest events of human displacement in history. And one of the things that touched me deeply at this slave market was what happened once the slaves got there. The slaves would carry ivory -- and

some of the tusks were so heavy that one person could not carry it -- and when they reached the market, both the ivory and the slaves were sold. But even for those that made it to the market, there was a test for who was going to be sold. And this would be decided by whipping the slaves in front of the prospective buyer. The one that could withstand the whipping was considered strong enough, and attracted a good price. Those that could not withstand the pain and fainted were considered weak and whipped until they died. And these slaves eventually served to build up the wealth of Arabia, Britain, France, Portugal, Spain, the United States and the Middle East.

The horror of slavery was not only its incomprehensible cruelty but also the complete traumatization of African societies, the impoverishment of communities by taking away its strongest and most productive members, and the destruction of the fiber that held communities together. And this was not the end of this greed and brutality. It was not enough for Europe to have the bodies of Africans and exploit their labor; now Europe wanted the land. So five European powers partitioned off the whole continent among themselves to colonize and exploit it without any restraint. Africans that escaped slavery now faced a new form of dehumanization and exploitation under the banner of colonialism. Under this system, the African was not considered a human being; he was a bit better than the animal, but lower than the European human. African culture, religion, and institutions were considered inferior and the African had to even give up his name in order to be accepted by the colonial masters.

Under colonialism and slavery, African traditional institutions of governance disintegrated or disappeared. The glues of African society were coming loose. Ethnic groups were pitted against each other for the purpose of weakening them in favor of the

colonial master. In some instances, the colonists created ethnic hierarchy and some ethnic groups were made to rule over the others. This increased animosity and destructive competition. Then towards the end of colonialism, came the modernization process. The new economic, political, and educational systems destroyed whatever was left of the systems that African societies had evolved over generations, and put in place a totally alien value system. Western education in Africa generated even more alienation between the educated and the communities that they came from. Education became an instrument to supplant everything that is African instead of enhancing or adapting it to meet emerging needs of the African society. This is not to say that nothing good has come out of the modernization process, or everything that is traditional is good. There are many backward things about African traditions, and a lot of good has come from modernization. But all traditional societies like those in Africa, had developed values and institutions that enabled them to make sense of who they were, to coexist with each other, to cope with their environment, and to manage their resources. When this was brutally dismantled or discredited as it was during slavery and colonialism, a deep trauma and disorientation occurred. And this has significant implications on conflict at the personal, psychological, and social level. This lack of roots and the importation and imposition of values, ideologies and institutions on a society without the adequate consideration for whether it is well adapted to that social reality, contributes a great deal to understand African conflicts. When you consider all these traumas, it even surprises me that Africa is not in a worse situation. In fact, one can say that the African people and their culture are survivors. There are still lots of positive and healthy things about that society that if managed properly, could be the sources of Africa's salvation.

Here I would like to share a poem with you, written by one of my mentors, Adam Curle. He was a professor at Bradford University before his retirement. It's called "Africa" and it goes like this:

"It is sickening to think how much we,
the slavers, settlers, exploiters, and such like muck
have messed the whole place up,
canting culture-killer missionaries,
corrupt traders in arms,
junk, worthless drugs, smart-aleck experts, scads of smug officials,
clowns all certain that they knew what is best for the natives.

This sorry crew have bled,
starved, robbed, attacked, belittled, divided, racked,
incestuously wrecked this motherland,
the womb from whom came humankind.

Allow me opposed to calm my hungry mind
before I pay humble tribute to the men and women,
so patient, so forgiving.

When I would have longed to hit him,
they obstinately forbore,

awaiting a change of heart that never came.

Only more cunning hidden pillage aid now the name for modern theft,

but the result the same.

But not many really understand our implications in the sort of land.

Once when I told a friendly man that we had lived ten years in Africa,

he answered, “Africa, eh?” reflected and said,

“A lot of troubles with the Negroes there, I’ve read.”

