Exploring Pathways Towards Conflicts Prevention and Resolution Mechanisms and Reconciliation Strategies in West Africa

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Abstract: This article explores pathways towards conflicts prevention and resolution mechanisms and reconciliation strategies in West Africa with Mali as a case study. Relying on traditional and modern mechanisms and strategies, it explores the rich values and traditions of conflict resolution and peace-building processes used by the Malian government and communities to settle the prevailing conflicts and build a sustainable peace. Indeed, The traditional Malian society was woven together by diverse forms of mutual assistance and solidarity across established families, lineages and clans. That form of social and cultural organization permitted them to prevent and resolve conflicts. To make peace, the Malians need to rely on those ancient values that represented solid foundations to building a strong and peaceful society. This paper further brings to light the modern mechanisms and reconciliation strategies of peacemaking and peacebuilding using the conflict theories of Karl Max and Ludwig Gumplowicz, postcolonialism, and African feminism with the role of women in that process.
Keywords: conflict; prevention; resolution; gender; peacemaking; peacebuilding

I. Introduction

Mali is a vast and eclectic country at many levels: historical, geographical, social, political, and economic. Tribes and ethnic groups living in peace and sometimes in conflict, as it is currently the case in many parts of the world, populate the West African country. The longstanding distrust between the central state and the populations of the North led to four Tuareg and Arab uprisings since Mali gained its independence in 1960 (1963, 1991, 2006 and 2012). Northern communities' deep resentment, mistrust, and animosity towards the central state, together with an unequal distribution of the country's wealth are among the root causes of conflicts in Mali. Consequently, each ethnic group living in the northern part of the country that includes the Tuareg, Arab, Songhay or Fulani have different political agendas. Though living in the same space, these groups have different culture, political history, languages or traditions. They do not all recognize 'Azawad' as their common land and express the need for independence, thus marking the existence of divisions between northern populations which is a crucial element in reaching sustainable peace. For a long time, the Malian authorities' strategy consisted in taming the northerners in order to prevent one group from gaining influence and threatening the authority of the central state. To that end, it adopted a divide-and-rule policy by exploiting interethnic and sectarian tensions to impose its authority, which makes the problem very complicated and difficult to reach sustainable peace in that West African country.

II. Research Methods

In traditional Mali, conflicts were settled down in very peaceful ways in the villages using public places. In fact, with neo-colonization and globalization with their politics of economic, political and cultural domination some once-dormant conflicts in have been fueled, thus pitting some ethnic and religious groups against each other. Despite the various peace agreements that were signed between stakeholders (governments and rebel groups), the situation is still fragile, thus making them understand that even when peace is at hand, it remains fragile and subject to setbacks if the different waring parties' commitments are perceived to be inadequate or if there is delays in implementing peace agreements.

Achieving sustainable peace is more complex than what one might think if one considers all the strategies that the different Malian governments have undertaken. It has been an ongoing challenge to the Malian sate for over years, one that successive governments have sought to address, and it is a goal that will help to find a solution to the country's basic development problems. Sustainable peace is a perquisite to take up the challenges posed by the economic crisis and to foster investments, job creation, and economic growth. Despite the various dialogues, security effort measures to reinstate more effective governance, to demobilize combatants and regulate access to resources, only little improvement has been noted, hence the need to explore other forms of peacemaking and building mechanisms drawn from the West African traditional society.

Arguing for a postcolonial shift in social theory, these articles calls on Karl Marx's grand theory of conflict-driven capitalism, as a fruitful springboard, to analyze the current problem of violence and conflict in Mali. To this end, it brings to light the global capitalism's effect on inequality and power in the West African country to see how social order is maintained by domination and power, rather than by consensus and conformity. Conflicts breed in society when a powerful minority rules against the interest of a less powerful majority. Therefore, the paper draws attention to power differentials, such as class conflict, or a conflict continuum by focusing on the way individual behavior is conditioned by social structure and on dialectical materialist account of history. Gumplowicz (1884)'s description of how civilization has been shaped by conflict between cultures and ethnic groups and the power dynamics, and their roles in creating power structures, social movements, and social arrangements within a society is also a relevant analytical tool to analyze the conflicts in Mali and explore pathways towards ending it. This article then reclaims traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution and peacebuilding that do not exclude any stratum and make no distinction among Malian people, but that favor dialogism, inclusion, justice, and equity in differentiation.

III. Discussion

The West African country's traditional system of government was open and inclusive. All people had the right to take part in the decision-making process irrespective of their ethnic group and religion. The major sources of conflict in Africa were land, chieftaincy, personal relationship issues, family property, honor, murder or poisoning, and marriage problems.

3.1 (Re) appropriating Traditional Peacemaking and Peacebuilding Mechanisms and Processes: the Principles of Equity and Justice

In resolving conflicts in West Africa, the principles of equity and justice, which were entrenched in African customs and traditions, were put forward. Contrary to many Western

societies that practiced majoritarian or representative democracy, African ones put in place participatory democracy, which consisted in favoring consensus in decisions making. African traditional mechanisms of conflicts prevention, management and resolution then were largely effective since they respected everyone's points of view, and their decisions were binding on all parties. Therefore, to put an end to community conflicts and regain 'national' unity, indigenous local authorities have used several methods to neutralize tensions and give to the different communities a common ground of understanding peaceful cohabitation. The elites have always resorted to established local traditional peacemaking and peacebuilding mechanism to foster a sense of a shared nation.

