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## Creating African Futures in an Era of Global Transformations:

## Créer l'Afrique de demain dans un contexte de transformations mondialisées : enjeux et perspectives

## Desafios e Perspetivas

بعث أفريقيا الغد في سياق التحولات المعولمة :  
رهانات و آفاق

# Thinking an African Politics of Peace in an Era of Increasing Violence<sup>1</sup>

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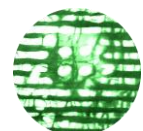
## **Abstract**

It should be apparent to all that violent approaches to resolving popular contradictions are today (again) seemingly all-pervasive on the continent. The patent inability of the (new democratic) African state to resolve popular contradictions has led to more or less vocal calls for ‘foreign help’, with consequences which are often too ghastly to contemplate. It is not simply here a question of state deployed violence but also of popular violence (e.g. of an ethnic or xenophobic kind). In South Africa at least a ‘culture of violence’ has been systemically produced by specific forms of political thought and practice and not simply inherited from a colonial/apartheid past. In Nigeria the state’s insistence on addressing the Boko Haram phenomenon militarily has (predictably) completely backfired leading to the kidnapping of teenage children à la (originally Ugandan) Lords’ Resistance Army. The only popular response on offer seems to be a moral one: ‘free our girls’. The absence of alternative politics should be evident. This paper attempts to think a political alternative to violence founded upon concepts and categories inherent in African traditions; i.e. in actually existing (although often subterranean) popular practices. These cannot be understood as mere survivals but have been imaginatively altered and reconstructed to different extents and in different ways because of the necessity of people to cope with ongoing crises in their lives from the slave trade onwards. The paper then is fundamentally conceptual and methodological in order to redirect analyses and to begin to make alternatives thinkable; it is not prescriptive.

The crux of the palaver is at the end, when the ‘guilty party’ is rehabilitated as a member of the community. In fact, there is not one ‘guilty party’, but several. All the members of the community feel guilty for not having succeeded in preventing conflict from taking root in their midst. The palaver rises above the law of retaliation, above justice as such ... Naturally the colonizers succeeded in playing down the political role of the palaver. They simply ignored it and, what is worse, concealed it, for they knew how powerful and especially how significant it was (Diong, 1979: 83, emphasis added).

## **Introduction**

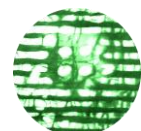
It should be apparent to all that violent approaches to resolving popular contradictions are today (again) seemingly all-pervasive on the African continent. The patent inability of the (new democratic) African state to resolve popular contradictions has led to more or less vocal calls for ‘foreign help’, with consequences which are often too ghastly to contemplate. It is not simply here a question of state deployed violence but also of popular violence (e.g. of an ethnic or xenophobic kind). In South Africa at least a ‘culture of violence’ has been systemically produced by specific forms of political thought and practice and not simply inherited from a colonial/apartheid past. In Nigeria the state’s insistence on addressing the Boko Haram phenomenon militarily has (predictably) completely backfired leading to the kidnapping of teenage children à la (originally Ugandan) Lords’ Resistance Army. The only popular response on offer seems to be a moral one: ‘free our girls’. The absence of



alternative politics should be evident. This paper attempts to think a political alternative to violence founded upon concepts and categories inherent in African traditions; i.e. in actually existing (although often subterranean) popular practices. These cannot be understood as mere survivals but have been imaginatively altered and reconstructed to different extents and in different ways because of the necessity of people to cope with ongoing crises in their lives from the slave trade onwards. The paper then is fundamentally conceptual and methodological in order to redirect analyses and to begin to make alternatives thinkable; it is not prescriptive.

What I mean here in particular is that it is not my intention to set out or for that matter to evaluate strategies for achieving peace. For example, despite its otherwise extremely useful observations and recognition of the fact that ‘communities of people have the agency to shape things’(p.176) and thus that political choices are possible, a recent text by Anderson and Wallace (2013) suffers from the limitations of not being able to transcend an ‘interventionist’ ‘ngo-ist’ view of ‘conflict prevention’. In this manner the issue addressed is de-politicised and technicised while rather, my intention here is to insist on the need to alter our way of thinking in order to begin to think new concepts and categories which contribute to a politics of peace rather than restricting ourselves to seemingly neutral methods and techniques. Moreover, I would argue that the currently predominant conceptions such as ‘civil society’, ‘governance’ or ‘citizenship’ *inter alia* (i.e. the language of liberal democracy) are of little use for thinking political subjecthood from an emancipatory perspective, which I maintain is what is required if one wishes to understand the contributions which singular popular experiences may at times make to a universal conception of humanity. We need to begin by thinking a politics of peace in relation to a politics of violence.

It is now generally admitted that recourse to violence has become widespread and endemic in contemporary post-apartheid South Africa as it is worldwide. The apparent legitimacy of violent solutions to personal or political contradictions and conflicts is so prevalent throughout South African society that it is probably accurate to speak (as many do) of a national ‘culture of violence’. One should be careful to stress however that such a ‘culture’ cannot be grasped as a given reflection of social relations inherited from the past, resulting from an as yet incomplete ‘transition’ or as endemic to African society. Rather it is created and re-created today on a daily basis as an effect of specific political subjectivities and choices. Thus, despite the fact that such violence is overwhelmingly said to be criminal rather than political in nature, it is directly connected to what is seen implicitly, if not always explicitly, by the state as legitimate activity for the resolution of conflicts. To account for a culture then is to account for specific subjectivities. These are produced as effects of complex interactions in various domains of politics between power and its hegemonic modes of thought on the one hand and people’s reactions to them on the other. The latter do not always simply conform to the former. Resistance may give rise to thought and not merely to knowledge; in other words it may exceed the subjective limits imposed by the state.



In state thinking, subjectivities are always seen as reflective (expressive) of social location or place. Reasoned thought, which is regularly in excess of state subjectivity is simply effaced here; people are not supposed to think outside their social location or place. All these subjectivities, whether state expressive subjectivities or excessive subjectivities at a distance from the state, provide the conditions of possibility of political agency in the sense that they pose parameters within which problems and solutions of particular kinds in particular situations are thought and to which agency conforms. Thus it may be held by power for example that the ‘problem’ of ‘illegal immigrants’ can be solved through increased repression by the state, which then smoothly translates into the deployment of violence against ‘foreigners’ and ‘outsiders’ by the people themselves, so long as they remain within the subjective parameters of the ‘foreigner’ as the excluded other. Of course this amounts to the production of a politics of fear of the stranger (Neocosmos, 2008, 2010). Moreover, the fact that perpetrators of xenophobic violence are rarely sanctioned contributes to a culture of impunity which further legitimates violence. At the core of these particular political subjectivities then are state modes of thinking and practices. These in turn often remain unchallenged so that it becomes easier for them to appear to be reducible to the social attributes of the excluded; they become naturalised. The naturalisation of subjectivity is, as we know, regularly associated with ‘ideologisation’ by the state and its modes of thinking, so this effect should not surprise us; but the first step in the subjective process of ‘naturalisation’, it should be stressed, is one of social reductionism through which subjectivity becomes linked exclusively to objective social location through its equation with ‘interest’. The reflection or expression of interest in political subjectivity is of course known as political identity.

