NARRATIVE AND TRADITIONAL PEACEBUILDING SYSTEMS: IMPLICATIONS FOR TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE IN AFRICA AND JUSTICE SYSTEMS IN BRITAIN

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Abstract
In the context of the increasing attention that many fields of research and practice are giving to narrative, this article examines the importance of narrative in reflecting on the past and creating a foundation for the future. It argues that traditional peacebuilding systems are well-placed to elicit narrative and reviews the manner in which they create an environment conducive to story-telling, using examples from Sudan. It then explores the contribution that traditional peacebuilding systems may make - both to contemporary transitional justice systems in Africa and to justice systems in countries such as Britain. In summary, this article highlights the connection between narrative and traditional peacebuilding systems and demonstrates that by intentionally considering their relationship we reveal numerous principles that could enrich justice systems of all kinds.

It is the story that outlives the sound of the war-drums and the exploits of the brave fighters. It is the story... that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort, without it we are blind - Chinua Achebe, Anthills of the Savannah

Delivering justice and cultivating peace are challenging tasks in any society, and are particularly difficult in the aftermath of war. During a period of transition the familiar problems associated with finding witnesses, producing evidence, staffing courts, maintaining the public’s confidence and allocating places in prison are multiplied by thousands. Politicians and lawyers have often based what came to be known as transitional justice mechanisms upon conventional Western legal systems. As these mechanisms have struggled to cope with the scale and complexity of crimes committed during war, they have changed considerably. From the Nuremberg trials after World War Two to the Truth
Commissions in Latin America and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa, there has been an increasing emphasis on delivering justice and cultivating peace in the widest sense, and a decreasing emphasis on upholding a narrow interpretation of written law.

Formal, national transitional justice strategies have, for example, increasingly incorporated narrative as a tool for understanding and redressing the past. Many of the Latin American truth commissions included narratives from victims; the TRC in South Africa went yet further and encouraged perpetrators to tell their stories by offering them amnesty. Yet some scholars see such changes as relatively superficial, and suggest that a more fundamental shift is required. Foster, Haupt & de Beer (2005), for example, write that the “quasi-judicial nature” of the TRC in South Africa limited and interfered with attempts to reveal the full truth about apartheid. Despite some incentive to tell their stories, the perpetrators still looked for ways to justify themselves and to withhold incriminating details because of the legal nature of the hearings. Such critiques are directly parallel to a widespread rediscovery of narrative techniques in a variety of fields in the West. In the field of justice as a whole, for example, enabling victims, offenders, witnesses, families, and the community to tell their stories is becoming increasingly important.

Whilst the West slowly rediscovers the role of narrative in transforming conflict and cultivating peace; Africa smiles knowingly. Communities in Africa have been using traditional peacebuilding systems for centuries, to stimulate and nurture narrative before, after and during conflict. This article argues that traditional systems have the potential to elicit full narratives where other strategies have failed, thus revealing truth and creating a foundation for reconciliation and peace. Instead of a court-like system in which people sit in far corners of a room speaking through legal advocates, traditional systems require face-to-face interaction, and all parties to the conflict are encouraged to tell their story. These stories enable each to see their enemies in the context of their emotions, motivation and relationships, and to see them as fellow human beings.

This article describes the “return to narrative” that is taking place in the West, and then outlines some of the advantages that a focus on narrative can bring to justice systems and transitional justice in particular. The central section explains how traditional peacebuilding systems elicit narrative, using examples from Sudan. This article then models two ways in which we can apply lessons from traditional peacebuilding systems to new and changing contexts. Firstly, it addresses one of the many problems facing traditional systems in the context of transitional justice: national rather than local governance systems and identities. Secondly, it demonstrates that such lessons are also applicable in conventional justice systems, for example in Britain.

**The “Return to Narrative”**
Western justice systems have evolved over the years into increasingly formal, legalistic and bureaucratic structures. As a consequence, contemporary conventional justice systems do not tend to elicit full narratives from any of the participants. Courts focus on
deconstructing and disproving people’s stories, rather than hearing and acknowledging them. However, justice systems are one of a number of Western systems engaged in what Teresa Phelps (2004), a scholar of law and literature, calls the “return to narrative.” She notes that scholars in many fields are increasingly recognising the efficacy of narrative techniques as a scientific research tool and that practitioners are using them in a variety of contexts.