In fact, long before Africa was colonized, and way beyond the advent of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, African societies had institutionalized some mechanisms as well as cultural sources to uphold the values of peace, tolerance, solidarity and respect for, and of, one another. These structures were responsible for peace education, confidence-building, peacemaking, peacebuilding, conflict monitoring, conflict prevention, conflict management, and conflict resolution. These mechanisms were effective in handling and managing conflicts, because they reflected the sociopolitical orientation of the African people, insofar as they tally with all the social, political and economic conflicts among a people who lived a communal way of life. Thus, it was customary as well as common currency to happen upon people sitting down informally to discuss and agree on important issues. Here, the importance of the family in the conflict management process, the role of the chiefs, elders, family heads and others, to anticipate and resolve conflicts were important elements. In traditional Mali, some mechanisms served to favor communal live. As examples, the "joking relationships" formula or Sinankuya (Nicholaisen 1963: 465) in Bambara language and totems that Sundjata Keita had already institutionalized as early as the 13th century were implemented to dampen tensions between communities. It is known to be among the most symbolic and still-effective methods that need exploring. The most familiar mechanisms of conflict resolution in Mali consisted of customary mediation, compensation and restitution. Those mechanisms centered on the values of truth, justice, forgiveness, reconciliation included the affected relationship, voluntary participation and give more emphasis for personal change above complaint behavior.

Indeed, one of the secrets of Malian pluralism and a solution to multidimensional conflict are the so-called sinankuya, or cousinage, a pact establishing a joking relationship between some families, neighbors and ethnic groups. It allows the free venting of tensions and peaceful settlement of conflicts. Moreover, this practice, which goes in hand with the marriage institution, decreases the tensions and jealousy between rivals. As an example, the sinanku should not fight each other and could not at anyway refuse demands emanating from their joking cousins. In traditional Africa, "the identity of an individual is linked to that of their family and these families are formed by the acceptance of marriage alliances" (Nicholaisen (1963: 465). The marriage institution between cousins was used as an implementation method that worked very well. Therefore, the Fulani can peacefully insult the blacksmiths who are considered clan groups in Mali. In turn, the blacksmith are allowed to treat their Fulani neighbor of "cattle followers," "thieves" or "small Fulani." However, these two groups cannot get married, but when there is a clash between two persons from the Fulani ethnic group, and a blacksmith witnessing the scene asks them to stop fighting each other, they would immediately obey. The same is valuable between the other joking cousins, who are the Bozo and the Dogon or Songhay. Without any doubt, traditional dispute resolution has played and still plays a significant role in the everyday lives of West Africans (Zartmann, 2000; Nkwi-Walters, 2013). In a region where most states' legal systems are based mainly on colonial laws that are highly influenced by individualistic orientation and do not suit

the social structures on the ground (West Africa) where they are being implemented, most West Africans seem comfortable with resolving their dispute traditionally.

This social networking, which is based on interdependence, is a very precious tool within the Malian society. This social capital is the opposite of the Western financial capital that emanated from colonization and was imposed on the Malians by the colonizers. Even Westerners acknowledge the value of social networking though nobody can count or measure it. What is sure is that in the business area, Western receptionists and bankers value smiling when receiving a customer. They measure the importance of appurtenance to the same academic or university promotion, the same age group, city or quarter. The Malian society is more based on clan and neither ethnicity nor language can permit to make the distinction between them. In many areas in the country when a stranger comes, they adopt the last name of their "jatigui."

Therefore, inter-ethnic marriages made ethnic collaboration peaceful and reduced tensions between neighbors. The first leaders of independent Mali, among whom President Modibo Keita, saw the inter-ethnic marriage as a form of reconciliation mechanism between the North and the South. As the first President of Mali from 1960 to 1968, he espoused a form of African socialism before he was toppled down in a coup d'état in 1968 by Moussa Traoré. The two heads of state avoided another rebellion for a long time by promoting intercultural marriage as a peacebuilding mechanism. They relied on mixed marriages as a means to overcome ethnocide and cultural hegemony through ideological means. Therefore, intermarriages and commonly organized cultural activities would take place on a large scale gathering the Northerners and the Southerners and the civil servants operating in those areas. They intermarried and socially mixed with each other until the end of the first independent regime, thus contributing in cementing the social fabric of human relationship though conflict social and cultural prevention mechanisms. As the saying goes, "a good close neighbor is worth than a distant relative." The neighborhood has always been seen as an important element of peaceful cohabitation in Mali. The neighbors become so familiar that they live in harmony as children from the same mother.

Therefore, when rebel groups, many soldiers, occupied some localities in the country civil servants and teachers from the South were saved thanks to their neighbors and some students who had hidden them or warned them to leave the area earlier. In the South, their neighbors also protected many Northerners with whom they shared tea parties. Neighborhood suppresses distances between human beings and reinforces union, unity, and cohesion. The problems between neighbors, from the same ethnic either group or not, are resolved through dialogues or common discussions. In most cases, if the problems escalated, people living in the conflict zones widened the consultations and dialogic mechanisms.