Yet the reduction of subjectivity to objective social location or place is not inevitable for as I have shown at length elsewhere<sup>1</sup> it is possible to think beyond the interest allocated to place. People are able to think beyond their objective social position and interests - beyond identity - simply because they are capable of reason. Therefore if we are to confront violent state political subjectivities in practice, there can be no hiding behind objective historical accounts in terms of processes of ‘transition’ for example, for this would only mean confronting a state politics with another state politics which would continue to occlude and hence to exclude people as thinking beings<sup>2</sup>. In the absence of an alternative political subjectivity or ‘consciousness’, one which explicitly puts forward in its discourse and practice an alternative politics of peace from the point of people, the state politics of violence will continue unchallenged and therefore unabated. I have shown at length elsewhere (Neocosmos, 2011) how a politics of violence can be accounted for in Africa and in South Africa in particular. There is no need to repeat the arguments here, other than to note that a hegemonic subjectivity of political violence (a so-called ‘culture of violence’) can be shown to be an effect of a particular mode of state rule (with its attendant subjectivities) deployed within specific domains of politics one of which I have called ‘uncivil society’. Here I wish to note

<sup>1</sup> See my forthcoming *Thinking Freedom in Africa: subjective excess, historical sequences and human emancipation*.

<sup>2</sup> A common example here is the contradiction between national identity and ethnic identity politics in Africa.





that if an alternative political subjectivity of peace is to become the object of thought (i.e. if it is to become possible to think such a politics), it must be excessive of interest and founded on a principle of equality. It must first be thought as a resolution to contradictions within political community, as a politics of peace, and not as ‘conflict resolution’ between antagonistic communities, however the latter may be conceived. Such thinking has and is still taking place within ‘traditional society’ which is endogenous (not indigenous) to Africa and it may provide the foundation for a subjective excess over state politics precisely because some aspects of the politics of ‘traditional society’ already exist subjectively at a distance from state politics.

I have chosen to focus my reflections on three sets of issues: first I wish to privilege concepts and categories because I think that there is very little theoretical thinking surrounding the African process of community-healing and a politics of peace<sup>3</sup>; second the thinking of African practices in this regard takes place overwhelmingly today from within Western liberal perspectives so I wish to take a deliberate Afro-centric perspective here; and third I am concerned to make visible the regularly occluded aspects of popular tradition and thought which I believe form the raw material from which an alternative politics of peace can begin to be conceived and practiced<sup>4</sup>. In general I wish to argue throughout that the essence of social healing in Africa consists of a form of politics among people who think and that consequently it cannot be technicised and professionalised without, at the same time, losing its healing powers. This means to say that social healing is not to be understood as a (‘subjugated’, ‘indigenous’ or whatever) knowledge but as a (possible) truth in Badiou’s (2009) sense of a political process of creation (not one of discovery). It necessarily presumes that people are capable of thinking beyond social interest as they search for alternatives in their daily struggles to exercise some kind of agency over their lives in conditions of political exclusion.

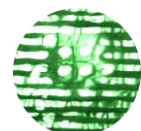
### **The politics of social healing**

It can be argued that endogenous to African society have been conceptions and procedures for resolving contradictions (both social and individual) which were always community based. It can even be suggested that the tradition goes back 4000 years at least to the ancient Egyptian (Kmt) conception of Mâât which was concerned with maintaining and restoring balance to community, especially after periods of violence and upheaval. For Diop (1991) for example, early African culture was founded on a moral philosophy of peace and was matriarchal in content. For Amadiume (1995: 42) ‘the values of matriarchy seem to have generated anti-state and anti-centrist tendencies’ as women resisted the imposition of patriarchal rule in Africa during the modern period (from 1593 onwards). Amadiume also argues that ‘the matriarchal value and moral system which generated the concepts love, harmony, peace and co-operation, and forbade bloodshed, imposed a check on excessive and destructive masculinism’ in ancient

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<sup>3</sup> The argument here is influenced particularly by Wamba-dia-Wamba, 1985.

<sup>4</sup> Of course it would not do for example to begin from a Gandhian conception of *Satyagraha* here as this is founded squarely within Hindu culture.



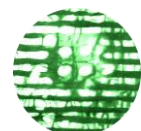
(pre-colonial) Africa (p.47). Central to these practices is a notion of ‘social healing’ where both individual and community are assumed to be so interrelated that contradictions in the one have effects in the other and vice-versa. Given that the ancestors are also part of the community (and guide it), healing or re-achieving a delicate balance involves, spiritual, physical and detailed ceremonial activity. Particularly in acephalous BaKongo societies (beyond the Kongo kingdom) in the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, sophisticated organisations were developed founded on spiritual beliefs in order to resist social disintegration in the face of the twin disasters of the slave trade and colonialism, for example the Lemba healing cult (Janzen, 1982).

According to Janzen, ‘Lemba, a major historic cult of healing, trade and marriage relations, came into being in the seventeenth century in a triangular region extending from the Atlantic coast to Malebo Pool between today's cities of Kinshasa and Brazzaville, and from the Congo river northward to the Kwilu-Niari river valley’ (1982:3). ‘In effect, although couched in the mold of a drum of affliction [a healing cult], Lemba was the governing order in a region much of which had no centralized institutions’ (p. 4). Although its cultural dimensions in particular were not limited to this area, it is here that Lemba developed to its fullest extent outside the control of centralised states, especially that of the Kongo kingdom. In fact the Kingdom of Kongo was riven by civil wars throughout most of the eighteenth century which fuelled the slave trade as kings and contenders expanded their earnings by selling prisoners in large numbers (Thornton, 1993:184). Janzen cites the following figures: ‘By 1750 in Cabinda alone 5000 to 6000 slaves were being exported annually; by the 1780s the three ports of Malemba, Cabinda and Loango Bay were processing 15 000 slaves annually’ (1982:34).

In the acephalous regions of the Lower Congo river, Lemba ‘adapted conventional religious symbols to its own purpose, and developed a pervasive and unique ideology of healing relating to its concept of a stateless political order’ (1982:58). It developed in the areas where it controlled markets and trade, a ‘unique political system’ for which ‘the notion of the sovereign was absent’ (p.72)<sup>5</sup>; Lemba developed ‘in a society with a strong egalitarian ethic’ (p.318) and was able to regulate conflicts and restore calm through its ‘laws of the market’ (p.72). Lemba was able to keep the area peaceful (the term ‘lemba’ means ‘calm’, ‘peaceful’, p.304) and to organise society without having recourse to hierarchies and a centralised bureaucratic authority or apparatus. It did so by regulating markets (through laws) and trade routes (which it controlled), by marriage arrangements between clans, by reconstructing the idea of the family and hence by healing both individuals and society<sup>6</sup>. Janzen continues:

<sup>5</sup> Ifi Amadiume (1995: 42) refers to West African acephalous societies as ‘anti-state decentralised political systems’ an expression which has the merit of stressing their explicit opposition to state power and not simply the absence of a state. From the evidence regarding the extent to which they went in order to secure their autonomy, it seems indeed that Amadiume’s term is applicable to these BaKongo societies.

<sup>6</sup> ‘It is more than therapeutic techniques; it is rebuilding society to make human dignity meaningful again. Lessons drawn from this process of social healing should be important for any politics of peace. Lemba was conceptualized as “mukisiwamfunisinakanda”—“a knowledge and practice of re-peopling the clan”’ (Wamba-dia-Wamba, 2013:15).