To some extent, the West has retained a sense of the therapeutic properties of storytelling, but this sense has become more clearly defined with the development of narrative therapy, testimony therapy and combinations of narrative with conventional therapeutic interventions. Schauer, Neuner and Elbert (2004), for example, combined narrative therapy with cognitive behavioural therapy to produce a short term intervention called Narrative Exposure Therapy (NET). In a study on Sudanese refugees with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) they found a dramatic decrease in PTSD amongst the NET participants, compared to a control group.

The West has only more recently acknowledged the restorative and reintegrative properties of stories. The developing field of restorative justice reflects the mounting degree of respect for narrative methodology as beneficial to both victims and offenders. Victim-offender, community and family mediators are well trained in managing the storytelling stage. Winslade and Monk (2001) took this concept yet further by developing what they called “narrative mediation,” in which people deconstruct and reconstruct their stories. Narrative techniques are becoming increasingly crucial for those working with victims, offenders and in the community. People are given the opportunity to tell their stories in such forums as support groups and trauma programmes for victims, support and accountability groups for offenders, family group conferencing, youth offending panels, family mediation, victim-offender mediation and community mediation, to name but a few.

**Why Narrative?**

When offenders are reluctant to tell their stories for fear of being trapped, they often withhold details that might help the victim, or enable others to help them. When victims and witnesses are insensitively used to gain information, rather than allowed to tell their full stories, justice systems can perpetuate their powerlessness. When the community is denied a voice a large proportion of the impact of the crime and conflict goes unrecognised. Without stories - whether an individual’s, a community’s or a nation’s - the future is built on an incomplete understanding of the past. Stories enable people to learn from their mistakes, to understand themselves and to appreciate others.

Stories also explore the complexities, ambiguities, relationships, emotions, attitudes, systems and institutions behind actions. Foster, Haupt and de Beer (2005) write that the search for factual truth serves the human interest in prediction and control, whereas the purpose of narrative truth is to achieve “intersubjective understanding.” Narratives of
victims, perpetrators, witnesses, beneficiaries and bystanders contribute not only to the accumulation of “truth” but to the ability of each to see the human face of the other.

John Paul Lederach, in *The Moral Imagination* (2005: 142), emphasizes that narrative is not just a methodology but that it “creates the formative story of who we are as a people and a place.” He states that it cannot simply be a “stage of problem solving” but a “journey of discovering what these events mean for who we are.” This view of narrative allows for the important concept of “restorying,” or restoring people’s place in history through story, when collective stories have been marginalized or lost in conflict. Stories are powerful because they are present in some form in every culture, and a part of everyday life. Alone, story-telling does not constitute justice, reconciliation or peace, but it does provide a strong foundation upon which to build. Stories challenge us to listen rather than argue, to acknowledge rather than ignore and to understand rather than to oppose.

**Narrative and Traditional Peacebuilding Systems**

Traditional peacebuilding systems in Africa are an emerging topic of study for African and international academics alike, yet are somewhat difficult to define. The literature uses a complex and inconsistent set of terms to refer to traditional/informal/customary/indigenous systems. Stevens (2001) writes that informal refers to any non-state justice system, thus traditional may be used to identify within this category those that are community-based, that the community respects and that derive from pre-colonial values and systems. The word customary primarily refers to legal systems, and the word indigenous is problematic because it creates barriers between groups of people that arrived at different times. Thus the word traditional is used here, acknowledging that although traditional systems by definition have pre-colonial origins, they are by no means unchanged since pre-colonial times.

The intended meaning of the term traditional peacebuilding system is recognition of holistic attempts to bring positive peace, as defined by Johan Galtung (1964). He described positive peace as “the integration of human society” in contrast to the popular perception of peace as the absence of war, for which he used the term negative peace. Although it is rarely if ever fulfilled, traditional African leadership, values and initiatives have as their goal peace in as full a form as possible. This may or may not include processes equivalent to judicial prosecution, conflict resolution, forgiveness, policing, spiritual healing, psychosocial healing, economic redistribution, reparations and others.