Consequently, as opposed to Western models of peace talks, peace and reconciliation obtained through democratic discussions under the "palaver tree" are known to be more efficient and sustainable. Village meetings, "variously called asetena kese by the Ashanti in Ghana and Palaver three in Mali, Senegal, Nigeria among other West African countries, served as spaces and platforms where discussions were held. The process involves everybody, the warring groups and social and cultural intermediaries composed of the griots, the elders, the religious leaders, the notables, the traditional chiefs and the joking cousins who play the role of diplomats. In that context, nobody is left aside and there is no way to complain about delay in the decision-making process. There existed then many approaches to and mechanisms in

peacebuilding or peace transformation and community dialogue which the Malian authorities resorted to in the different conflicts that hit their country.

The sharing of a kola nut is another peaceful practice through which disputes are resolved in many Western African countries. During the traditional war years, a weaker king or ruler would send a kola nut to his enemy through his representatives. The move was as not only a sign of surrender, but also a significant initial step in clearing the warring atmosphere to enable the parties to engage in dialogue. Indigenous Practices of conflict resolution when dealing with dispute, people are mostly concerned with restoring social harmony between the parties in conflict, and both parties exposing the truth about what went wrong and who kick-started the dispute do this. This is because the identity of an individual is linked to that of their family and these families are formed by the acceptance of marriage alliances. In the Sahel region, the prevailing local conflict, which is between the nomadic populations, who are herders, and the sedentary ones, who are farmers, is spilling over Mali. The "sinankouya", which is traditional way of conflict resolution, is used to sooth tensions. The process is regarded as a truth and reconciliation moment and not a legal court proceeding. However, to get to the root causes of the dispute, the elders or chiefs in charge ensure that the process is transparent and accepted by all parties. One such way of ensuring transparency is by allowing the parties to speak out their grievances in a free and frank, but respectful manner. This indicates that indigenous methods accept conflict as something that has to be discussed until a resolution is reached.

Unfortunately, present-day Mali's leaders have ignored those indigenous methods which consisted of gathering the different chiefs of the villages under the "palaver tree," joking relationships, and the pacts between ethnic groups. To achieve sustainable peace in the future, the Malian authorities need to go back to the past and implement the existed traditional methods of conflict resolution. Moreover, failing to create a real space of dialogue between community members has delayed the peace-building process in Mali. The authorities have not learned the lesson that the legitimacy of the reconciliation process depends on its social entrenchment. Therefore, it is essential to take into account the logic of each actor and institutions that have some experiences in peacemaking and peacebuilding. The reconciliation process and community dialogue should be adapted to the local reality at the sociopolitical, cultural and religious levels (Dakouo 2016: 13). Reviewing the education system with what to teach and what not to teach should be included in the reform agenda toward reaching peace across the country. A reform of the school and university syllabi is necessary to enable Malian citizens to revisit the traditional method of conflicts prevention and resolution mechanisms though an appropriation of their traditional culture and values. Therefore, schools and universities will no longer be places for learning and teaching only theoretical knowledge but also practical knowledge through the introduction of a peace-seeking and civic education system based on African values of human rights, citizenship, and love.

Schools should then provide youth with viable alternatives to delinquency, criminal behaviors, and extremist group membership. The students spend their time learning the history of Bonaparte who wanted to unify Europe by force; how the USA had destroyed the Japanese cities during the Second World War, or even the wars of colonization of Africa, but rarely do, they learn about the history of African conflicts peaceful management mechanisms and strategies. They rather ignore the excellent quality of African diplomats, peacemakers and peacebuilding agents that are the griots and the blacksmiths. The history taught in the country's Western-inspired education system is dominated by violence and topics that do not tally with Malian local realities. The European traditional way of conflict management was

based on violence and dehumanization. As an example, during the colonial period, when a European country conquered an African one or an area in Africa or even a Europe country, the colonizers turned the populations into subordinated beings by putting them under their authority and by making of them assimilated subjects. To better assert their politics of assimilation, they would exclude the languages and the culture of the people they defeated. Therefore, revisiting those conflicts resolution, peacebuilding mechanisms is a prerequisite if Malians are to reconcile with their past and end the ongoing conflict.

In analyzing the history of traditional Africa, one can notice that the unity of most of the empires and kingdoms was based on common interests instead of conquests for individual interests only or that of the winning country. Their philosophy of war or conflict was quite different from the Western one. In their context, when a local chief dominated a group physically and spiritually, the defeated people accepted the domination by sending presents to the chief and the influence of the chief was reinforced for the common good. However, each defeated and dominated group remained autonomous, thus becoming a vessel kingdom that is attached to the great empires. Therefore, the decentralized power was a reality in West African tradition, with each social group respecting the culture and the language of its neighbors. The griots, the blacksmiths, the hunters, the healers, and the old women were important mediators in Malian traditional society. For instance, when crises broke out between the North and the South, one way to put an end to it quickly was to summon the traditional chiefs (dignitaries) from both sides, the religious leaders, and the griots, and send them to meet with the rebel groups for talks. Therefore, the Malian state should appropriate that process by identifying and working with all the stakeholders on the ground, including the members of the civil society and those who, out of necessity, made a pact with jihadist groups because the country's priority now is to bring back peace.