... it is significant that inhabitants of the region made a selective choice for the kind of public order that emerged, that, instead of imposing a new order to deal with the coastal trade which resembled a state, they developed a solution to the challenge of trade which emphasized the redefinition of reality in therapeutic terms ... It is important to explore ... the way a society imagined alternatives open to itself and the consequences of such alternatives if taken (1982:324-5).

It seems then that Lemba was able to maintain relative peace in a region impacted heavily by the slave trade through its activities and perhaps also ensure that this particular area was less affected by the slave trade than the area south of the river which was subject to internecine warfare. It was able to achieve this through a politics which distanced itself from state politics and which had mass support among the population, combining political, administrative, economic and spiritual features. It can be seen then that under enormous pressure from colonial forms of domination, Africans invented non-state forms of regulation which could resist slavery for a long time<sup>7</sup>. The view that local societies simply collapsed as a result of the impact of the slave trade and the power of Europeans is therefore not quite accurate. Janzen (1992) also traces the existence of such healing cults throughout the Bantu-speaking world.

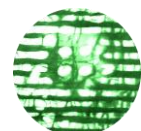
At the core of the whole idea of the healing process is a popular traditional institution referred to by different names but known generally as the Palaver (from the Portuguese palavra meaning word) or Mbongi in KiKongo. Dismissed by colonialism as a mere time-wasting exercise or 'talk-shop', the palaver was the central means of healing in societies from all corners of the continent. It was also often central to popular forms of rebellion against colonialism, and cultures developed which valued the skills of rhetoric and speaking. While war was often (and has regularly been conceived as) the normal way of resolving contradictions with those named as 'the enemy' (i.e. the 'other', the 'excluded', etc), among people who were not enemies but friends and relatives (i.e. the 'included' in community), talking and persuading was the central method.

It is absolutely crucial to begin from this observation; namely that not all contradictions are of the same order - some are antagonistic and some are not - and consequently that different contradictions need to be resolved in different ways<sup>8</sup>. Of course this is also dependent on who is counted as 'included' and who is 'excluded' but traditionally - if I may be allowed a generalisation - African societies were generally inclusive of strangers. Today when politics is seemingly reduced to war (politics is apparently today the 'continuation of war by other or

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<sup>7</sup>Janzen sees Lemba as gradually succumbing to the coastal slave trade in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and to colonization following on from it in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Lemba survived for three centuries in this form according to Janzen (p. 6).

<sup>8</sup> The classic text in which the distinction between antagonistic contradictions (between the people and the enemy) and non-antagonistic contradictions (among the people) is developed is Mao Zedong (1957). He notes with reference to the latter contradictions that: 'Here, the essential thing is to start from the desire for unity. For without this desire for unity, the struggle, once begun, is certain to throw things into confusion and get out of hand' (p.390).



similar means' for a number of writers<sup>9</sup>), as even within the same party people are often referred to as enemies, such thinking is of paramount importance for it challenges the dominant legitimating of political violence<sup>10</sup>. Of course, even between enemies, contradictions can often be resolved through talking - this is precisely what negotiations consist of - but this process is not the central issue of concern here<sup>11</sup>. In any case a political challenge to a state propagated culture of violence, in order to take root, must arguably be developed 'from below'. Rather, my main concern is to begin to put on the agenda a form of politics which can be referred to as a 'politics of peace'. Not to be confused with pacifism as a moral injunction, a 'politics of peace' is concerned with the resolution of 'non-antagonistic' contradictions, in other words it confronts differences and contradictions between people within 'community' however the latter may be conceived. It puts talking and persuasion at the centre of this process of the resolution of conflict, not coercive practices; politics here becomes close to an art form rather than to a science as war has regularly been understood.

How to begin to think through this process? First, it is important not to essentialise or to reify culture here. The dominant notion of 'culture' as a given set of norms and values, by insisting on action as habit or tradition or custom<sup>12</sup>, occludes agency as reasoned practice. It effaces subjectivation- the process of production of a subject - as it assumes a given subject and an identity, a way of being and doing which is reflective or expressive of and hence tied to a social situation or place. Here people-subjects simply act within state induced subjectivities; it is taken for granted that they do things without knowing why they do them and that we therefore need social science to tell us why. Social scientists are thus required to translate the idioms of popular traditions into recognisable categories of liberal scientific discourse<sup>13</sup>. As a result politics as reasoned practices excessive to location are removed from the domain of thought. Given what we have been told, namely that tradition and culture are created and re-created by interests and identities (e.g. Vail, 1989), and particularly by power, the de-politicising and naturalising effects of such modes of thought should not surprise us. 'Culture' is the core name of the politics of traditional society. Like 'rights' within civil society, it should be understood as created, recreated and struggled over within that domain of politics.

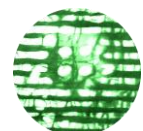
<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Foucault, 2003 for example.

<sup>10</sup> See President Jacob Zuma's recent utterances on the 'enemy within the party' in the run up to the ANC's December 2012 congress in Mangaung. <http://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/beware-of-enemy-within-zuma-warns-1.1402085>

<sup>11</sup> '[In politics] killing simply produces the illusion of the disappearance of a problem rather than the reality of its solution' (Badiou and Milner, 2012: 130 *my translation*). See also Badiou, 2013a: 9-11.

<sup>12</sup> For example as in the notion of '*habitus*' in the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's work.

<sup>13</sup> As in the idea of *Ubuntu* popularised in South Africa. As it is predominantly understood, *ubuntu* is reduced to a cultural practice more or less undermined by colonialism/apartheid and more or less adhered to. It follows that in circumstances where this practice has been reduced, if it is to revive it has to be taught like all cultures. See for example Praeg and Magadla (2014: 101). The reduction of African complex conceptions to a metaphysical notion that 'I exist *because* of others' (p.96) effaces the centrality of political agency in African thought (i.e. that such a conception of mutual interdependence must be struggled for by a political practice) in favour of an anthropological notion of culture. It thus becomes compatible with communitarian identity politics.





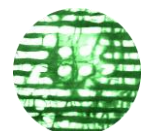
Moreover, an African institution such as the palaver is not simply given in cultural memory waiting to be rediscovered (it is not ‘authentic’), but rather it is constantly created and recreated -Badiou (2009) would say ‘resurrected’ - in different forms in different circumstances. The use of the Gaçaça in Rwanda is a case in point. As is well known, this institution was recreated by the RPF (Rwanda Patriotic Front) post-genocide state as a way of processing the backlog of perpetrators (known as *génocidaires*) which could not possibly have been processed through Western courts<sup>14</sup>. It also served two other functions: first a degree of community reconciliation and second a re-enforcing of state power at local or community level and thus helping to enable the reproduction of an ethnic Tutsi state at central level. In other words it was initiated as a ‘top-down’ process which may have worked to reconcile in some respects but which has also undermined reconciliation in others for example by political rivalries and personal vendettas (Clark, 2012). This outcome was helped by the fact that Gaçaça had already been a chiefly process before colonialism anyway (Reyntjens, 1990).