The African state has generated much conflict and miserably failed to regulate conflict, as healthy states should. It has been repressive, the holders of state power have been brutal and unaccountable, and governments have been corrupt and exclusive of many social groups. When one looks closely at the African state one observes that it is not adapted to African tradition, life, worldview or social relationships. The modern African state mimics the colonial states which it followed. In the previous system, the state was a mechanism that subjugated the entire country. The entire economic, political, religious and cultural system was used for the benefit of one ethnic racial group -- in that case, the whites -- at the exclusion of all Africans. Most of the African political leaders that took state power in independent Africa were socialized under this system. So when it was their turn to be at the helm, they copied the model on which they grew up. They made the state an instrument of oppression for the benefit of their own ethnic groups at the exclusion of others. Many conflicts have erupted around competition between ethnic groups and the state is seen as belonging only to those that are in power. Therefore, there isn't much of a sense of accountability or internal checks and balances. As a result, there have been endless wars between those that are in power and those that have been excluded for control of the state, just as during independence, African leaders struggled

to take the state away from their colonial masters.

And let me make what I am saying clear. All these historical and global factors do not exonerate Africans from their responsibility for their plight. Many states have now experimented with independence for close to forty years, and some even for a longer period. Leaders can make a huge difference. They can bring the worst or the best out of people. If leaders opt for the best, it can still be done in Africa. People point to the miserable poverty of Africans that they say underlie many of the conflicts, but actually Africa is very rich, and with proper leadership, tremendous prosperity can be unleashed in that continent. Unfortunately, the continent has failed in generating leaders who have the capacity to bring people together, to heal their wounds, and inspire them to collaborate. Instead, the types that we are generously endowed with are those that thrive in hatred, exclusion and selfishness. One of the astounding aspects of Africa, as I said before, is that despite all this, the continent is rich and the people are quite gentle and friendly. African people have still a lot of humanity left. This is why even those who know Africa, once stung by the African bug can never get it out of their soul. The last words of David Livingstone, one of the first explorers of the Nile were, “When I die, bury my body in Britain, but bury my heart in Africa.” And they took out his heart and buried it in Zambia.

The third element that I want to touch on is the global context in which Africa’s conflicts play out and the role that they play in contributing to or generating conflicts. Here, there are two main factors. The first is the contradiction between the professed values of the global political and economic order and its practice. Although the west and the industrial North profess democracy and equity as desirable values and push it on the

world, their own practices in the international arena dramatically contradict these values. The affluent societies that constitute about 25% of humanity control over 75% of the world's resources and also dominate the global, political and military power. Therefore, the model of governments and economic management that this global order presents for the rest of the world is not much different from the situation which prevails in many conflict-ridden African states -- such as minority rule, exclusion and unaccountability. The president of one state in Africa which got its independence about eight years ago, said in a press interview, "What I learned from my six years of presidency by looking at the global order is that might makes right." This is the stuff that is tearing apart the societies of Africa.

The second factor is that there are some specific policies that are emerging from the prevailing global order and feeding conflict in Africa. Specifically, these are the structural adjustment and privatization policies that are being pushed onto the poor and conflict-ridden countries in Africa. Even though the long-term benefit of these policies can be debated, what we are observing is that they are generating an increasing gap between the rich and the poor. More and more people are joining the ranks of the dissatisfied and angry and are turning to crime, armed robbery, prostitution or destructive insurgencies such as the Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone. When I think of my own country, Ethiopia, and the impact that these policies have, I am greatly saddened. In the late '60s and early '70s, I was in the student movement. At that time, the gross inequality between the rich and the poor had created a revolutionary situation in which students and other civil society actors were militating for rapid social change. But then the social process went out of hand and created a revolution that ultimately overthrew the

monarchy and brought about a very brutal dictatorship. And in the process of this change a high human price was paid. After a long time, with the collapse of the socialist systems in Eastern Europe, this system also collapsed, and we had a new regime that adopted the free-enterprise system as a remedy for the country's problems. Now, when I go to Ethiopia, I see that the rich are getting incredibly rich, but the poor are getting poorer. Again, I see cruel history repeating itself and I wonder when we are going to learn from the past. After all, sooner or later those that are disenfranchised are going to hear the calls of political demagogues. I get very angry to see how the international system forces us to get into situations that make us repeat what we thought we have left behind.

In conclusion, as we could see from this presentation that some of the causes and problems that underlie conflicts in Africa seem to emerge out of unique African situations while others seem to be shared by all of us as members of the global order. As we saw already, African history is also European, American and Middle Eastern history. Ironically, just as the colonized Africans and the slaves suffered, the enslavers and the colonists also suffered, because an ideology that degrades certain human beings at the hands of others also degrades all of humanity. The stories of slavery and colonialism are told not to point accusing fingers or inculcate guilt, but to warn all of us of the immense capacity that we all have for evil, and to challenge us to hold hands, examine our consciences and dismantle the values, practices and institutions that we still have today and which continue to enslave people and colonize their minds. There are oppressive and exploitative national and global economic systems that thrive on evil by supplying instruments of human brutality against each other. There are social and cultural systems that deprive 2/3 of humanity and nature of their proper place on this earth. Perhaps there

is hope of global partnership among those that have been alienated by the emerging order to cooperate across borders and contribute to the creation of a much more compassionate and inclusive global system. If we don't use the tale of this suffering to challenge us to bring about this transformation, then indeed the experience of African suffering has been in vain. Thank You.