Furthermore, the various conflicts in present-day Mali have been very difficult to resolve due to the high number of operating armed groups and the complexity of the situation on the grounds. The solution to these ongoing conflicts should be first national with endogenous conflict resolution mechanisms before being international. It is up to the Malians first, the rebels groups and the central state, to sit around the same table, which symbolically means the palaver three, and decide what they want for their country. If they manage to talk, understand each other and accept to stand as one Malian citizen, then, people from the outside, and from the international community will be bound to support. The national efforts being fundamental, fostering local peace negotiations with endogenous solutions should be prioritized in ending the long-time Malian conflict. Nevertheless, for this to happen, mutual trust and commitment to peace from all sides are necessary. One has to notice that the great majority of those who are called 'terrorists' are also Malians. Ançar El Dine of Iyad AG Aly is exclusively composed of the Malians of Kidal. AQMI is composed of Malians, Mauritanians, and some Algerians; the Katibat of Macina of Hamadoun Kouffa has as members the Fulani in majority from the center who want to rebuild the former "Fulani Empire of Macina."

The initiative of reconciliation and peacebuilding processes should be rooted in Malian endogenous culture. Sustainable peace should be homegrown because pain, misery, injustice, and discrimination can only be known and acknowledged by those who suffered from them and those who caused them. In a conflict, only the victims and the perpetrators can make peace (Dione & Togola 2018: 13) because any form of 'imposed peace' is likely to fail. In view of the complexity of the situation, the vast geographical area, the state and the international community should work hand in hand with the local populations to find a solution, but not exclude them in the process. Given the long history of human rights abuses, which were

reportedly perpetrated by the Malian army against some local communities in Northern Mali, on the one hand, and between communities themselves, on the another hand, any intervention perceived as disruptive or parasitic should be discarded at all costs. Pursuing a militarized approach is risky due to the prevailing mistrust between the central government and many communities living in Northern Mali. To build sustainable peace then, all the stakeholders should ensure the withdrawal of the 'foreign extremist forces' and drug dealers that are also engaged in the ethno-religious conflicts in the Northern. The central government should also go after the top tiers organized crimes and throw the book at those criminals. They are really the ones the authorities have be after to try to stop this scourge.

However, the ongoing conflict resolution system cannot effectively deter, incapacitate, and rehabilitate criminals and waring groups. The conflict in Mali has poisoned relations among Malians themselves, on the one hand, and the central government, and the population, on the other hand. Therefore, now is the time for all the Malians to sit together as brothers and sisters and discuss the future they want for their country. An inclusive dialogue is needed to address the Tuareg and Arab communities' disagreements and wider disputes over regional autonomy. Unlike what happened in past negotiations, reconciliation and peace should gather both the offenders and the victims. To keep hopes alive, in the meantime, the Malian civil forces inside and outside the country could organize robust political discussions on options for power sharing, justice, and ways to implement politics of decentralization outside the state arena.

Indeed, the country's external partners should be prepared to step in to financially support and help facilitate such talks. These involve both the building and the renewal of communication strategies inside the communities where the victims and offenders live and between them. The country's political, community leaders and religious institutions have a serious responsibility in that initiative as a reminder for Malians of the statement of American civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr who said that those who do not learn to live together as brothers are all going to perish together as fools. As a saying that complies with African tradition society's approach to good neighborhood and communal live, the most important for the Malians is to learn from the different forms of conflicts that are devastating the country and not to keep in mind any idea of hatred, revenge or retaliation.

Avoiding the total jeopardization of the agreement signed in Algiers more than seven years ago between the West African country's then-civilian government and armed groups aimed at restoring peace in the north, after rebels sought to break away from the capital Bamako in 2012 is also another option for the central government to take on. The agreement was due to decentralize Mali, integrate former rebels into the armed forces and bolster the economy of the north. Some progress has been made so far, but at a slow pace and decentralization has not happened yet. Consequently, constant violence has stymied attempts at disarmament and ravaged the local economy. That is why the government's response should not focus exclusively on counter-terrorism operations, which contributes to a rejection of the state by the people, especially when accompanied by abuses, manipulations, and falsehood. On the contrary, the government, in coordination with local elites, civil society organizations and external partners, should demonstrate a greater intention towards reestablishing public services in these vast once-neglected regions as well as build infrastructures there. To do this and demonstrate its utility and impartiality, it should plan its actions carefully, set priorities, and acknowledge that restoring its authority is not only a question of keeping order, but of also showing its capacity to deliver effective and equal justice, health, food and education to the populations of those regions. They should take on

the crucial role of mediator between citizens and the state and, in doing so, set aside intercommunal divides and individual disputes to cooperate with new the representatives of the local people, mainly nomadic chiefs (dignitaries) and religious leaders, even with those who have sympathized with armed groups over the past years. There are areas where the central state has no control of and it might face difficulties in restoring peace there.

Nevertheless, the focus on the main stakeholders in the process by providing security, helping to implement peace agreements, and providing basic services to the local populations can be a good beginning. The central state should also open up the conflict-zones to the rest of the country and create the conditions for aid to reach all the civilian populations that need it. In fact, the stigmatization of some communities and ethnic groups has also contributed in rekindling the conflict, hence the need for the central state to support the other communities that do not share the idea of independence instead of indexing them. It is the very role of the state along with its partners to convince the rebellious parties to abandon the project of Azawad state, to encourage and ask the population under their controlled-areas to accept the administration as mentioned in the 2015 Algiers accord. The groups negotiating with the military government demanded talks in a neutral country under international mediation. A coalition of armed groups in northern Mali has pulled out of long-running peace talks based on a 2015 Algiers accord, arguing lack of political will on the part of the country's military government. The coalition, called the Permanent Strategic Framework for Peace, Security and Development (CSP-PSD) threatened to come back to the table if talks were held in a neutral country under international mediation. Therefore, it is important for the central authorities to share the right information with the population by telling them that the Algiers agreement does not refer to an extended decentralization, but a form of regional state system and gear up towards its implementation.