Second, it is also important not to think simply in terms of ‘conflict resolution mechanisms’ underpinned by Western notions of ‘transitional justice’ or ideas of ‘democratisation equals Westernisation’ because for such conceptions, Western ideas of state liberal democracy are taken as a universal ideal to be attained while African tradition is simply understood as a left-over from the past defined by absences (by the absence of liberal features such as human rights for example) and not as contemporary to modernity<sup>15</sup>. The manner in which the Gaçaça experiment in Rwanda has been regularly dismissed in Western legal literature as a ‘kangaroo court’ is an example worth noting, although in other (often anthropological) literature it has been idealised as authentic. There is no linear left-over or development of traditional systems; rather such capacities are constantly being re-invented and practiced to a greater or lesser extent in conditions of (post-) violent disruption.

The African state itself cannot impose any idea of the ‘traditional’ on its people without subjectivity collapsing into some ‘ethno-philosophical’ conception (in the sense developed by Hountondji, 1997) divorced from popular practice; the latter can only be successful if socially rooted and practically enacted at the ‘grassroots’ so to speak. The failure of the South African state’s idea of ‘ubuntu’ here is a recent example of this, but one can also refer to Mobutu’s ‘authenticité’ in Zaire and even to Nyerere’s ‘Ujamaa’, which despite their ideological differences were all ultimately ‘top down’ state conceptions. Finally the notion (widespread in South Africa) that the past can be ‘mummified’ in institutionalised memory (museums, statues, public buildings, etc) avoids all discussion of contradiction as such and thus also evacuates from view the living politics of popular agency. Unsurprisingly such state activities

<sup>14</sup> It may be important to ask whether the genocide of 1994 would have occurred had the Gaçaça been in widespread use; in any case the state has now switched Gaçaça on and off which says much regarding the weakness of popular politics in that country.

<sup>15</sup> There is no space to argue this pointy here but I have done so in detail elsewhere (Neocosmos, 2011). It should be clear that democratic struggles in Africa (e.g. in the 1980s) as well as in North Africa in 2011 did not always equate democratisation with Westernisation; it should be recalled that there was a struggle over different conceptions of democracy in Africa in the 1980s (see Ake, 2003 for example).

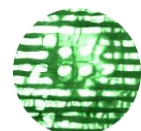


are regularly contested while people attempt to re-appropriate their memories for themselves. It is thus central to my argument that popular agency must be the core focus of any discussion of social healing.

In brief then there are three major orientations associated with neo-colonial perspectives regarding resolving contradictions which must be avoided: 1) the technicisation of ‘conflict resolution’ so that the issue is reduced to one of management and expertise; 2) the ‘anthropologising’ of popular practices by a distant respectful outsider so that what people do is relegated to some form of (perhaps useful but ultimately alien) strangeness; 3) the uncritical celebration of ‘memory’ or ‘tradition’ (the past) by a nationalist state. In all cases the effect is one of de-politicisation. From these it follows that social healing could not be turned into a pedagogy and located at a university without losing its healing powers; it must remain a popular practice in order to be effective. It bears repeating that popular systems of healing must be understood politically, not in the sense of state, parties civil society, etc, but in the sense of popular practices of democracy (often using idioms which are not obviously ‘political’). In other words it must be understood that people engage in healing practices in times of necessity, as with all popular politics, in order to assert some form of control over their lives. These processes therefore require to be conceived as collective processes and decisions, which are, after all, what popular politics consist of.

In fact it is arguably because of the inability of the episteme of social science and history to recognise such practices as political that they have been systematically occluded, except as anthropological oddities and ‘traditional left-overs’ or even as exceptional occurrences in the case of historians as I have argued elsewhere (Neocosmos, 2012). A people’s politics which does not correspond to what the scientific episteme requires it to be - for example to correspond to what the ‘political’ is meant to look like in Liberal or Marxist theory, i.e. as explicitly concerning the state, the civic, etc - is dismissed and occluded under the terms ‘superstition’ (during colonialism) or ‘religion’ (under liberal post-colonialism) or ‘false-consciousness’ (Marxism) or ‘culture’ (multi-cultural respectful anthropology today). Resolving contradictions and healing simply becomes an oddity with some interesting aspects to it. If its importance is to be recovered, it must be understood as a collective popular political practice.

This argument has a number of consequences for analysis which I will illustrate with examples. First and foremost, the resolving of contradictions or (potential) conflicts within communities is not to be understood as resolving conflicts between antagonistic groupings but among community members as noted; in community there is no ‘other’ as everyone is included. In this case then there is no enemy; outside community, the ‘other’ is the potential enemy. The whole point of a process sometimes referred to as ‘othering’, as for example in the case of xenophobic interpellation, is that people are first excluded from community as ‘strangers/outside’ before being violently attacked as enemies. It is crucially important to reflect on this as politics today regularly degenerates into violence and war simply because



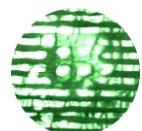
any potential other is viewed as an enemy, as in the recently rediscovered work of Carl Schmitt for example where politics is understood first and foremost to be about identifying the enemy. But politics is not simply concerned with identifying and confronting an enemy; it also concerns ensuring balance and cohesion in community, i.e. 'healthy relations' among 'friends and family' without which a community cannot survive or exist in the first place. No society can live in a state of permanent crisis and while in crisis it cannot confront its enemies adequately anyway. So the idea of 'community healing' or 'social healing' implies necessarily the resolution of contradictions within community (among 'families and friends' - 'kith and kin'). At the core of the idea of social healing is the desire for unity. It is this desire which governs the peaceful resolution of non-antagonistic contradictions. As we shall see, it is the ancestors which frequently embody the idea of unity in Africa precisely because the present crisis is understood as a dramatic shift from a unified past. Of course no such desire is necessary in the process of negotiation between enemies. Politics then concerns both friends and enemies, in fact probably the former more than the latter, as the latter cannot be successfully confronted in the absence of unity within the former; it is therefore absolutely crucial to be able to distinguish between the two.

To reduce all contradictions irrespective of who they involve (friends or enemies) to a matter of 'conflict resolution' is to equate healing with 'negotiation' and hence with technique. It is not accidental that negotiations between employers (representing along with others the interests of capital) and organised labour, i.e. class conflict (between class enemies<sup>16</sup>) diverted onto a negotiating table, is referred to as 'collective bargaining'. The point in healing however is not simply to 'resolve' conflict and to 'bargain' with the 'other' (so-called 'give and take'), but to reconfigure the community itself, to re-create on a new basis a collective balance (health) within the community. As a result, what is said to be the view of the ancestors plays a crucial role here as the ancestors themselves define the idea of balance which is then derived from a view of the past when the community was healthy. Who interprets the past through tradition and how it is interpreted therefore becomes crucial. It is for this reason that elders and/or other knowledgeable people often play an important role in the process; yet knowledge is not all that is required, what is also necessary is an understanding of the truth that all are equal within the palaver process itself, at least if the palaver is to reflect the views of all and not exclude some. To sum up, the unfortunate theoretical reduction of such politics to 'conflict resolution' thus has a number of negative effects:

- a) It obscures the crucial distinction between 'enemies' and 'friends', both are treated in the same way, in most cases as enemies; but resolving contradictions between each of these requires different politics and different methods;

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<sup>16</sup> Some may recall British ex-Prime Minister Thatcher referring to trade unions in Britain as 'the enemy within' as opposed to Argentina during the Malvinas war which was seen as the 'enemy without'.