Traditional systems of some kind are present in every country in Africa, but to illustrate the potential for practical application this article draws upon examples from just one country. In Sudan the conflict is far from over, poverty is severe, corruption is rife and many have lost hope. The Nuer, Dinka, Beja and Baggara people mentioned below are only some of the many Sudanese suffering from the effects of a decades-long war. Yet there are many reasons for hope in such a rich and diverse country, and among those reasons is
the potential contribution that principles from traditional Sudanese peacebuilding systems may make to eliciting narrative in the forthcoming transition.

Traditional systems have been manipulated, concretised, broken and corrupted. They are not in a position to elicit narrative in the manner described below; only some are able to achieve such ideals, some of the time. However, whilst Western systems have struggled to navigate the treacherous path between care and control, communities in Africa have continually used traditional systems as their best and only way to deal with conflict and crime. Such systems have consistently focused upon story-telling, and as the “return to narrative” takes hold we would do well to learn from systems which did not ever abandon it.

How do traditional peacebuilding systems elicit narrative? The immediate and simple answer to this question is that they focus on it. A large part of most traditional initiatives is dedicated to each and every party to the conflict telling their story. Participants spend many days listening to stories. In a modern version of a Nuer peacebuilding initiative, for example, the first seven days consisted of story-telling (Lowrey, 1996). Traditional courts, or luk, of the Dinka, consist of the bany luk, or judge-type figure; a council of advisors; and a tree under which the meeting is held. A central feature is the presence of an agamlong, a person who sits in the centre and repeats the words of the speakers to ensure collective understanding and the creation of a common narrative (Deng, 1972). George Achor (2000: 5), of the Sudan Civil Society Peacebuilding Initiative, concurs that the right “to be heard and listened to” is the “greatest characteristic” of Dinka peacebuilding systems, and it is indeed a prominent characteristic of many African traditional peacebuilding systems.

The more complex answer to how traditional systems elicit narrative is that they incorporate numerous elements that motivate participants to tell their full stories. No two traditional systems are exactly alike, nor do they all share core principles. However, similarities and convergence among them point to recurring themes. This article employs five themes identified in previous research (Batchelor, 2006) and describes how traditional systems elicit narrative through community participation, a focus on relationships, and through being culturally appropriate, flexible, and integrated.

First, the participation of the entire community motivates particularly the perpetrator to tell the full story as truthfully as possible (e.g. Kiplagat, 1998). Perpetrators know that stories will be told from many different angles before the community creates and recognizes a single version, and that many in the community often already know what happened. The threat of others revealing what they know, and the shame of being found lying, encourages them to tell the whole truth. Particular groups of women often make this threat most explicit - among the Nuer, for example, these women are referred to as maan naaths (mothers of the nation). They threaten both to reveal their knowledge and to shout down and shame anyone who lies (Creative Associates International, 1998). There are of course varying degrees to which communities participate; for example El Amin
(2004), from the University of Khartoum, writes that the Beja do not themselves contribute in meetings, they are represented by their leaders. Regular consultation between the leader and his group nevertheless amounts to some degree of participation.

The extended family and the community may persuade one another to tell their full stories. The perpetrator's family is usually held responsible for the act along with the perpetrator, so is likely to encourage the perpetrator to tell the whole story in order to understand that for which it is being held responsible. Cunnison (1966: 180) describes in detail a feud taking place between two lineage groups of the Humr, a sub-group of Baggara Arabs from the North of Sudan. After the leaders or facilitators of the meeting, the ajawid, attempted to persuade the parties to reconcile, people then started persuading each other. One said, “See how we are sitting together - what could be better than this?”

Victims know that they will not be alone in telling the stories, nor in holding the perpetrator accountable if he or she is found guilty. The original offence can often make victims feel humiliated, and in formal settings they may be reluctant to make themselves more vulnerable by sharing their experiences. Surrounded by family and friends, however, traditional settings provide a safe environment in which they may feel able to tell their whole stories.