Question: What does peace building mean and can you give some examples of what peace-builders do from experience in Africa?

Dr. Assefa: For me, peace building really implies working on peace from the grassroots up. I use the metaphor of constructing a house. When you build a house, you start from the foundation, then you build the walls and then the roof. For me, peace-building and the way I use it in my practice is trying to work with grassroots organizations like NGOs, women's groups, and youth groups to mobilize people to work together for peace and reconciliation in their society. For example, if the people have been denied peace because their leaders are at war with each other, we start by demanding peace from their leaders, and actively working for negotiations to identify alternatives to war. Or, in situations where societies have been torn apart by violence, peace building work begins by examining how reconciliation can be promoted between warring groups or groups that have suffered brutalities from each other.

Question: How has the legacy of some of the problems you mentioned like the history of slavery led to the current situation in Rwanda?

Dr. Assefa: The current situation in Rwanda is very directly linked with what happened in that country during Belgium colonialism. And the conflict is astounding because the Hutus and the Tutsis of Rwanda are the same people; they speak the same language, they have the same culture, they intermarry, and they share the same geographical territory. Instead of thinking of them as ethnic groups it is probably more appropriate to consider them caste systems. To a large extent the Hutus are farmers, while the Tutsis are pastoralists. But what happened during the Belgium era was that the Belgians selectively privileged the Tutsis and gave them political power and the Tutsis became proxies for collecting the products that Belgium expected from Rwanda from the Hutus. Naturally this generated a tremendous animosity between the two groups as the Tutsis were now seen as the agents of the foreign masters that exploited the poor Hutus. Ultimately the Belgians even began to identify physical characteristics that would distinguish the Hutu and the Tutsi. They said that a Tutsi is tall and has European features and is therefore qualified to govern, while the Hutu is much more African looking, and more appropriate for running non-administrative and non-government matter in the state. And after that, the distinction between Hutus and Tutsis began to take on a racial character. But this is not a watertight categorization because that there are still many Hutus that are tall and have Tutsi features and vice versa. In fact, during the war many people were killed by mistaken identity, and there were others that bribed their way to get a different identity. So it is the perception rather than the reality of differences between these people that really was the stuff of this conflict.

After the Belgians left, bad political leaders continued taking advantage of the

situation. But the Hutus were numerically superior, and their leaders felt that the time had come for political power to be in their hands. Which meant that the governing Tutsis had to be thrown out. And this started a cycle of revenge that when the Hutus were in power they would punish the Tutsis for what they had done in the past, and when the Tutsis were in power they punished the Hutus for what they had done or what they might do. And this was the cycle that led to the genocide in April 1994.

Question: Could you give us an insight into the Ethiopia-Eritrea war, and are you involved in resolving this conflict?

Dr. Assefa: I think the Ethiopian-Eritrean War is one of those conflicts that is very difficult to describe or analyze because it doesn't fall into the frameworks that we usually have to understand and analyze conflicts. And what is most tragic about this is that when you look at this conflict on the people-to-people level, even at this stage where lots of brutalities have been committed, the readiness of people to forgive and reestablish the old relationship is very high. And this capacity for people to forgive is the kind of thing that also gives me hope about Africa.

Unfortunately, Ethiopia and Eritrea have not been blessed by leadership that tries to take advantage of the good in people. There is a sense of incompatibility between the leadership that is in Eritrea and in Ethiopia. The leaders in these two countries were very close colleagues at one time, but as soon as this conflict erupted they began to hit at each other's vulnerabilities and pushed it to a point of no return. And what is sad is that people are being held hostage by a conflict that is not serious enough to cause such bloodshed.