- b) It reduces the political process of healing to a technique which can thus be learnt by ‘experts’ (e.g. managers, negotiators, arbitrators), taught at universities and ‘applied’ in different contexts;
- c) It thus disempowers ordinary people by creating expertise and vesting power in experts and professionals;
- d) It simultaneously occludes politics (understood as popular collective action to enable control over one’s life and social environment) altogether and therefore disables collective decision making so that it further disempowers;
- e) It is therefore amounts to a typical neo-colonial conception of de-politicisation and disempowerment.

### **African Social Healing as a Political Practice**

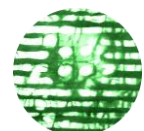
The idea then must be to re-introduce politics (understood as above, i.e. as a process of collective ‘taking control’) back into thinking the social healing process. The ideas and practices of what can be called the ‘politics of healing’ become quite clearly apparent in historical examples of the social healing process in different parts of our continent, although they take different forms; I will refer to four examples. It is apparent that when the palaver is under popular control it is a much more egalitarian and democratic process than when it is under state control.

**Example 1: The Palaver [Mbongi]<sup>17</sup> among the BaKongo.** The palaver especially as developed among BaKongo people in Central Africa is a particularly important instance of a process of healing as it constitutes probably the best example there is of a popularly constructed African process, as interference by external (colonial) power was largely successfully resisted. It is clear that many different kinds of palavers have been practiced over the years and that during the colonial period in particular, according to Wamba-dia-Wamba (1985), there were attempts at class differentiation by those with connections to power within rural communities which were often combated precisely by calling palavers. The following points stressed by Wamba-dia-Wamba (1985) should be particularly noted. A palaver:

is a collective/individual cleaning-up of people as community (physically, biologically, anthropologically, sociologically and spiritually) ... The palaver appears as a mass bursting of active involvement in matters of the entire community of ‘free’ or ‘liberated’ (i.e. with no taboos, no restrictions, no diplomacy, etc) speaking ... When a palaver is artificially organised by oppressive ruling powers, however, it degenerates into a formal exercise without life and (de)void of mass spontaneous

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<sup>17</sup> Also called Yemba, Boko, Lusanga (Wamba-dia-Wamba, 2013:12).





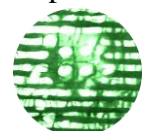
creativity: people speak, as it is said, with ‘tied tongues’ or with ‘tongues in the cheek’ (pp.3,4 emphasis in original).

The description is clear; a palaver involves everyone equally otherwise, if organised under the aegis of the powerful, a politics of interest is practiced in order not to offend them and the palaver fails to resolve contradictions. It follows then that a palaver is egalitarian and democratic or not at all. ‘The palaver requires of and provides to each community member the right to carry out, and the obligation to be subjected to, an integral critique of/by everyone without exception’ (p.7). Important ‘conflicts, emerging in, and threatening the life/existence of the community qua community, need to be resolved with appropriate methods’ (p.4). To resolve contradictions elicited by both internal and external forces, a struggle takes place over whom the ancestors represent. The dominant: ‘present themselves as the real servants ... of the powers of the ancestors ... It is claimed that ... the ancestors [speak] through them, and the masses of the community must obey them without question and reservation’ (p.5-6). Other members of the community oppose this and invoke the view of the ancestors through visions and dreams which affirm that ‘the community has deviated from the ancestral line’ (p.6). They do this because ‘to evoke the ancestors is to re-affirm their line, the one which allowed the community to reproduce’ (p.11). The ‘ancestral line’ is for them founded on equality. The palaver, therefore, through its struggle around the meaning of the ‘ancestral line’ helps resolve social conflicts and re-establish social egalitarian balance. To do so, it combines political processes with cultural representations, forms, and rituals that constitute a complex language through which the palaver can be understood and therefore succeed.

One can see then that all social differences, hierarchies and relations fall away during the palaver so that these may be reconstituted on a new basis after the conflict has been resolved. Given the absence of hierarchy within the political moment, specific intellectuals are charged with running the proceedings, articulating and clarifying the various positions expressed and adhering to rituals. These are the Nzonzis: ‘the collective self-criticism is carried out under the intellectual (dialectical) leadership of the Nzonzis who articulate positions and counter-positions in relation to the theoretical, ideological and symbolic requirements of the palaver’ (p.11). In sum Wamba-dia-Wamba concludes:

1) There cannot be any people’s consensus through silence ... 2) Democracy is first of all a free collective and individual exercise of free speech by everyone and by the whole community ... 3) A true leader is one who listens tirelessly ... 4) [the] Nzonzi, has as a duty to surmount every obstacle to clarification, democratization, simplification, creativity, etc. (p.14).

It should be emphasised that this particular case illustrates a totally participatory popular process which emphasises egalitarianism as the political solution to contradictions within African community: the ‘true essence ... [of the palaver is] freedom’ (Diong, 1979:83). The Mbongi, when run in a truly free manner, can be said to have been a site of ‘excessive’ politics at local level as it occurred at a distance from state thinking (both colonial and post-



colonial). It is therefore not surprising that it was a threat to the colonial power as well as to those aiming to set themselves above the people; the undermining of the institution was required by both.

**Example 2. The Shir in Somalia.** In this account I rely on Samatar's (1982) detailed study who observes that:

The pastoral Somalis, egalitarian and lacking a partial authority to compose differences, readily resort to violence ... Force is exercised not only in action but also in words ... The pre-eminence of the spoken word has its roots in an essentially democratic society in which men who wield influence do so mainly through their powers of persuasion rather than coercion (pp. 26,27).

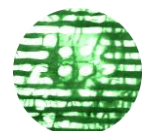
The Somali assembly is called the Shir and Somalis distinguish between four types of assembly which deal with different issues such as: justice, conflict resolution, clan praising and collective manufacturing of implements (p.28). Both prose and poetry are used and rhetoric and poetry have developed into sophisticated forms. The two main offices in the Shir are those of the 'chairman' and the 'wordbearer', their role according to Samatar is 'simply ceremonial'. 'The function of the chairman is ... to oversee an orderly execution of business. The function of the wordbearer ... is to repeat loudly and clearly key parts of an argument after each orator so that everyone present has an opportunity to hear and understand what is being said' (p.47). The 'wordbearer' here seems to fulfil a similar function to that of the Nzonzi in the Mbongi although with less responsibility as certain distinctions such as age and gender ones still operate within the Shir with the result that egalitarianism is compromised.

Samatar (p.55) cites a very important observation which sums up the centrality of the use of language in the Shir: 'Poetry is the central integrating principle without which harmonious relationships in society would be unthinkable'. Evidently here verbal eloquence was fundamental to providing unity and social health ('harmonious relationships') and moreover this resulted in the fact that it was poetic oratory which was a central feature in unifying Somalis in resistance to colonial domination in the Dervish Movement. Clearly then the politics of talking and persuasion in this case were achieved through specific highly sophisticated verbal forms of communication and rhetoric despite the absence of a complete egalitarian process in the Shir itself<sup>18</sup>.