3.2 Women as Key Stakeholders in Peace Negotiation, Resolution, and Management Processes

Gender, as a socially constructed identity through which roles are assigned and relationships defined at different levels, differ according to culture and can be changed under circumstances such as conflict. One of the most critical challenges is the need to develop integrated, gender-sensitive strategies and program interventions for addressing conflict situations. In this context, women's roles and men's roles refer to the spaces or sides they have occupied in the conflict and designed based on normative concepts of masculinity and femininity. Both sexes have been victims of abductions, but women, children, and those jailed who cannot get away easily were more abducted. They did not aspire to power, they did not hate each other, but they were the most affected ones. Women witnessed the deaths of family members such as their young babies, husbands or breadwinners. In the absence of the husbands and the breadwinners, they played the role of the chief of the family in a society where patriarchy prevails, thus making their social reinsertion or affords to get a job vain. Consequently, many of them were forced to play roles they were not prepared for. The victims of abductions who had the chance to return home reported about the various forms of ill-treatment they underwent in the camps where they were kept and where many young girls and women were often turned into sex slaves or concubines for the combatants.

In fact, the vast majority of people affected by conflict, including refugees and displaced persons, both internally and externally, are women and children. In Mali, women are less visible in the political, economic, and social fields, let alone in peace-related initiatives. They ae rather tricked into sexual activities during conflict and post-conflict transition. Because of the fear of violence and sexual abuses, they are forced to stay at home, thus

preventing them from engaging in any economic activity. This mental pressure exacerbates the trauma many of them have experienced in this conflict. Therefore, since they have experienced various conflict-related atrocities, their roles should not be downplayed in the quest for sustainable peace. Conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and peacekeeping should not be only the affairs of those directly involved in armed conflict, mainly men. They should work together with women to allow them to have their voices heard and recount their experiences as war victims. Men and women need to cooperate in a harmonious and complementary manner. This is in reference to Zulu Sofola (1996) who quotes a Yoruba proverb about the desirable relationship between men and women that says that "if a man sights a snake and a woman kills it, all is well as long as the snake does not escape," or this "when a woman buys a gun it is kept in a man's room" (Sofola 1996: 25). Sofola's inner thoughts express the in-depth complicity between African men and women, and their roles and places before, during, and after conflict. Unfortunately, women and girls, who have often been targeted in wartime for violence, especially sexual violence, have also been excluded from conflict prevention and resolution efforts.

Women bear the greatest brunt during conflict and therefore their participation in peace talks can help ensure increased local ownership of conflict management process and its outcomes. It is also a way of engaging them in local and community affairs in an environment in which they otherwise face severe restriction. Therefore, sustainable peace cannot be achieved when women are excluded in the process; both men and women need to work hand in hand, for women's involvement is vital. Women are critical to peace processes because they bring a more holistic peace plan to the negotiation table by addressing societal issues rather than focusing simply on what would make the warring parties happy or war end simply. Any peace process that ignores the needs and roles of women is likely to fail and, therefore, inherently will keep on fueling the conflict. In this time of political transition, empowering Malian women is essential if the government is to boost the country's social and economic development. Malian women and men are both victims and stakeholders in the ongoing-armed conflicts though in different ways and different fields.

Women are crucial partners in economic recovery, social cohesion, and political legitimacy, and their participation in a mediation process can help ensure that more and diverse members of the community become engaged in peacemaking. This being the case, Malian women, for their part, need to undertake new activities and assume new roles, often taking on new responsibilities, which makes it abnormal to marginalize them in conflict and post-conflict talks and peacebuilding processes, even in, peacebuilding strategies by international peace operatives (Norwegian Institute of Internal Affairs 2000). Conflict can result in higher levels of gender-based violence against women and girls, including arbitrary killings, torture, sexual violence and forced marriage. Many women in conflict areas are advocating and working effectively with approaches to lasting positive peace that transcend traditional male-dominated structures and ideologies. They also communicate in a much less indirect style, often hinting at a problem instead of cutting to the chase. In addressing issues and not personalities in a direct and straightforward way woman effectively, address conflict.

Moreover, women are the mothers, sisters, wives and daughters of the combatants, so they can convince them easily to lay down arms and to put on the clothes of peace. As the most vulnerable war victims who often experience sexual abuse in the form of mass rape, forced marriages, and prostitution, with social stigmatization and marginalization as consequences, their involvement in the reconciliation process is also important to take into consideration, let alone the offenses against them and their children following their being

raped. Many of them suffer from the status of illegitimate children with no rights. Therefore, their inclusion and allocation of resources to deal with the physical and psychological consequences of the conflict should be a first step. The reconciliation process should also include compensation to address existing inheritance laws and practices that dispossess them of their new obligations as family providers (Barnes 2003: 13). If mobilized nationwide without any form of gender discrimination, women could use their energy to contribute in settling sustainable peace in the country. As a recall, when the conflict reached its highest point, Malian women took on community leadership roles to voice out their concerns.