After all, there are many creative options to deal with a boundary issue. One possibility is to make the border loose so that people on both sides can maintain their common identity. But cutting the same people into two and giving them an artificial identity does not make sense to their history and to who they are. In fact, I am at a loss in terms of understanding that conflict. And many people are at a loss, which is why it has been so difficult to deal with. I have tried to work on a people-to-people reconciliation basis, and have been extremely encouraged by the kind of response that I was able to get both from the Ethiopian and the Eritrean side. Once I organized a meeting for about thirty officials from Ethiopia and twenty officials from Eritrea. The exchange that took place and the desire for reconciliation was amazing. But it does not seem to have political space, and this is its tragedy.

Question: Would you mind talking a little bit about Nigeria and the corruption that's so common for Africa. Do you think that Obasanjo has a chance to make a unity out of his disparate country which has so many tribalisms?

Dr. Assefa: I don't envy Obasanjo. He is has a very difficult balancing act. If he continues alienating the military I don't know how long he might stay in power. So, how does he bring about reform that's acceptable to his own followers, the military and the international community -- particularly the World Bank and the IMF? So far, I think he is doing a good job. One of the things that I hear he has done is to restructure the military and to take out some of the corrupt military leaders that could be possible threats to him. But that doesn't give security because if a person has the intention to start

an insurgency, it is not very difficult to do so. The other problem is that the IMF is putting a lot of pressure on Nigeria to repay its thirty billion dollar international debt. And therefore, instead of showing economic results from the reform process that he is undertaking in Nigeria, Obasanjo might have to use those same resources to repay the debt, and people will not see a difference. And they will ask, "We've got a new person but what difference has he made for us?" And this can create a new opposition that could undermine him. So I think it is too early to pass a verdict on his ability to bring about meaningful reform in Nigeria, but I commend him for his good start and the courage that he has shown in terms of dealing with the military.

Question: I come from Liberia. There's a story about a missionary who, when he first came to Liberia, saw that people used to paste the walls of their huts with sand from the river. And this missionary saw that the walls glowed in the night. He called the chief and said, "Look, all these shining things on the wall are evil spirits," only to find out that they were diamonds. He made out with so many diamonds that he came here and said do not go to Africa -- there's much evil there. My point is that corruption in Africa does not come from Africa. Corruption comes from here. What do you think will help us develop Africa? What is it about this place that when we go back to Africa we have to rule our people before we know we are in Africa?

Dr. Assefa: Of course, what happens in Africa is also connected to what happens in the rest of the world. And sometimes these are the kinds of things that we miss. The danger in that kind of thinking lies in externalizing everything and saying that everything bad

and evil comes from outside. There are some bad and evil things that also come out of the continent of Africa. But there is a fertile ground in the international system that tends to nurture and take advantage of these kinds of behavior. Take Congo, which used to be Zaire -- one of the most corrupt countries on earth that had an extremely brutal dictatorship. But, until recently, some of the greatest proponents of democracy including the United States and France, were its greatest supporters. They knew what was happening in the country but they never hesitated to provide weapons and advice for almost thirty years. So yes, outsiders did not make Mobutu. But, Mobutu would not have stayed as long as he did had he not been nurtured and supported by the international community. So, in a way, what makes dealing with African problems difficult is its interconnection with the global system. And in some instances, even if Africans were to say they want to have peace, the international system may not allow that to happen because it benefits from the consequence of conflict as arms suppliers, beneficiaries and illicit resource imports etc. Many are taking advantage of the tremendous wealth of Congo, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. For example, during the brutal war in Liberia, the brother of the French prime minister was actively engaged in exporting timber out of Liberia. And these are the secondary parties that are very difficult to bring to the negotiating table and make peace-building even more difficult. Anyway, this is what I mean by a partnership between the North and South. And as much as there needs to be peace-building work in Africa, there also needs to be a similar drive in North America and in Europe. It is not only important to see what Africans could do to change the situation in Africa, but what it is that the big powers -- the industrial and affluent North -- can do to contribute to and restrain from the behavior that feeds these conflicts in Africa.

And often, Africans in the Diaspora are more extremists than Africans inside Africa. The latter have to be realistic about conflict and how to coexist with each other because coexistence is not a luxury -- it is a necessity. So, my message is also to those Africans in the Diaspora that would have to learn how to take responsible leadership. We also need to develop a new ethic for the African intellectual who thinks that everything has to be criticized, and the role and responsibility of the intellectual ends in destroying -- theoretically -- whatever exists there. While we need academic honesty, we need have to also be constructive --- we have the responsibility of also putting together.