**Example 3. The Gaçaga in Rwanda.** This is perhaps the most well known institution of this type today. As noted it was re-invented by the Rwandan state for the reasons already given. A few remarks will suffice. The literature on the Gaçaga is overwhelmingly located within Western conceptions of law, 'transitional justice' and 'conflict resolution'. Clark (2010), the most detailed analysis I have seen to date of Gaçaga in practice, operates squarely within this paradigm as does Bornkamm (2012) who looks at the legal context of rules. There is usually

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<sup>18</sup> Although I have not had the opportunity to check the empirical evidence for this, one could speculate that the rise of ethnic politics in postcolonial Somalia (eventually finding expression in warlordism) was not unrelated to the decline of the *Shir* as a site of popular politics.



little discussion of the origins of Gaçaça and only its post-genocide workings are discussed<sup>19</sup>. One exception is provided by Mironko and Rurangwa (2007: 203) who note:

Traditionally, gacaca was used at the local level to resolve disputes within one family or between close families ... The basic unit of Gaçaça was the council of elders, with all adult members of the community as observers. Although judgments were reached by elders, and not necessarily by popular vote or consensus, the principle behind each judgment was the restoration of social harmony, the re-establishment of order, the reintegration of the offender, and the reconciliation of the two parties.

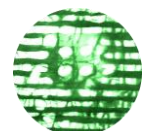
It seems therefore that Gaçaça was already a state institution in pre-colonial times which would explain why it so easily collapsed during the colonial period and degenerated into arbitrariness after independence (p.204). It was revived by the post-genocide state and has recently been terminated (in 2012). Most of the discussions concern whether it corresponds to Western conceptions of justice and the failure to discuss the crimes of the RPF itself (Clark, 2012). Moreover of course there is evidence of manipulation by various powerful local political figures in specific local situations.

Yet at the same time the process has contributed to healing. Clark insists on using 'healing' only for overcoming the psychological traumas of individuals (2010:258) and reserves the term 'reconciliation' for 'communal healing'. There is a clear reticence to discuss African conceptions of social healing here, while the Rwandan state, despite its gestural invocation of African tradition, is fundamentally concerned with establishing 'social cohesion' like all states<sup>20</sup>. Given the history of animosity between Tutsi and Hutu in particular and the minority nature of ethnic Tutsis who run an ethnic state, this fear is understandable although not condonable. What is particularly clear then is the distinction between the popular concerns and popular democratic thinking in the first two examples and the much more state-focussed concerns of the third. Evidently this is linked to the character of the societies in question: without a central state in the first two, statist in the third.

**Example 4. Judiya in Darfur (Sudan).** An important detailed study here is that undertaken by Tubiana et al. (2012). They note that:

<sup>19</sup> Although Bornkamm (2012: 33) notes the following about the pre-colonial Gaçaça: 'The principal objective of dispute settlement was not to render justice. Customary legal rules were only a starting point for the discussion. The primary objective was always to restore peaceful relations within the community, which could even justify an unfair result. While the damage caused would certainly have to be compensated to some extent, the wrongdoer also had to be fully reintegrated in the community. In fact many traditional African societies perceived formal justice according to pre-established rules as working contrary to reconciliation. It was believed that a final judgement would only further exacerbate a conflict rather than settle it.'

<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that the idea of 'social cohesion' is on the state's agenda in Africa at the moment as a number of governments like to refer to its necessity given the perceived 'challenges' in current society resulting from the failure of nation-building. The South African state in particular has been using this term more and more. Interestingly the term rarely used by the state is 'inclusion'. The reverting to the terminology of 1950s conservative 'functionalist' sociology is itself interesting and worthy of note as it tells us something regarding hegemonic state subjectivity in the current political sequence.



Judiyais the main term for traditional justice and reconciliation mechanisms in Darfur. The term is derived from jud, which translates to generosity or magnanimity in Arabic. The judiyaprocess is facilitated by ajawid(sing. ajwad). The central tenet is that of a consensual mediation that brings together a commonly acceptable outcome for the parties. Problems are not solved by punishment, but by a common acceptance of social ties... When Darfurians want to say that a mediator is good, they will label him an ajwad, and when they want to indicate that a conference was good, they will call it a judiya. Both terms are strongly positive (p.37).

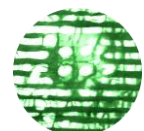
Here the central figure of the process comes under a different name and clearly from important men with status: ‘traditionally, ajawidare chosen among elders and notables known for both their neutrality and their competence in traditional matters. Elders or notables will put themselves forward to serve as ajawid, or be recommended by leading members of the community’ (p.57).

We are told that the foundational component of customary justice and reconciliation in this context is material compensation: the offending party must compensate the aggrieved party for the offense. If there was loss of limb or life, the compensation comes in lieu of blood. Compensation is also, and implicitly, the recognition of responsibility, and can therefore lead to reconciliation. Compensation can be ordered by the court, recommended by ajawidor other mediators, or agreed by consensus by the parties. It comes in three forms: diya(blood money), ta‘wid(compensation for non-human losses), and khasarat(costs) (p.27). These institutions resemble more closely what are known throughout the continent as ‘customary courts’ founded on tradition.

It comes as no surprise that these customary courts were first recognised and institutionalised by British colonialism and subsequently by the post-colonial state; they are controlled by ‘traditional leaders’ and are comparable to ‘traditional courts’ elsewhere on the continent in the sense that they form the bottom level of the official judicial system. There is very little evidence of popular politics in either the government-controlled areas or the rebel controlled areas yet, at the same time, these courts retain a popular legitimacy which customary courts in South Africa do not possess.

The first priority of the ajawidis to stop ongoing violence. Today, the first step is often to call the police, at least in government-held areas, where most of the population lives. This is in keeping with a tradition now so distant it has become a legend, according to which elders of both sides would physically restrain their youth with rope to stop the violence and allow a judiya. Using police rather than rope began during colonial times - perhaps more an opportunity to show the military power of the hakuma, the government, than any attempt at Solomonic justice (p.61).

Darfurians agree that they favorjudiyaover any court because it is more efficient and swifter - not least because, unlike the courts, it has no appeal process. Above all, judiyais less risky and





less divisive. It is less risky because the outcome is the result of a negotiation, and therefore the process offers more control than that depending on an unpredictable court process. It is less damaging because it offers an opportunity to manage relations with an individual or group one is likely to have to deal with in the future. “When the government [that is, the statutory court] imposes a sentence, it is cutting ties between people,” a camp leader in eastern Chad explained (p.62).

Darfurians will say that a successful judiya involves truth-telling, which in turn allows for, and obliges the other party to, discount in the compensation, forgiveness, and a lasting reconciliation. “It is very important to tell the truth. To be forgiven, you must tell the truth,” said a Fur intellectual who has been a close observer of reconciliation processes (p.66).

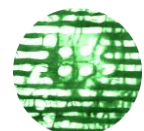
It appears that Judiya possesses a high level of legitimacy in Darfur despite its state character, but its functions are clearly limited to the legal resolution of conflict and do not extend to social healing. Interestingly this lower state court brings forth a distinction between state and government. The former’s legitimacy is recognised while the latter’s partiality is emphasised:

Making an incident the responsibility of many people creates powerful social disincentives for violence. Darfurians of all sides are quick to point out that the conflicts of the past twenty-five years show what happens when a powerful external actor - the government - enables local groups to become immune to traditional conflict mitigation processes by arming them, giving them political support, and undermining the mechanisms that should provide a disincentive to violence. This is particularly so among groups that have been militarized by the government and gradually integrated into official armed forces (p.68).