In traditional Malian society, though they did not appear in public the community's decisions were always taken by consensus after consulting women. They were then part of the country's economic and development processes. Their status as marginalized being is a colonial, legacy that needs changing to enable them to assume their past and real roles of mediators and voice-bearers. Within the marriage institution, their husbands consult them at night about important decisions to make, thus evidencing their everyday-roles as great advisors since as the Malian proverb says; "night bears advice." Their voices, which could enrich the educational system, are still (un)heard in modern-day Africa. They are the guardians of tradition and faith insofar as "the African mother should behave as a captain of a boat who worries about the security of the crew" (Maraire 1997: 31). Bearing the role of educators, as Mariama Bâ (1981), has stated is to allow "the virtue and greatness of a race to take root in this child" (Bâ 1981: 47). For example Sundjata Keïta, the Mansa of Mande, managed to set up the Mali Empire and defeat Soumaoro Kante thanks to the mystical power of his mother and the cunning of his sister.

Then, women were behind the power of Sundjata Keita for peace and harmony to prevail in the empire. Because they occupy spiritual places as ritualists, consulting them in decision-making is essential if the Malian authorities want to snatch peace. Knowing that the Islamic religion does not prevent women from being involved in peace processes, involving them is necessary. For example, symbolically, in the North, the tent used by the Tuareg families belong to their women. They come into the marriage with it, and in case of divorce; they can leave their husbands and go with their tents. Symbolically, they are bestowed with political and cultural powers that can be used in negotiation and reconciliation processes. Therefore, failing to involve them can undermine all and thus deterring them from voicing out their concerns, design roadmaps, and suggest pathways towards ending the conflict, and increasing their marginalization. The real value of women is unearthed by the Tamasheq proverb that says that a "woman is the belt which maintains her husband's trousers" to refer to the complementarity between men and women, especially in time of conflict when both are needed.

3.3 Gearing Up Towards a Post-Conflict Mali: Strategies towards Reconciliation and Cohabitation

Many people, especially the victims of great hurt, are suspicious of reconciliation and see it as an excuse to belittle and ignore their sufferings. It is up to the journalists and traditional messengers such as the griots, the blacksmiths, women's and youth's associations, and religious leaders to convince the victims to accept to forgive their offenders. The whole idea is to promote cohabitation, which means to live together peacefully while interacting with each other and other cultures. This form of peace settlement strategy does not silence injustice for sake of order and stability. It rewards political violence in the form of blanket amnesty, power sharing, and transitional government arrangements such as the ones initiated following the 1991 and 2012 military coups. The media and government's forums have an important

part to play in it. They should find ways and means to convince the victims and the offenders that reconciliation is only a goal, not a process. The victims, often, and rightly, suspect that a fast move to a state where everyone is apparently reconciled with the past and with each other is a way of short-cutting the proper processes of justice, truth-telling and punishment that it means they must 'forgive and forget.' The whole idea here is to prevent any actions towards revenge from the victims for the atrocities they underwent. Reconciling the past does not end when Malians have addressed the past, but also guides them to an empowered future. To create peace and order by bringing parts and pieces of their experiences back into alignment, thus providing a sense of accuracy, completion, and serenity across the country. One of the first step towards, as Malian authorities did with the French army Barkhane, is to end the mission of private Russian security company, the Wagner Group that is operating in the country. One done, they should move on to open up talks with the armed groups, as a way of re-appropriating and securing the huge natural resources it is endowed which include gold, salt, uranium, diamonds, copper, iron ore, let alone the untapped ones.

Therefore, the Malian local authorities and their partners should help the traditional chiefs, religious leaders, griots, women's and youth's associations to organize 'cleansing' ceremonies and reconciliation meetings. The aim is to make communities accept their returning sons and daughters, which will alleviate former soldiers' fears of acts of revenge from the victims. Acknowledging and repairing the victims' sufferings is a way of acknowledging their humanity, as equal beings with human and civic dignity. To get on with life individually and to be able to live properly in a post-conflict society, each victim needs renewed self-confidence. The mediators, the journalists, and the religious leaders preaching in the country's mosques and churches should tell the victims that it is not possible to forget the past and start completely afresh as if nothing had happened, but it is possible to forgive. Preaching then should turn around forgiving and moving forward for the benefit of all Malian people. The motivation for building a future is precisely to ensure that the past does not return and that such a conflict will never happen again. This is as a way of rebuilding confidence; engage the populations and build a sense of commitment among warring parties in the post-conflict agenda.

Sustainable peace will not be achieved unless the government promotes and facilitates public debates about the causes of and solutions to the conflicts. The real causes of the different conflicts should be identified and properly analyzed. Participatory consultations are necessary if an agreement is to be reached on such key issues of national interests as the status of the Northern regions, decentralization, secularism, and the management of the lands and resources. Such participatory processes could also identify local-level and endogenous solutions to rebuild social capital and citizenship, and focus on the perceived needs of priority target groups, including displaced persons and demobilized combatants.