Question: One issue that hasn't been mentioned is peace in settler societies like South Africa and Zimbabwe. Many people think that these countries are unique in the history of African peace building. And some people contest the idea that there is a universal way of looking at peace. They feel that you can't look at Africa as just one region, but as many regions. My question is, given what is happening in South Africa -- the unequal political and economic control of the resources, the involvement of the international community, and the refusal of those who control the means of production to share them -how do you envisage the building of peace within that context?

Dr. Assefa: I think this is one of the difficulties of conflicts. To a certain extent, every conflict situation is unique and a solution has to be appropriate to that situation. And when it comes to African conflicts it is a great mistake to say that if this worked in one place, then it should work also in other places. However, we might be able to make observations. And there are lots of lessons that we can learn from each other in terms of various processes. We do not have to reinvent the wheel every time. In fact, there is

a saying in my culture which says, “A fool learns from his own mistakes, but a wise man learns from the mistakes of others.”

In the case of settler societies like Zimbabwe and in South Africa, I think the big danger is to realize, as in the example of South Africa, that because there has been a black take-over of political power the problem has not yet been resolved. In fact, you can even say an even more serious conflict is going on, which previously was blatant and easier to mobilize support from the world, but now has an invisible enemy. And to a certain extent, giving political power to blacks, while whites still control the economic system, is a way of perpetuating rather than resolving that conflict.

So, what happened under Mandela? What happened during that transition in South Africa? This is only the beginning of long journey for peace in South Africa. Sometimes we make the mistake of confusing the first step with the last, and we forget the commitment that we have to keep on with this work. And when things go back to the way they were before, we become easily disillusioned and say “Well, we tried it, it doesn’t work, therefore it must be the fault of these people.” But the fault is in our thinking because this is not a short-term problem. If it took decades to develop, it is going to take decades to solve. Naturally we should celebrate hope when we see it, but we should not be deceived by what is happening on the outside. There is a lot of work that needs to be done in South Africa.

Question: There are many young people with a lot of potential to make many changes in the world. What events or conditions in your youth gave you the character, the

motivation, and the ability to become a peace builder?

Dr. Assefa: It is very important to think of what kind of models we are leaving behind for our youth. And it's very important to involve them early enough and help them to begin making their own contributions. I realized recently that my mother suffers from rheumatism and she has been advised by doctors to rest. But when I call home, I don't find her. And that upsets me, because her suffering is not just hers, it is also mine. And once I had the opportunity to confront her, and after a lot of pushing, I came to learn that she and another seven or eight women had organized to go from community to community, to identify people that have been alienated from each other during a terrible period in my country which we called Red Terror and White Terror, and bring them together. And the more I pushed her, the more I found out that in close to a three-year period they had managed to reconcile over a thousand people. And the kinds of things that they were doing were just the reverse of what my theoretical training would tell me to do in those kinds of situations. Well, it humbled me tremendously that they didn't have to do a Ph.D. in conflict resolution to do this marvelous work that I am having difficulty doing with all my 'training, skills, and experience.' So perhaps there were some innate characteristics in her and in the environment that I grew up in that passed certain values onto me.

I remember how much of a peacemaker my mother was. An aspect of my mother, which is also an important part of peace making, is her capacity to say that nothing is too small to share. It would amaze me how, if there were visitors and we had something at home, she would bring it out, multiply it and share it with everybody there. This

capacity to make something large out of something small is a characteristic of traditional societies that is being replaced by the so-called moral value that more is better.

Peace and Conflict in Africa: Reflections from an African Peacebuilder

II Patterns of Peace and Peace Building: Lessons and Reflections.

Dr. Assefa: Today I will talk about emerging patterns in conflict and peace in current-day Africa, and illustrate what I mean by telling you a story about a process of peace-building that I have been engaged in for the past six years. And then we can see what kinds of generalizations might be drawn from that experience. When we talk about conflict and peace in Africa, we can see about four patterns emerge. There are a group of countries, like Somalia and Sudan, which have been in crisis for decades and where there still seems to be no discernable signs for peace. Then, there are others like Mozambique and South Africa that have overcome conflicts and are now trying to build sustainable peace. In these countries, it might be a bit too early to talk about reconciliation, but they are working on it. Then there is a third category of countries that have begun building stable peace, but are recidivists. They are addicted to conflict and are slipping back into it. These are countries like Angola, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Uganda. A fourth pattern that is that of international wars. After the fall of the Soviet Union, we thought that there were primarily going to be internal wars. But in Africa, we have seen the resurgence of international wars. For example in the Congo, many countries, including non-African countries, are drawn into a conflict that revolves around the exploitation of resources in the Congo area. On one side you have Rwanda and Uganda fighting against the government of the Congo. Some people say the United States government is assisting them against the Congo. And on the other side are Zimbabwe, Namibia, Chad and Sudan that have come to the aid of the Congo.