In sum we can note that despite what may be called its ‘statistation’ this ‘customary court’ has nevertheless attempted to mitigate and resist the effects of violence in an extremely violent environment through disincentives to violence such as collective social responsibility. The four examples outlined exhibit different levels of statistation of the politics of peace. In the last two cases (Gaçaça and Judiya) the institutions are unmistakably state institutions and are restricted to court functions; thus although we may be able to speak of reconciliation there is much less evidence of healing as the processes are less democratic than the Mbongi and even the Shir. The levels of variation in these processes give some idea of the rich traditions available for resolving contradictions among the people in Africa.

### **Some Popular Practices in South Africa**

In South Africa, given that ‘customary courts’ have largely lost their popular legitimacy as they were used as systems of control under colonialism and apartheid, the experience of popular assemblies with an element of healing is mostly to be found in the practices of some popular social movements. If we except the state structured TRC process in the 1990s, such assemblies are practiced in conditions which do not receive official recognition. Their presence in popular practice makes this process much more in conformity with the first two examples I mentioned (it takes place ‘at a distance’ from state institutions) although the level



of utilisation of ritual and symbolism is much more limited to the sacrifice of a small animal (poverty of course plays a central role here). I am not aware of social healing processes having taken place in the rural areas of Pondoland (whence most of the migrants came to the Lonmin mine) after the recent Marikana massacre for example, but this certainly does not mean that they did not take place. The same is valid for the post-xenophobic violence of 2008. Given the extreme effects of colonial and apartheid domination during which the repressive powers of the centralised chieftaincies were systematically bolstered, popular assemblies are predominantly an affair outside official ‘culture’. At the level of the state what are performed are formal ceremonies such as the ‘tradition of cleansing violence’ performed by the ‘Nkosi’ (chief) himself<sup>21</sup> while ‘traditional courts’ in rural areas mainly serve the chieftaincy to control the population and enable the plunder of resources from the people through arbitrary forms of coercion (Mamdani, 1996)<sup>22</sup>.

Popular traditions of social healing therefore are in need of resurrection in South Africa. The organisation with the most evident current experience of this is AbahlalibaseMjondolo, the movement of shack dwellers which originally began in Durban. Central to Abahlali’s conception of politics is what they call ‘living politics’ which:

simply refers to the practice according to which any shack-dweller (whether member or not) can turn to the movement with her problem, and anyone can raise any point of concern at any gathering of the movement ... In addition to the conviction that everyone’s suffering is equally unjust ... this implication also points to the second sense which living politics points to. Beyond the healing effects of “providing that ear”; “something that people are craving”, in this second meaning, living politics attends to formulating a responsibility to effectively deal with the problem which the cry is about (Selmeczi, 2012: 508).

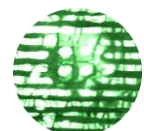
A specific example of living politics concerns the way Abahlali responded to violent attacks on their leaders prior to the mass attacks in Kennedy Road (Durban) in September 2009. Rather than launching revenge attacks, they discovered who their assailants were and entered into discussion with their grandmothers (given the predominance of elderly women in Abahlali, this is very pertinent) who then put pressure on the youth to come to a reconciliation meeting. The community was reconciled after much discussion and an animal was bought by the offending parties and sacrificed<sup>23</sup>.

Given the multi-ethnic character of Abahlali (and of course the multi-ethnic character of shack-dweller communities), an elected committee is often entrusted with resolving differences and the offending parties provide reparation in the form of a small animal (e.g. a chicken). Moreover, tensions in meetings are sometimes diffused by an elderly woman who goes into a trance and communicates with god (or the ancestors) who then insists on the need

<sup>21</sup> See the report of King Zwelithini’s performance of rituals to cleanse perpetrators of violence, *Times* 6/11/2012.

<sup>22</sup> It is in this sense that the South African government’s ‘Traditional Courts Bill’ is fundamentally oppressive of rural people, although most opposition has taken a different perspective emanating as it has from human rights discourse and gender rights in particular; see e.g. Clappaert, 2012.

<sup>23</sup> Abahlaliactivistpersonal communication.



to maintain unity. The need for unity would then be addressed through outpouring emotion rather than argument, affect rather than reason<sup>24</sup>. Yet the insistence on achieving unity is totally rational, irrespective of the manner it is achieved.

This kind of healing politics then is integral to the politics of Abahlali. It works because it is founded on popular participatory democratic practices along the lines of the first two African examples noted above. People feel involved and are indeed involved in the process of devising politics collectively. Of course, community meetings of this sort are accompanied by rituals borrowed from African ‘tradition’ as well as from Christianity, but what is central is the ability of everyone to talk and to be listened to as in the case of the palaver noted above. While these practices are not necessarily ‘post-violence’, the latter are relatively easy to organise in those cases where a culture of discussion and debate within community has been fought for and instituted already. Given the multi-ethnic character of the community and the leadership of the organisation, there is somewhat less possibility of traditional chiefs taking over the running of these politics and pushing them in an authoritarian direction. In any case Abahlali’s politics of peace are being ‘re-invented’. They do not conform to a formalistic traditional model although they perform similar functions to the more formal African processes discussed above.

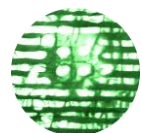
What all the above examples strongly suggest is that a genuine popular politics of healing and the resolution of contradictions in community has taken many different forms in Africa, but what needs to be stressed is that such a politics is successful when it is already founded on ongoing popular democratic practices which involve everyone equally, irrespective of the cultural particularities within which it may operate. The forms taken by popular assemblies are clearly the outcome of struggles: when the state or local elites have established control over the process (e.g. Gaçaça), the content of the popular assembly differs fundamentally from when it is directly under popular control (e.g. Mbongi). In South Africa, popular forms of resolving contradictions in communities are also clearly located within an understanding of the politics of healing. In other words they are not a technique with potentiality but the deployment in actuality of ancient methods adapted to current needs. They are in many cases much more humane than anything the criminal justice system can provide. Their importance is increased by the fact that poor people are equally alienated both by the workings of the criminal justice system and by the ‘traditional/customary courts’ in the rural areas over which chiefs exercise their arbitrary powers. The question therefore remains how can a politics of social healing be made central to a politics of peace and how can it be made more widespread so that it acquires a more prominent place in politics today?

## **Conclusions**

It needs to be noted that none of the examples of social healing in action which I have provided are based within parties and I know of none which are. In the case of Abahlali of

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<sup>24</sup> Abahlaliactivistpersonal communication.



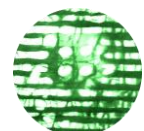
course we have the only ‘non-rural’ example provided, yet the rural-urban distinction is largely misleading because it is invariably associated with the supposed ‘traditional’ character of the former and the ‘modern’ character of the latter; subjectivity here is reduced to place. This is an unhelpful procedure. The point is that the political subjectivities associated with parties are not conducive to the resolution of non-antagonistic contradictions. Parties regularly deploy a militaristic subjectivity which is geared to ‘othering’ as a prelude to seeing the other as the enemy. This is largely because parties are subjectively geared towards attaining state power to the exclusion of other parties. Another obvious consequence of parties’ focus on attaining power is that people are not considered as capable of thought, only experts are for only they can fathom the objective. People divided into classes, for example, are thought as ‘forces’ but never as capable of thinking for themselves as in the militaristic notion of the ‘objective balance of class forces’, identified by the knowledgeable, on which the attainment of state power is ultimately said to depend. However a politics of peace, as I have begun to outline it above, necessarily assumes that people think<sup>25</sup>.