Second, the focus of traditional systems is on restoring long-term relationships rather than upholding a written law (e.g. Malan, 1997). Hadley (2000: 22), an observer of a contemporary peacebuilding initiative between the Dinka and Nuer, said that story-telling “provided a rich interwoven fabric for building relationships.” Aspects of the story that are unnecessary for establishing the facts are nevertheless valued if they contribute to relationship building. Perpetrators and victims have the same goal - to try and understand one another.

The fact that perpetrators are required to look their victims in the eye can stimulate an honest confession. They also know that there will be an opportunity to make amends to their victims to alleviate their shame. In contrast to formal systems where the state takes responsibility for punishment and restitution, if it happens at all, traditional peacebuilding systems enable perpetrators to re-enter relationships with their victims and their communities through restitution. Dinka “law,” for example, is not based upon retribution but upon direct compensation for the losses incurred during the “crime” (Makec, 1988). Among the Beja of Eastern Sudan offences often require the payment of dyya (compensation or blood-money). Alternatively, however, if one tribe forgives another, the forgiven tribe becomes in debt to the forgiving tribe. If in the future a similar offence is committed against the forgiven tribe, they are obliged also to forgive (El Amin, 2004). Thus a “virtuous cycle” of indebted relationships replaces a vicious cycle of violence.

According to Francis Deng (1972), a Sudanese scholar of international politics and an expert in conflict resolution and anthropology, the leaders of the Dinka luk, the bany luk, do not draw their power from the threat of force nor do they have religious authority.
Instead, their character and the backing of the community they serve give them irresistible powers of persuasion. The leaders are chosen for certain qualities; for example, they must be generous, righteous, and “cool-hearted” as opposed to hot-tempered. Cunnison (1966: 184-5) tells us that the mandate of the Baggara community leaders, or ajawid, is to be “active rather than passive agents in bringing about reconciliation.” They must proclaim patience over vengeance and humility over indignation. The community does not perceive them as neutral, nor does it mandate them with finding a middle way. Instead, they should be “identified with the side which is seeking peace rather than the side which would continue vengeance.”

Third, traditional systems are by nature culturally appropriate and familiar to participants. In a formal court, facing strangers in an uncomfortable setting which uses unfamiliar language and symbols, both perpetrators and victims are likely to be nervous and withhold or forget details. In an environment in which people feel comfortable, which uses symbols and language they understand, people are more likely to tell their whole stories.

Lisa Schirch (2005: 59) summarizes the power of ritual as not just an expression of peacebuilding, but a contributor to it: “Traditional or improvised rituals can nurture the social commitment to values of peace in times of crisis, creating a space in which people can release pent-up emotions and trauma.” In the meeting of the Baggara, for example, Cunnison (1966) tells us that the leader of one group said that his group symbolically “spread” their “smocks” before the other. This recognisable symbol of apology caused the others to follow suit. The community leaders, or ajawid, also drew upon common religious understanding to nurture social commitment. Among the Beja, the leaders, or sorknab, repeat sayings and proverbs relevant to the situation. Gullad, for example, is an oft cited familiar concept. Gullad means giving one’s word of honour not to use violence and it can create a “peaceful” space in which to begin dialogue or reconciliation (El Amin, 2004).

Traditional systems also acknowledge the stories people tell using culturally appropriate rituals and symbols. In a formal court, people may feel that they tell their stories without result, whilst in traditional systems a variety of symbols represent the subsequent material restitution and the reconciliation that may follow. The New Sudan Council of Churches (2004), which works with traditional leaders in Southern Sudan to create “Peace Conferences” based on traditional systems, claims that the most common rituals used to acknowledge a peacebuilding process (including story-telling) are: shaking of hands, dining together, drinking from one pot, animal sacrifices, burying of spears and the sprinkling of water mixed with cow dung. The study of psychology confirms that taking action affects belief, as well as vice versa (Festinger, 1957). Thus, the active part of a ritual is not just a demonstration of acknowledgement, restitution and potential reconciliation; it actually contributes to such change.

Fourth, traditional systems are often very flexible. Leaders are able to adapt both the process and the outcome to take into account the stories that victims, perpetrators and
witnesses tell. They make each discussion, agreement and ritual appropriate to the people and the conditions involved. Cunnison’s (1966) description of the Baggara system demonstrates the flexibility of traditional systems, and the role that people’s personalities and backgrounds play in the process. There were some victims, for example, who demanded “blood-money” on principle but later refused it. The outcome of one case was the inclusion of a new member on a council, where in others it would be compensation.