And what are the responses for resolving conflict? We can identify a number of categories. One is direct negotiation between conflicting parties, such as what happened in South Africa between the white minority regime and the African National Congress. But the difficulty with direct negotiations is trying to get the parties to the table. The moment one side signifies that they want to talk, the other side takes this as a signal of weakness and tries to intensify its offenses. And neither side is willing to be the first to ask for negotiation. Therefore, an unmediated negotiation has been quite difficult in the African context.

There have also been a number of different kinds of mediation efforts made both by African states and outside states. Examples are the British mediation in Zimbabwe, the United States' attempt in the Ethiopian conflict, and the Tanzanian mediation in Burundi and Rwanda. And then there are regional responses to conflict in Africa such as the Organization of East African States that is trying to intervene in Liberia and Sierra Leone by employing negotiation and military means to bring peace.

When we look at all these responses there is a certain pattern about them -- they are undertaken by state actors: single states, international bodies or a group of states. Secondly, they are done at the top political level. They are what we call 'top-down' or 'trickle-down' approaches. The assumption is that if there is an agreement made at the political level, it will somehow percolate down to the rest of the society. But this assumption hasn't held true in many instances. In international conflicts, if you negotiate between state leaders and they agree, to a very large extent you can expect this to hold for the rest of the society because nation-states are separated by boundaries. But when you talk about civil wars in which communities have turned against communities, just to have

an agreement between leaders without involving the community in the reconciliation process is futile. Here peoples lives are so intertwined with each other that just signing a peace accord cannot dismiss the animosity and hostility that exists between them. So, in one way or another, communities must be part and parcel of this peace-building process.

We can identify two kinds of top-down processes. One is what we call “first track” which is highly visible, political and driven by power considerations. The mediation process that Richard Holbrook used in Kosovo and Bosnia is a good example of that kind of an approach. There is also what we call a “second-track” approach, which is quiet, behind-the-scenes, away from the media, aimed at developing trust and confidence and helping conflict parties work out their problems in a satisfactory way. This could be done by state actors, but in most instances no state actors are involved. A good example of this could be the Oslo accord, which got the Palestinians and the Israelis together. Among these various approaches, the power-based first-track one is considered efficient since that it can forge agreement quickly by either trying to punish those that are unwilling to agree, or by trying to provide economic inducement for those that cooperate. In this way, it can get to an agreement quicker than the alternative process of second track. But because the agreement does not take care of the deep interests and needs of the parties, it will collapse sooner or later. And we have seen a number of such agreements that have been signed and not respected later on. A good example of this is the Arusha accord of 1993 which was mediated by a lot of international actors including France, the United States and Britain and that ended the war between the insurgency of Rwanda and the government of Rwanda at that time. But, before the ink dried, the agreement collapsed and it led to one of the worst genocides in human history: the genocide of 1994.

Alternatively, the second track trust-based approaches are relatively inefficient since they take a long time to reach agreement. But the result of the agreement is more likely to stick. In fact, in Rwanda there were a number of attempts to get the rebels --the insurgency -- to dialogue with the government in power, and there were many promising possibilities. However, the French government overtook this initiative and the whole methodology changed from trust to coercion and arm-twisting, which eventually led to the accord that ended up collapsing.

And increasingly, there is an emerging approach to peace building which is coming from the ground up. Comparatively, this approach is new and its methodology is not yet very well developed or understood. And what I will try to do is to illustrate this method by giving an example of a process that I have been engaged in for the past six years in the northern region of Ghana.

The conflict I am talking about happened in February 1994. It was called the Guinea Fowl War and how it came about is rather interesting.

Click here to download Dr. Assefa's article, "Coexistence and Reconciliation in the Northern Region of Ghana," which describes his experiences in peacebuilding following the Guinea Fowl War. This article was published in Reconciliation, Justice, and Coexistence: Theory and Practice, edited by Mohammed Abu-Nimer.

In conclusion, it was the reconciliation process that challenged people to think of a greater inter-ethnic regional identity. And recently we are increasingly discussing pan-Africanism. Of course, African identity is not an end in itself. We should be challenged to have an even greater identity -- our human identity. Thank You.