Civil society and local communities have also an active role to play by discussing and making proposals to both the government and its international partners, as a way of reflecting the needs of the people of the society as a whole. The participatory consultations could help the different governments establish new social and economic relationships, reweave the social fabric in conflict-torn societies and communities, and rebuild mutual trust. Even if a participatory approach takes more time, empowering and listening to the affected people could pave the way for durable peace. Once the commission of truth and reconciliation has identified the victims, the offenders, and the acts committed by them, justice, and reparation for the victims become necessary in order not to repeat the same acts of the past, that is, forgiveness should prevail. However, this might be a very risky move because it may

destabilize a fragile peace settlement. Former military leaders may respond to the threat of prosecution by trying to reverse the course of events with another coup or the rebellion may take back arms, as it was the case in 2012. This hectic and risky situation can lead one to ask the question about "what is more just to consolidate the peace of a country where human rights are guaranteed today or to seek retroactive justice that could compromise that peace?" (Barnes 2003: 103). The general attitude and arguments are that there is a 'sleeping lion' in the background, which trials will inevitably provoke, thus making chances to bring back military dictatorship real.

In addition, the government faces a dilemma, for many Malians want to see a better regulation of religious affairs, but intervention by a weak and discredited state could be counterproductive. Then, the solutions lies in the establishment of a more constructive partnership between political and religious authorities. Maintaining the important distinction between the two while accepting religious leaders to have a say in both political matters and conflict resolution processes are also part of the strategies to implement. The government, for its part, has a role in limiting intolerant and hateful speeches that are often noticed in some sermons, preaching, and in the media, and in regulating the training received by the prayer leaders known as Imams. As religion is also a conflictual issue in the conflict, religious leaders should be fully involved in the quest for lasting peace. Religious leadership could work to counter jihadist doctrinal teachings that mostly target Malian youths. Their role is to explain to the population the role of Islam religion, as a religion of peace, and the real motivations of the extremist groups that have invaded the country.

Considering the absence of widespread Islamic radicalization in the country and, in that context, the need to implement more culturally grounded solutions to the crisis, religious and traditional stakeholders could usefully assist the Malian authorities. If the political authorities give religious leaders a symbolic role in future national dialogues, alongside other relevant 'moral figures', the Malian government could maximize opportunities for long-term stability or, at the least, prevent any strong opposition in society. Religious leaders should organize and preach in favor of tolerant Islam and peace. Unfortunately, it appeared that the politicians are the ones preaching peace instead of the religious leaders (Imams and Priests). Some of them, instead of preaching peace, preach hatred and violence in support for the extremist groups. That is why working towards a partnership with them will allow them to play the part expected of them in society, which is a stabilizing role. (Crisis Group Africa Report 2007).

Moreover, the Malian authorities should put an end to the divisions prevailing between local elites by encouraging them to take part in the political debates rather than resorting to weapons to resolve their differences and rivalries. Preventing political competitions from leading to the formation and emergence of armed militias as those present in the North is also a prerequisite towards ending the conflict. Some authorities and local elites are tempted to try to improve security by supporting the creation of community-based self-defense militias. Nevertheless, these groups cannot constitute a sustainable solution to the real problem of local insecurity, and even less, a means to reverse the way the state has been discredited in the central regions. With inter- and intra-community tensions running high, the militia groups have fueled sporadic and worrying surges of violence, including between the nomadic and sedentary communities. The term "pro-militia government" is in itself a source of tensions between community members. The Malian authorities should then avoid relying on the community self-defense groups, and rather strengthen the capacity of the security forces while severely and publicly punishing security service exactions against civilians. Relying on them

cannot but be a short-term response to insecurity and could, in the end, fuel intercommunal violence in some central and southern parts of the country due to the multiplicity of the communities that live in those areas.

The stigmatization of some nomadic elites because of their recent association with groups such as MUJWA is counterproductive in the long term. Known as 'Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA)', it is an Islamic organization that appeared in West Africa in 2011 after splitting off from al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb. It is also commonly referred to by its French acronym, MUJAO. For Mali, it is essential to avoid a situation in which some communities, feeling excluded, would be tempted to join radicalized groups as a means to make their voices heard. In partnership with the government, the local elites can play a central role in that sense. All the protagonists should accept their share of responsibility in the current turmoil and stop blaming each other and manipulating desires for vengeance. The government could appoint a high representative for the regions of the center who would be responsible for coordinating initiatives and preparing a special out-of-crisis plan. The person should have a deep knowledge of the realities of both the northern and central regions with their different tributes, traditions, and cultures. The peace agreement has disregarded the center so much that no peace plan cannot be implemented there. The different sectors of civil society in the center, not only armed groups or those in power, should be closely involved in the preparation of such a plan, to ensure that the elites alone will not take the lead.

The peace agreement signed in Bamako, which is rather favorable to the armed movements, was not the product of an inclusive process and that was why the majority of the population in the South contested it (Crisis Group Africa Report 2015). Only the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) program, a process through which members of armed forces and groups are supported to lay down their weapons, which pre-existed, could be extended to the country's central regions, along the lines provided for in the agreement, to facilitate disarmament and reduce the increasingly worrying availability of war weapons. Even though it still remain poorly funded, which prevent practitioners from developing better reintegration programs, its implementation can but be welcomed for security' sake. Dwanetoa, which consists in appealing to (a) mediator(s) from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) or the African Union (AU) embodied by African respected heads of state, diplomats or religious leader to intervene on behalf of the population, can be fruitful. Since mediation is so important, then West Africa having a chief for mediation is essential. Usually they are people with status, recognition, integrity, and experience and expertise in the management of communities who can be appealed to in order to avoid more confrontations by adopting different forms of mediation. In some cases, the warring parties can plead through a mediator. In other cases, the offender may admit guilt to the mediator and ask the mediator to plead on his/her behalf to the victim. This is to avoid a situation that may potentially escalate the present conflict situation in Mali.