The flexibility of the process both arises from and contributes to a sense of mutual trust. Perpetrators trust that the community will take into account the whole story rather than focus on a particular breach of law, as might be the case in formal justice systems. Instead of feeling that one is going to be “trapped” if one mentions specifics that are illegal, one may feel that the more people know the more likely they are to understand the situation. This thereby motivates perpetrators to reveal details rather than to hide them.

Fifth, traditional peacebuilding systems elicit whole stories by including and integrating services often separated in the West. El Amin (2004) describes the many elements of the Beja traditional system. The system combines processes equivalent to community mediation (the creation of the wagab), a judicial court (the majlis), religious confession (the people speak to and through their sheikh), consultation of respected elderly members of the community (wise sayings recited by the sorknab), and news media (news of a solution is conveyed across the region as part of the greeting, sakanab).

The separation of court, truth commission, police, social worker, psychologist, priest, and other actors can lead to competition among them. Each seeks a particular version of the story – the facts of the case, the contribution it made to a national struggle, the effect on one’s religion or the effect on one’s psychological condition – so it may happen that no one hears the whole story. In contrast, traditional systems combine many of these different elements and seek to hear and acknowledge the full stories of all those who want to speak.

What Lessons for Post-Conflict Transitional Justice?
Traditional peacebuilding systems cannot simply be substituted for formal legal mechanisms in transitional contexts, and it would be dangerous to suggest they should be. They are situated in a complex and unfair world and have been shaped and distorted by many external influences over the years - the manipulation of tradition and identity by colonial administrations, globalisation and the changing nature of conflict are just a few examples (see also Batchelor, 2006). However, with careful adaptation and support, they have a lot to offer in the face of difficult challenges. I will focus here on just one challenge they face today: that presented by the national dimension of conflict, governance systems and identity formation.

A primary focus of many traditional systems is the creation of a common narrative from the stories of individuals in the community. In order to utilize this concept in today’s world of nations, the creation of a common narrative among communities must be
extended to a national forum. This is especially true where communities have been strictly segregated; a national narrative has the potential to unite across divisions whilst embracing difference. Allan and Allan (2000: 463) state that “as generations pass history to each other, both facts and myths are conveyed. We believe that these myths contribute to the hatred, stereotypes, and unresolved issues that one generation passes on to the other. To counter this, there must be a record of what really happened to help later generations distinguish between fact and myth.” Whilst it is perhaps impossible to determine “what really happened,” it does seem likely that a national narrative to which all sides of the story contribute will be closer to the truth and will combat the passage of “hatred, stereotypes and unresolved issues.”

Although it is clear that colonial administrations in Africa determined many of the current borders and established existing systems of governance, national identity is not a new phenomenon. Basil Davidson, in *The Black Man’s Burden* (1992), notes that there were nation-states or their equivalents in Africa long before they were imposed by colonialists. Different groups of people aligned themselves with one another, controlled a region and installed a king and a government. It is also common for people to unite for a reason. Lowrey (1996), for example, tells us that in Sudan, the segmentary system and the decentralized governance of groups such as the Nuer do not prevent them from acting as one people (*naath*) in the face of a common threat.

William Zartman, in his book *Traditional Cures for Modern Conflicts: African conflict “medicine”* (2000), writes that traditional systems can work today at a community level and can also be adapted to work on a larger scale, but he does not believe that they can be used when there has been violence by the state against the community. I would argue that even state-level perpetrators come from a community of some kind and that their community’s story should include their story. State-level perpetrators should not be representatives of their communities; instead their communities should put pressure on them to tell their stories, to hold them accountable and to put them face-to-face with victims. Similarly, although many traditional communities have disintegrated to some extent, in most African societies people are aware of their geographical, linguistic and ancestral identities, and have friends and extended family members who form some kind of community.