Question: What was the substantive character of the agreement? Did these two

communities move beyond the borders of the economic identity that they previously had?

Dr. Assefa: What's interesting in Ghana, and in a number of African countries, is that land is not owned individually. Land is owned by the community. And the chief owns the land in the name of the community. What happened as part of this agreement was that in those areas where the formerly landless were settled, it was agreed that their communities would appoint a chief to hold lands in their group's name. In other words, they formally became landowners. Also, the traditional landowners have a consultative body called the House of Chiefs where this new right to own land was recognized, and which the new chiefs joined.

Question: I recently returned from Burundi where there are many people that are very afraid to talk about conflict. One thing that they did talk about was the subject of reconciliation and whether one could have reconciliation without forgiveness or forgiveness without justice. And in this case, they were referring to not just justice, but accountability because the very people who had committed crimes, rapes, and killings presently had no accountability. How can you answer these people?

Dr. Assefa: That is a very thorny question. Fortunately, in the Northern Ghana situation the atrocities were not as horrendous as in Rwanda and Burundi where, for the sake of peace, those that committed atrocities were rewarded with positions in the new government. I have great difficulty trying to understand peace that way. In my definition, justice is a very important component of peace and reconciliation. I don't think the question for me is whether there should be justice or accountability for crimes, rather how is that done? If we understand justice as punishing using existing legal processes, then I wonder if that attains the objective of justice. Because to a very large extent, the

kind of justice system that we have is fashioned to deal only with very small, interpersonal conflicts where the legal standards and norms are shared by all members of a society. But when you are talking about very large-scale social conflicts -- where even those norms are under dispute -- then trying to use the current system is not appropriate, especially in Burundi or in Rwanda. If you punish the Hutus that are accused of having killed the Tutsis, the next generation of Hutus will make heroes out of the accused. They will build statues for them and the conflict will continue.

So what are the appropriate justice mechanisms that do not feed the cycle of violence and hate? There is no easy answer. I think the way the Rwandans are trying to deal with it is to go back to some of their traditional ways of understanding guilt. Whether this is adequate could be debated. But when you apply the legal process that is aimed at punishing to larger-scale social conflicts as divisive as Rwanda and Burundi it does not work. This is a very difficult message, but something that has to be recognized. Question: What was the role of women in resolving and in mediating some of the conflicts, and in creating the environment for peace?

Dr. Assefa: Again, this brings up the issues of modernity and tradition. I think it might have been by the time we reached Kumasi Five that one of the elders said that they needed to have women at these meetings because if there were women there, the discussion would not be as difficult. And so they began inviting women to come and join the discussion. And the women ended up playing a significant role. However, if from the beginning, the mediators had put pressure on the groups to include women, we may not have gone as far as we did. But creating the environment where the people themselves realized this and took the initiative to bring women into the process as active participants

was one of the best parts of that peace process. And now they play a key role in the implementation body. So how to get to that objective of this mediation process and modernize it without necessarily unleashing resistance from traditional institutions is a very delicate balancing act.

Question: Could you talk of the process of externally understanding things through an internal self-reflective process and also give an example of how that took place?

Dr. Assefa: One of the significant stages in this process was that of honest self-reflection. And there are two dimensions to this. We have to take responsibility not only at the individual level and also at the collective level. In the Ghanaian peace process, some people from the land-owning groups were shocked to hear of the things that people from their group had done to other people in the name of their group. So that is part of the individual as well as collective self-reflection process. And a number of the comments that people made were not just how their relationship with their neighbors, but also how their relationship with their families, and their relationship with themselves, was improving.

One of the things that I have learnt about mediation, and particularly working in this kind of situation is, is that you cannot control the process. Sometimes a person would stand up and just tell a story. Sometimes I even had some difficulty trying to understand what was going on. And as the story was being told I would wonder what it meant, and how it was relevant. But then I would see that it was touching people. And I would realize that everyone had their own style and that this was cross-cultural.

Question: I am from Ethiopia where we used to have very well-established mediation processes. Could you tell us one or two things about our tradition of mediation processes?

