

**Traveling models in conflict management:
A new approach to conflict research and intervention**

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How do ideas – for example about managing conflicts – turn into models and how do these models travel from one place or one conflict area to another? In order to travel, ideas first have to be translated, or: objectified, into mobile objects. These mobile objects are primarily people, texts, tales, pictures, models for doing things, artefacts. Going on a journey means that the objectified ideas, the mobile objects, are removed from their context, they are dis-embedded. Sent or brought to new places, they become re-embedded into another context, into another institutional order and another material set-up. A ‘translation’ has happened and can be identified if the ideas and objects are put into actions within the new context. If they are repeated often enough, they might stabilize into a practice, that is, an institution as a set of unquestioned rules. The institution, in turn, will eventually be described and summarized through abstract ideas, which might start a new translation chain; a process without a definite end, and so on for ever (Rottenburg 2002).

Globally circulating models to interpret, de-escalate, prevent or solve conflicts have a long history. In Africa, varying colonial modes of governing have been in use to handle local conflicts. While these interventions mainly aimed to improve the economic potentials of the colonizing powers they had significant and long-lasting effects for the African societies. A research project, which takes place in six African countries, coordinated by Dr. Andrea Behrends and headed by Prof. Dr. Richard Rottenburg at the Institute of Anthropology, University of Halle-Wittenberg, investigates the emergence, travel and use of models in conflict management in contemporary African contexts. The models the project is interested in are either developed somewhere abroad within the global arena of professional conflict management, or they are developed locally, where the conflict happens. Their common characteristic, though, is that at a certain point they become standardized and used in various other conflict situations, i.e. they travel. Thus, the project first asks where, when and how a specific pattern of conflict management has emerged, where it has “first” been applied and how it was translated by the local actors into their own agendas. The project secondly asks how such a pattern in conflict management is turned into a model by being picked up in different contexts and used as a blue-print that has potentials independent of its original context. Thirdly, the project is interested in how the original pattern (that has become a model by having been imitated) changes as a result of its standardization, imitation and travelling.

The Ethiopian anthropologist Tadesse Berisso of Addis Ababa University studies conflicts and their resolution among the Guji-Oromo of Southern Ethiopia. The Guji-Oromo have a history of numerous conflicts with neighbouring groups, some of them ongoing. As a culturally specific way of solving conflicts Berisso is looking at a locally developed ancient institution consisting of a specific generational framework (the *gada*). This institution enables elders of different ethnic backgrounds to mediate in conflict according to a generally acknowledged set of rules. “Up until very recently”, Tadesse Berisso explains, “these old indigenous structures have been targeted by the Ethiopian government. Only recently their significance has started to be more widely accepted.”

Not only has the Ethiopian government promoted the use of traditional conflict solving mechanisms like *gada*, but several national and international NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations) have started to take up aspects of the Guji system of conflict resolution and

introduced them in other societies within Ethiopia and across the border in Kenya. Dejene Gemechu, Tadesse Berisso's doctoral student within the research group, found similar mechanisms among the Borana-Oromo. Their conflicts with neighbouring groups are both of political and resource based origins. "It is important to see whether the traditional institutions of conflict management are effective in the face of internal and external interventions or not", he maintains, "and that depends on the methodology the respective interveners employ and the nature of the conflicts they address." First results of his research show that those interventions that empower contenders and allow them to critically deal with their own problems with no or only little external pressure are more successful than approaches that restrict the groups to the issues at stake and preclude, for example, narrating a long history of conflict and probing into the groups' former relationships. "These latter approaches risk bearing little or no fruit in building peace" Gemechu asserts.

In all participating countries, three researchers work together: a supervising scholar of a university within the African country, a doctoral student and a German 'country partner'. In South Africa this trio consists of Prof. Kees van der Waal and Tinashe Pfigu, PhD candidate, both of Stellenbosch University, and Dr. Thomas Kirsch of Goldsmith College, London. "One important aspect of the South African transition concerns transformations in the 'security' sector", Thomas Kirsch explains. "During the apartheid era, 'security' agencies of the state—such as the police—were actively involved in acts of repression and gross human rights violations. Governments in post-apartheid South Africa are therefore confronted with the challenge of transforming a 'security' apparatus whose legitimacy had become highly questionable during the days of apartheid."

Tinashe Pfigu investigates into the results of this transformation within the South African police and the communities. Her research on 'community policing as a travelling model in conflict management' takes place in three areas of different social compositions around Stellenbosch in the Western Cape. "My research shows that the three communities expose different approaches to how people organise themselves and how they deal with crime under the guidance of the community policing model", she says. "The structures are broadly the same, for example the neighbourhood watch, but the day-to-day functions are determined by the people who are fully committed to the working of these structures and the problems being encountered at a particular time." One of her informants, the Stellenbosch police inspector tasked with community policing stresses: "We need to understand the type of crimes in specific communities and the fears the residents have. It is important to note that everyone has a different opinion, because of different experiences with the police."

In the Sudan, the anthropologist Musa Adam Abdul-Jalil of the University of Khartoum investigates into 'power-sharing' as a means to restore peace after violent, long-lasting civil war. This travelling model in conflict management traces its origins back to the British colonial policy of indirect rule, which granted limited power to local chiefs who conveyed British ideas of ruling to their subordinates. Enforced by the American government, the war between northern and southern Sudan has come to an end with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in January 2005. This agreement provides for equal power and economic shares of revenues to the two most powerful parties within the country, the southern rebels and the northern government of Sudan.

In his study, Abdul-Jalil focuses on why and how teachers, as a local educated elite, have been heavily involved in the conflict in the northern part of Darfur – the region that has been left out of the 2005 peace agreement and is still engaged in most violent civil war. "This particular group of educated Darfurians have dominated the political scene in the region for

more than three decades”, Abdul-Jalil underlines, “because of the extension of the topic for half a century, the investigation will use a historical method to identify various stages in the development of elite involvement in conflict management in Darfur.” After the Sudan’s independence in 1957, the local elites had fought for democratisation as a way of bettering the country’s political situation. But by now, they have turned around to tune into the government’s policy of power-sharing on the basis of ethnic origin, which Abdul-Jalil calls “the politics of divide-and-rule”.

The lack of democracy in the country has led ambitious members of the educated Darfurian elite into competing for political positions on the basis of their ethnic constituencies. “It is not surprising, therefore, to discover that many young educated members of the elite have stakes in the on-going conflict in Darfur.” Abdul-Jalil outlines that while the Darfurians originally had shunned tribalism and supported the strength of their region on a non-ethnic basis, some members of this elite have become warmongers. “It is the failure of the educated elite in this manner that needs documentation and explanation.”

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