Eghosa Osaghae (2000: 216), in Zartman’s book, writes that “modern states in Africa, with the diverse groups that compose them, do not have the common moral and customary order on which conflict management is hinged in the traditional society.” Indeed, diverse bodies of people are using varied traditional systems in countries with relatively arbitrary borders created by colonial powers. Only the African countries that will design and implement creative forms of transitional justice in the coming years can address such challenges. Traditional systems show us that an important step towards dealing with the consequences of the past is to create a common narrative. The principles outlined above even offer a framework by which to create such a narrative and which might form the basis of a national transitional justice system.
The participation of all communities will enable the nation to tell of the structural
damage done to traditional systems in the past. These communities can also ask
themselves questions about the present – for example who their elders are and who
constitutes the community. A focus on relationships will enable the nation to address the
question of reparations – how to make them visible and effective with only limited
resources, and who should make them; the state, communities or individuals. An
understanding of cultural appropriateness will enable people to decide upon the rituals or
combinations of rituals that could be used to acknowledge the national story – for
example how to combine modern media sensitively with traditional oral storytelling
techniques and how to combine dissemination of the story through formal education with
dissemination through traditional methods such as song, dance, poetry, paintings and
carvings. Flexibility will enable communities to make changes and address new issues – for
example how to give women a greater voice in traditional systems. Integrated systems will
provide safe environments to ask such questions and create a national story as well as a
plan for the future.

What Lessons for Justice in Britain?
As well as making contributions to transitional justice in their own countries, traditional
peacebuilding systems also have a lot to teach conventional justice systems. In Britain, for
example, the agenda is already increasingly being set by communities - justice is no longer
the domain only of the courts and fuel for a hungry media. However, change is slow and
in many cases good intentions do not result in tangible change towards genuine
community justice. Whilst this is to be expected in the context of a dramatic paradigm
shift, such a shift is nonetheless made up of small steps. Traditional peacebuilding systems
highlight a step that can be implemented immediately on any scale – a focus on narrative.

Britain ruled Sudan jointly with Egypt from 1899 to 1956. Since independence Sudan has
been grappling with the legacy of British-made racial hierarchies, imported technologies
and arbitrarily drawn borders. On top of this, Britain almost entirely replaced the existing
mechanisms for maintaining order - traditional systems - with unfamiliar, counter-cultural
formal justice systems. The remnants of traditional systems that remained were often so
distorted that communities no longer trusted them. However, traditional systems did
survive and, though badly damaged, they may yet be an effective tool for breaking cycles
of violence. Their resilience and continuing impact demonstrate that for the Sudanese
people they add value to the distant, distorted British systems used in Sudan.
Undoubtedly, therefore, Sudan has much to gain by studying and incorporating their
principles. Reasonably, Britain might also expect to gain something from the same process.
She may find it difficult to take lessons from a country she previously ruled, but would do
well to recognise the benefits of joining her ex-colonies in the study of traditional systems.
Let us look now at how we, as British citizens, could apply the principles of traditional
systems outlined above to our communities and to our nation:
1. **Community Participation:** Whilst Britain is already a proponent of community involvement, engagement and governance, there are many unanswered questions. Who is the community? Does community exist in our individualistic society? One way in which we might assess whether community governance is effective is whether community forums simply become smaller versions of a win-lose legal system, or whether they become supportive environments which nurture people as a whole, enabling individuals to tell their stories in the context of a community and therefore to create a common narrative. Community forums that are truly participative will have an impact on a national scale, and wide-scale participation in developing a national narrative could certainly bring us a step closer to the national goals of “community cohesion” and “integration.”

2. **Restoration of Relationships:** In Britain the offender-state relationship has been primary, but the focus is gradually changing to the offender-victim-community relationship. This is the main premise of restorative justice approaches which are, with varying degrees of success, being used at all stages of the criminal justice system to build relationships - from neighbourhood policing to victim-offender mediation to reintegration and resettlement of prisoners. Traditional systems advise us that a focus on relationships can result in opportunities for participants to tell one another their stories, and that if we give participants a secure space and the time to tell their stories, relationships will develop. The British justice system would therefore do well to consider how it might better utilise story-telling in building relationships – e.g. how much time do we allow participants for telling their stories, what questions do we ask, what settings could make them feel comfortable enough to speak openly?

