Chapter 25
Interethnic Conflicts: Understanding the Important Role of Folktales

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ABSTRACT
The argument in this Chapter is that the key to bringing about lasting ethnic peace and harmony in Kenya – and in the rest of Africa – lies in understanding the attitudes and values found in community folktales. Folktales reflect a community’s attempt to give form and shape to its hopes and fears and answers to its important questions. They touch on the very core of who they are, both personally and corporately. When it comes under threat, a community will return to its traditional stories to look for direction and to regain a sense of what made it great in the past and what will nurture it into the future. The Chapter uses examples from Kenya where a disastrous post-election ethnic violence in 2008 landed several prominent Kenyans at International Criminal Court in The Hague charged with crimes against humanity.

INTRODUCTION
In his book, *If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories?* Chamberlain, (2003) narrates a discussion between a Native American Indian community in northwest British Columbia and some government officials. The officials claimed the land for the government. The natives were astonished by the claim. They couldn’t understand what these relative newcomers were talking about. Finally, one of the elders put what was bothering them in the form of a question. “If this is your land,” he asked, “where are your stories?” He spoke in English, but then moved into Gitksan, the Tsimshian language of his people – and told a story. All of a sudden everyone understood, even though the government foresters didn’t know a word of Gitksan, and neither did some of his Gitksan companions. But what they understood was more important: how stories give meaning and value to the places we call home; how they bring us close to the world we live in by taking us into a world of words; how they hold us together and at the same time keep us apart.

Interethnic Conflicts

This story is quoted here because it puts forward more powerfully the argument of this Chapter – that the key to bringing about lasting ethnic peace and harmony in Kenya – and in the rest of Africa – lies in understanding the attitudes and values of communities which are found in their folktales. Folktales reflect a community’s attempt to give form and shape to its hopes and fears, and answers to its important questions. When it comes under threat, a community will return to its traditional stories to look for direction and to regain a sense of what made it great in the past and what will nurture it into the future. Examples supporting this argument will be drawn from Kenya, where a disastrous post-election ethnic violence in 2008 landed several prominent Kenyans at the International Criminal Court in The Hague charged with crimes against humanity.

Located in eastern Africa, Kenya has a staggering array of 42 indigenous ethnic communities, and they continue to increase every now and then. Recently a group of a Mozambican community, the Makonde, who have lived in Kenya for more than 80 years, decided their roots in the country were strong enough for them to become Kenyans. They officially became the 43rd tribe or ethnic group (Ndubi, 2017). No one can tell how many more will come up in the coming years but the fact that the Makonde could be allowed to officially become Kenyans and occupy a space in the prime rural coast of Kenya without anyone creating a fuss, makes an important statement about the widely held idea that poverty and competition for resources is the main cause of ethnic wars in Africa (Nafziger, Stewart, and Väyrynen, 2000). As Kenyans, the Makonde will now enjoy all the rights and privileges enjoyed by the native ethnic groups, including access to schools, hospitals and jobs and tilling land. Most importantly, they will have a chance, like every other Kenyan, to access political power.

UNESCO says life today requires a tremendous amount of inter-racial and inter-ethnic interactions. It can quite safely be stated that in any society today, everybody deals on a daily basis with people from different origins and cultures in the neighbourhoods, in places of work and study, and even in their families. There are people who come from different continents, who speak different languages, practice their own customs and profess different religions. Technology has increased travel and trade all over the world. The consequence is that modern nation-states are masses of different racial and ethnic groups. “Nowadays, culturally uniform societies are very rare and they find it very difficult to ensure their continuity in an interdependent and globalized world” (UNESCO, 2009). The challenge, therefore, is not that of creating culturally monolithic societies; the challenge is how create harmony and peace among these ethnically different groups, some of which may have antagonistic cultures.

In Africa the question of interethnic peace is compounded by the continent’s colonial experience. According to Mays (2003), the new states inherited colonial boundaries that grouped many diverse ethnicities into single artificial countries. These internal differences among the population often resulted in civil wars leading to even greater economic and social misery for the people. Conflict and misery in one state tended to spill over into its neighbors’ area due to refugees, trans-border movement of guerrilla groups, the disruption of transportation routes, or the involvement of external governments in the “internal affairs” of another country. African leaders realize that conflict in one state affects many more states on its borders.

In Kenya only a handful of the ethnic groups do not extend across-borders. Most have large populations in the neighboring countries of Tanzania, Uganda, Sudan and Ethiopia. In some areas of Kenya, there are high concentrations of different ethnic communities. For example, Marsabit County has 14 communities that form the bulk of the population, most of which have cross-border relatives.