The same is not true of NGOs - another ‘modern’ institution - as their concern is not with capturing power but assuring the interests of their funders. This is not to maintain that NGOs are open to the idea that people think of course, rather simply that they operate with a different subjectivity. There have been a number of NGOs which have concerned themselves with violence and peace in South Africa (e.g. the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation - CSVR). But overwhelmingly these NGOs think within Western parameters which remain statist, especially those of ‘transitional justice’, (parliamentary) democracy, human rights and so on, and are consequently unable to open up to the thought of alternative popularly-based politics as well as to the fact that people are capable of developing their own political thinking. The main point however remains: it is largely impossible for a politics of peace to be thought from within a party-type organisation. This constitutes yet another reason for the necessity of thinking outside the parameters of party-state politics and its expressive objectivism.

There is no alternative to taking popular practices of social healing seriously simply because they also enable us to think transformation at the level of the symbolic<sup>26</sup>. In particular, the palaver itself is the clearest model of such practices located deep within African humanistic traditions. It is apparent that a number of features which suggest a politics at a distance from the state are central to the traditional palaver. These include the total freedom allowed to

<sup>25</sup> One noteworthy contradiction among the people was expressed in the political differences between Fanon and Césaire for example. Césaire supported the attachment of Martinique to France via the DOM-TOM system; Fanon opposed it. Beyond the specifics though, the contradiction was one of more general import between the figure of the politician (Césaire) and that of the militant (Fanon). It is this contradiction which needs to be brought out in the open and discussed. At different times this contradiction has prevailed within one proper name itself; e.g. Patrice Emery Lumumba, Mao Zedong, Thomas Sankara, Maurice Bishop and Jean Bertrand Aristide who were all politicians and militants i.e. state revolutionaries to different extents and in different ways. They attempted to speak and act for the popular politics of the masses while in state power with devastating results. This issue is treated rather summarily in Badiou’s play *The Incident at Antioch* (Badiou, 2013b).

<sup>26</sup> It is relevant in this context to think in terms of the distinction stressed by Lacan between the real, the imaginary and the symbolic. For an introduction see Žižek (2006).





everyone, irrespective of their social location, to speak openly ‘without fear or favour’. They also include the central role of those highly respected intellectuals, the Nzonzis known under different names in other contexts. However at the core of the palaver - and perhaps its most important feature - lies its understanding of time as following other requirements than those demanded by a utilitarian rationality. Given the centrality of time in biological healing processes, the palaver seems to suggest that time is also crucial in relation to social healing, in other words in resolving contradictions among the people. If the idea in resolving such contradictions is to provide a unity of purpose in the community, then time has to be thought differently. The fact that the colonial enterprise could not comprehend its importance, so that the term ‘palaver’ came to signify its wastage (a waste of time) merely confirms the fundamental contradiction between the capitalist foundation of colonialism on the one hand, and the universality of humanity on the other. The dismissal of the palaver by capitalist subjectivities in fact symbolizes both their contempt for humanity and their systematic effacing of popular politics. I wish here to cite Alain Badiou who in his discussion of the disastrous effects of the deployment of ‘revolutionary violence’ and terror in an attempt to resolve political contradictions in emancipatory struggles, insists on the need for a different conception of time attuned to humanity which does not attempt to compete with the urgency inherent in the market. It should be apparent then that in the palaver, Africans have invented a form of social healing for the emancipation of humanity as a whole:

... what experience shows is that, over the long term, neither antagonistic action, based on the military or police model, directed against enemies, nor Terror within your own camp can resolve the problems created by your own political existence ... Ultimately, every political problem boils down to a problem of the unity of orientation on an issue that is collectively defined as being the main issue of the moment or of the situation. Even a victory over the enemy depends on the subjective unity that was the victors’. Over the long run, the key to a victorious treatment of antagonisms lies in the correct handling of contradictions among the people - which also happens to be the real definition of democracy ... The main lesson learned from the last century’s revolutions can be expressed as follows: the political time of the communist Idea must never compete with the established time of domination and its urgencies... There is a necessary slowness, both democratic and popular in nature, which is particular to the time of the correct handling of contradictions among the people ... What ... [that paradoxical] violence especially destroys is the time of emancipation, which is on the scale of the life of humanity, not on that of the market’s profit cycle<sup>27</sup> (Badiou, 2013a: 9-11, emphasis in original).

In addition to the question of the need to rethink the problem of time, it is also important to stress the centrality of an understanding of the historical evolution of gender relations in Africa for an understanding of a politics of peace. While I have noted the importance of

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<sup>27</sup> The classic historical treatment of the character of time under capitalism is of course Thompson, 1967.



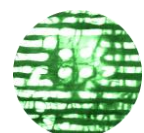
women in the contemporary struggle for the peaceful resolution of contradictions among the people in Africa, Amadiume (1997:95) reminds us that:

Accumulation through the appropriation of the fruit of other people's labour means that appropriators resort to more and more violence, since human beings - as history rightly shows - always rebel against oppression in one form or another. In Africa, irrespective of internal contradictions and conflicts, the most effective and destructive instruments of oppression were imported from outside that continent: horses and firearms which were used to kill, capture and enslave. The ideology of violence was monolithic masculinist ideology, which ... had roots in European social systems. It entered Africa gradually through Islam... it is generally agreed that it was Europeans who first domesticated the horse and used it as an instrument of war... This was also the case with gun powder, which the ancient Chinese and Egyptians in their concern with balance and harmony only used medicinally and not for destruction and murder. The important point is that with the introduction of firearms into Africa in the sixteenth century by European colonizers and slavers, by sea, the whole of the African continent became totally militarised.

What Amadiume perhaps overlooks somewhat is Africans' capacity to resist militarisation through the matriarchal systems which she analyses so clearly. In John Janzen's work, 'drums of affliction' or 'healing cults' or 'rituals of affliction' (ngoma) are shown to still be important ways through which Bantu-speaking peoples of Central and Southern Africa deal with individual and collective misfortune and affliction (Janzen, 1992). These healing rituals in which women play a prevalent if not predominant role are still widespread. In fact, Janzen (1992) remarks that:

In colonial and postcolonial Africa, the logic of the use of affliction and adversity for the organisation of social reproduction has contributed to the perpetuation, even the proliferation, of cults of affliction, often in a way that has baffled government authorities and outside observers. Cults have arisen in connection with epidemics, migration and trade routes, shifts in modes of production, and in response to changes in social organization and the deterioration of juridical institutions. Colonialism itself undoubtedly generated many of the cults of affliction that appeared in the twentieth century. Post-independence conditions have continued to provide grist to the mill of cult formation ... The role of ngoma networks in popular resistance in South Africa's townships is not yet known to scholars, but it may be substantial (pp.75, 77).

With such social healing cults so widespread and so resilient, which proliferate 'where misfortune is rampant and where social chaos prevails' (p.79), it would seem that the people of Africa themselves are able to utilise tradition in order to exceed state subjectivity and to thereby resist and survive its coercive power. In doing this excessive subjectivities are not reduced to political terms only but involve complex processes of symbolisation and rituals. These also need to form part of any thought of emancipation.





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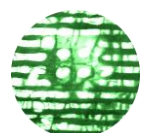
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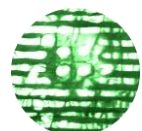
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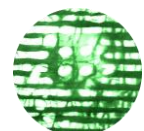


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