3. **Cultural Appropriateness:** In Britain, as a multi-cultural society, we each have little explicit understanding of our own and one another’s cultures. We are therefore unable to identify practices we can truly own and feel comfortable with, and are unable to embrace the “cultural” practices of others. In order to make use of rituals and symbols that can be powerful in conflict transformation, we must first explore our own and our neighbour’s cultures. How do we each demonstrate remorse? What does forgiveness mean to us? What is reasonable as reparation? One of the most important lessons Britain can learn from traditional peacebuilding systems is that we should look to our existing cultural and historical resources to elicit narrative, and consider which of our varied cultural symbols we might use in the context of dealing with crime and conflict.

4. **Flexibility:** Endless upheavals in Britain’s governance and justice systems have made her people suspicious of change. Flexibility requires trust, and if we do not trust our leader, even change towards community involvement in governance will be met with suspicion and may do more harm than good. True flexibility arises in the context of openness and honesty. In Britain we must perhaps start with the creation of trust through story-telling, both as communities and as a nation, so that we can trust community and national leaders to vary processes and outcomes best to suit the situation we find ourselves in.
5. Integration of Services: There is no doubt that the British justice system is already putting many resources into integrating services. For example, gaps in the system have triggered extensive moves towards “multi-agency working,” “local partnerships” and “end-to-end offender management.” Whether or not these changes will provide safer environments for victims and offenders to tell their stories remains to be seen. Traditional systems indicate that integrated services provide a safe context in which to tell stories, but they unfortunately cannot show us how to manage the process of integration. Let us heed their warning that change should occur in the context of good relationships and trust and hope that despite the many difficulties with the process, current changes in Britain will result in foundations for peace in its fullest sense.

Conclusion
This is a significant time in the development of transitional and conventional justice alike. Narrative is slowly gaining its rightful place as a key to mediation, dealing with trauma, creating common histories and redressing crime. Traditional peacebuilding systems are also attracting much attention for their potential role in transitions. Not only do these developments overlap but, as this article emphasizes, there is added value in the simultaneous study of narrative and traditional peacebuilding systems.

This article has demonstrated that the potential power of traditional systems to elicit narrative is quite remarkable. Harnessing that power, in the context of historical influences and changes in contemporary society, will require coordinated academic research, creative planning and cooperation for implementation. There is no need to pretend that we are drawing upon an unspoiled ancient resource; restoration and adaptation are necessary to maximize their potential. Africa has already begun the process, but it will take dedicated individuals, willing communities and committed nations to see it through.

Similarly, countries not facing a transitional period, such as Britain, can also learn from traditional peacebuilding systems’ integrated, holistic strategies. Britain is currently exploring “community justice” and is going through some significant changes. In this context, we have an exceptional opportunity to draw upon our own history and the richness of our multi-cultural society to create an integrated justice system that is participatory, culturally relevant, flexible, and focused upon relationships.

Recourse to traditional peacebuilding systems is not a panacea. On the contrary, this article contends that traditional systems offer a specific solution to a specific problem – that of the need to reveal truth and facilitate reconciliation through narrative. While formal justice systems aim to strip narrative of all but bare bones, traditional systems nurture and feed them. While vulnerable narratives delivered into legal contexts are attacked before they are fully formed, traditional systems cradle and support them. The result? A step toward truth and a foundation for peace.
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End Notes

1 The following definition is taken from Batchelor (2006). I write as a firm believer in “home-grown solutions”, and in the fact that systems should be developed in a local context rather than imported. As a Westerner myself, however, I cannot escape viewing African traditions through Western lenses, using Western words and concepts to describe them and comparing them to formal Western initiatives.

2 For a discussion of the problems presented by “unfamiliar” formal justice systems see Stevens (2001).

3 Such goals were most dramatically underscored by the launch of the Commission of Integration and Cohesion in August 2006.

4 For example the introduction of Neighbourhood Action Groups (NAGS), Youth Offender Panels and an emphasis on building relationships with children and families of prisoners as one of the seven pathways to reducing re-offending outlined by the National Reducing Re-offending Delivery Plan.

5 For example through Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs), Local Area Agreements (LAAs) and the National Offender Management Service (NOMS).

Bibliography