A dialogue be¬tween the leaders of the North and those of the South is necessary to rebuild and maintain peace in Mali. This dialogue and security efforts may lead to a total end to the conflict. For this, the government should put in place a National commission that aims to deploy specific efforts to re-establish harmony between different ethnic groups. For the commission to reach its goals, it should be a politics-free structure to avoid what happened with the negotiation of the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, which resulted from the Algiers process, on 20 June 2015 and the national conference. Those participatory processes have failed due to the choice of the people and the missions assigned to them. The choice of members of the commission were based on their political affinities and their ethnic

group but neither for their rank in society, their professional skills nor their knowledge of the situation. That is why the majority of the people, both from the South and the North, contested the different agreements.

Peace is not a project that can be forced or imposed on people, for building it needs much time. Building and sustaining peace is a deep process and a challenge. It involves coming to terms with an imperfect reality that demands changes in [our] attitudes (e.g., tolerance instead of revenge), aspirations, emotions, feelings, and beliefs. Such profound changes are a vast and often painful challenge to take up, and as such cannot be rushed or obtruded on the peace process. Strengthening democratic governance could be also a solution for peaceful reconciliation and cohabitation. It requires building a real nation-state that should not be based on corrupt notions of public administration, on inequality or injustice. However, promoting good governance and social justice, which are some of the foundations for lasting and stable peace, should be the rule. To this end, the different conflicting parties should clarify and agree on some key issues such as the role of Islam in particular and the religion in general in a secular state and society. The coordination between Mali, the Economic Community of West African States (COWAS, the African Union (AU) and the international community as a whole can be a viable step towards normalization.

Indeed, the Malian traditional society having been a decentralized entity, thus reproducing the then decentralized structure can be a means in sustainable peace process building. The priority for the government, with the aid of the country's international partners, should therefore restore its presence in the conflicting areas, build good relations with the local populations, and renew the understanding between the North and the South. To make this a reality, it has first to understand the extent of the rejection of the state by the local people and rebuild its legitimacy not by returning to repressive, partial, and authoritarian policies but by playing its role of regulator, guaranteeing access to basic services for all the Malians, ,including nomadic groups. The aim is to avoid any feeling of marginalization and discrimination. Since reconciliation cannot be imposed on from outside, nobody or nation can also map a peace process strategies and get all the Malians on board without taking into considerations their views, their own realities, and needs. The best strategy is to find local solutions to local problems, which involves a very long and painful journey, addressing the pains and sufferings of the victims, understanding the motivations of offenders, bringing together estranged communities, and   heading to the path to justice, truth, and peace.

The different agreements signed between the northern population and the government proved that the unity of Mali is still a dream. The name "National Pact" is sufficient to prove the lack of understanding and appropriation of the concept among the Malian populations. It was the Malian initiative to build and support peace based on the country's traditional practices even if it had benefitted from the support of the international community. It aimed at renewing understanding between Malians in general and the governing and the governed, the northerners and the southerners. Building a sustainable peace needs to take into account the reality and potentiality of each region and each group to implement development-related strategies, including jobs creation for young people and women's empowerment. To this end, the government and its partners should develop the northern regions' communication and transportation means to promote intra-and extra trades. There is also need for a balanced and harmonious development of the country's regions under conditions of equity, by means of political, economic and social integration. To have a feeling of lasting peace, authorities in coordination with the international community should engage with the local populations on how to rebuild conflict-affected areas, counter widespread distrust of the state that extremist

militants often exploit and potentially even talk to Malian insurgents themselves. Malians need to re-imagine and re-legitimate their state by re-establishing the links between the populations concerned and the central state, and allowing them to freely express themselves during elections since lacking to do so has been the cause of low turnout in the country's past polls.

IV. Conclusion

This article has shown that Malians need to work towards building a sustainable peace in a society torn by years of cruel wars that have generated inter-ethnic conflicts and divisions. To this end, it has explored some pathways sources from Malian tradition and modern ways of conflicts prevention and resolution mechanisms. To restore justice and peace in the different communities, it has pleaded for women's involvement in peace negotiation processes. One of the reasons why the Malian government should implement the ancient conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms to allow all Malians to appropriate a peace process that is based on all-parties' shared principles of equity and justice likely to tally with local realities and benefit all.

Moreover, this paper has demonstrated that in traditional Africa in general and Mali in particular, in the face of conflicts and menaces of conflicts, strategies for making and maintaining peace were arranged using as convivial alliances with families, tribes, ethnic groups, etc. Therefore, Malians need to revisit those ancient values to the forefront, cultivate and let them blossom across all the war-torn territories. Resorting to some traditional means of conflict prevention and resolution such as the sinankouya, the good neighborhood and marriage alliances can help Mali to overcome conflicts and promote togetherness in differentiation.

Indeed, the challenges towards reconciliation and building a sustainable peace today rests on the country's political leaders' capacity's to rebuild a strong State without having recourse to intimidation, propaganda, violence and exclusion. To that end, promoting good governance and democracy (two terms which are conflated and considered two faces of the same coin), is a precondition towards inclusion and trust. Therefore, using both endogenous and exogenous approaches to conflict resolution and post-war reconciliation is essential if Malians are to end the long-time deadly conflicts.

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