Dr. Assefa: One example is that of governance. If we really look seriously, we find that we have institutions that are even more democratic than multi-party politics such as decentralized systems with a high level of accountability and where the chief is not a dictator. A chief has to be very sensitive about responding to the will of the community. A chief cannot abuse his people or be irresponsible and get away with it. The idea of wealth in the society that I grew up in was not about greed. It was not about enriching oneself at the expense of everybody else. It was an instrument that gave you an opportunity to be generous. A wealthy person was able to open their house so that those that did not have much could share in the wealth. But when you look at what political power has meant in Africa, you see that what we call economic growth and development just means more selfish affluence and more greed, and this is maladapted to the African tradition. And if we were to look at our traditions, there are lots of inspirations for a governing system that can meet the needs of people.

After all, the conflict-resolution movement, particularly in the United States, was inspired by work in Africa. Legal anthropologists seeing how over-burdened the American legal system was, sought alternatives in other societies that were dealing with conflict. And they looked at African experiences in mediation. This is a highly developed practice and one of the duties of the chief and respected elders is dispute settlement. For example, in my country, if two people were fighting and a woman who was passing by placed her traditional belt between them, the fighting had to stop. That is respect. The tragedy is that some of these practices have disappeared and, to a certain extent, the development of the legal system in Ethiopia has been at the expense of traditional systems that existed in the country.

The second thing is that the nature of conflicts has changed. Traditional systems, previously meant to mediate small scale inter-group or inter-personal disputes, are being overwhelmed by the intensity and size of the emerging conflicts. Also there are certain assumptions about community behavior that make traditional approaches successful. But such traditions are weakening.

Moreover, western education is a knowledge culture and our tradition is a wisdom culture. In a traditional Ethiopian mediation process, if people had a dispute, they identified somebody who is a respected elder and they take their case to that elder. But, there is also a certain premise that goes with it. That is, if the elder speaks, you obey. I was once in a mediation process in Uganda. After lots of hearings, the elder came up with a proposal. As an outsider this solution sounded incomprehensible, and afterwards I asked this person how he felt that the judgement was given against him. But the person did not perceive it that way! And instead of saying that it grieved him, he said that he felt that he was accepting the punishment for the sake of the community. And it is in such cases that the community focus replaces the individual focus. But now elders and priests have been politically emasculated. Previously, they could go to the king and advise him. But not anymore. One of the things that the rebels in Southern Sudan do when they take over a town is take the traditional elder and flog him in public. The point is to show that this person does not have authority in the community anymore.

Audience member: You are quite right, the changes have really undermined most of the conflict resolution traditions in Ethiopia. In 1991, there was a strange phenomenon brought by the government to recognize ethnicity as the base for political organizing. And that meant weeding out those that did not belong. And about 30 domestic groups got

together and said, “Wait a minute, we’ve been living with these people. How can we throw them out?” So they got together and they held a ritual. They got in a circle, killed a white bull, and dug a hole in the middle of the field. Then an elder women took a spear, dipped it in the blood of the bull, went over to the hole dug in the middle of the field, broke the spear, and buried it. Any conflict that was there was meant to be buried by that elder women who, because of her age, was an honorary man and political figure. If the conflict had been between individuals, she would have poured blood and milk on both of them, put them on fresh hide, tied them together, and untied them. And just like the process of rebirth, they would have emerged as new individuals no longer remembering the conflict that they had in the past. These kinds of traditions are very beautiful. But, you know what happened to the ritual of the 30 ethnic linguistic groups? Soldiers of the new government came and shot at them and dispersed them. So the forces against the traditions are absolutely powerful.

Question: One problem is that in many cases there are a lot of forces that don’t want local peace. So you have the para-military forces of the army coming in. What do you do when you are trying to build peace locally and you have outside forces that are trying to prevent you?

Dr. Assefa: Usually leaders set the tone. And first they make you hate somebody and then they say, now it is all over, we are friends. But in the reconciliation process I described, people were saying, “Yes, you are telling me to hate, but why should I?” So it actually eroded their power-base. And in the next political election, those that were against the peace were voted out and those that were champions in the peace process won. Naturally, those that want to control society for the purpose of war are very threatened by a peace

process because it is democratic in the real sense of the term. But this work is risky and recently in Kenya, two of my colleagues were killed. In my country, I cannot talk about reconciliation and peace. They say, what are you talking about? There is no war here. If you are talking about peace or reconciliation then you must have a hidden agenda -- you must be part of the opposition. But in this work, part of the philosophy of the methodology is vulnerability. The point is not to go and withstand forces when you know who is going to lose. Rather, it is to be who you are and to be firm in your cause, because in some strange way, that vulnerability often turns into a power base. Thank You.