Peace and reconciliation

Reconciliation has long been recognized as a key element of a just and lasting peace. Yet there are no specific formulas for reconciliation processes. The meaning given by individuals and groups to experiences of violence and the ways they deal with their impact are intrinsically linked to specific social and cultural contexts.

The majority of the Angolan population has been severely affected by the war and as a result, fear and distrust are now embedded in relationships among Angolans. Many people feel permanently threatened and have developed psychological defence mechanisms to cope with fear. These responses are reinforced by cultural and educational values that discourage the expression of grief or pain. Although the war and its consequences have been extensively written about, individual traumas and collective suffering are scarcely mentioned either in private or in public.

Annex 6 of the Lusaka Protocol reads: “In the spirit of National Reconciliation, all Angolans should forgive and forget the offences resulting from the Angolan conflict and face the future with tolerance and trust”. As such, it expresses something common to all conflicts – the desire to forget. Although ‘national reconciliation’ continues to be invoked as an important aspect of consolidating peace in Angola, in the political arena it has basically amounted to the reconciliation of the warring parties without exploring the causes of the conflict. Little attention has been paid to the social processes that enable individuals and communities to address and overcome the distrust, polarization and pain caused by the conflict.

Culture and reconciliation

Culture plays a crucial role in the psycho-social welfare of populations, as people manage their pain through strategies, which are at least partly based on cultural perceptions. Angola can use a great diversity of cultural resources to facilitate reconciliation. Among them are the traditional beliefs and practices of African cosmology as well as resources stemming from different churches and the numerous ideological influences that were absorbed during and after colonial domination. However they entered, they are now part of Angola’s cultural heritage, working at different levels and sectors of society, and intersecting with and complementing each other. The careful combination of Angola’s greatest cultural assets can offer a solid foundation for peacebuilding and reconciliation, which in turn will constitute the basis for the country’s development.

Whereas western practices are characterized by a focus on individual healing, African cultural elements
emphasize the collective, the social, and the community. Most Angolans still come from a rural background and will probably be reintegrated into their communities of origin, where the way of life is deeply rooted in a traditional value system. Even populations that are more exposed to urban life continue to turn to tradition, especially in times of personal and/or social crisis.

Rituals and ceremonies are the way in which specific situations are honoured or dealt with. As a result of the war and frequent population displacement, many traditional practices and rituals have fallen into disuse. However, some continue to take place and have great importance, such as rituals linked to death and mourning, rituals for those who have taken part in the war, and rituals for the reintegration of missing people and orphaned children.

The war and funeral rites
A central theme of traditional African cosmology is its deep belief in the dynamic and interdependent relationship between natural, spiritual and social forces. The visible and invisible worlds are indivisibly linked. Ancestral spirits are responsible for promoting the welfare, health and good fortune of individuals and communities. The living are in constant fear of upsetting their ancestors and so try to gain their protection. These beliefs underscore the importance of social harmony. Since vital bonds cannot be broken, after death the person will continue to exist among the living. The visible world will only be safe if the individual really ‘dies’ through funeral rites and is received into the ancestors’ community. The deceased person must be welcomed in the world of the dead and his or her residence there ‘set up’ in order to avoid the risk of wandering aimlessly. Family and community ‘promote’ the dead to ancestor category, thereby re-establishing solidarity and social order. When these funeral rites are not properly fulfilled, the spirit will be lost and insulted, and may take revenge on the living. Failure to perform the rites can be seen as a challenge to the community’s solidarity, which is sacred and must always be protected.

Although funeral rites are very important, in difficult circumstances such as war it is very difficult to bury the dead with dignity. A great number of people died and did not receive proper funeral rites. There are also many people whose whereabouts are unknown, so one cannot know whether they are dead or alive. Consequently, all of the dead are taken as displeased and restless spirits. This fact makes the necessary reconciliation between the living and dead difficult and as a result, hinders reconciliation among the living.

Truth
Understanding the truth of past events is a crucial factor in reconciliation. In war there are victims and perpetrators, people who suffered and those who caused the suffering (often themselves victims as well). Truth concerns the recognition by the perpetrators of the damage they inflicted on victims. Victims must also know how to deal with the horrific events they experienced. For this to happen, there should be opportunities for victims and perpetrators to talk about these events, and for the events to be acknowledged by whoever caused them. To know the truth, it is vital that people talk about and discuss past events.

Truth, as understood here, does not necessarily have to be underpinned by the creation of commissions or any other type of official structure. Yet painful memories are part of the collective memory and cannot be worked out individually. Most important is a public recognition of the suffering caused by the war translated into a public apology to the population, and for those involved to sit together to talk about past events, about what divided them and caused so many years of fighting. It is important, most of all, to reach an agreement on how to manage these differences in the future.

To forget and to remember
Talking about the truth is not only about being informed; above all it is about being moved by the horrific stories told and being able to identify with those who have suffered or still suffer. It means feeling rage, pain, indignation and sadness. But the most frequent reaction by society and/or individuals – given the horrors perpetrated – is to refuse to acknowledge the truth. Typically, there is an enormous desire on the part of the people going through these situations to forget, and all efforts are made to that effect. However, forgetting without processing past events would mean putting an end to a story that remains unresolved. It is necessary to create a ‘space’ so that all aspects of the conflict can be identified and recognized, the fear partially exorcized, and the notion that we all enjoy the same rights regained. Hence the importance of performing collective acts and rituals for honouring those who died during the war, of exhibitions, publications or other materials referring to past experiences, of monuments, as well as celebrations and meetings that help deal with the past.

What is the truth about the war in Angola? There is not just one truth; each individual and community has his or her own truth, his or her version of the events, and a full picture would be composed of pieces from each one. Such a historical picture may be a pre-requisite for all Angolans to face the present and the future in a more constructive way and practice ‘national reconciliation’.