

CREATIVE ALTERNATIVES TO WESTERN STYLES OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION:
THE POTENTIAL OF WEST AFRICAN DANCE

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Summary

Western peace practitioners often come into a conflict with subconscious cultural assumptions which ignore these other potential options for solving the problem. A way to get past this is to turn to traditional indigenous methods of conflict resolution and learn from them. These approaches are often very creative and outside the box in comparison to what Western practitioners come up with. On the grassroots level in particular, acknowledging traditional, long-used practices and encouraging their use can give certain legitimacy to external efforts in conflict resolution and may lead to a more sustainable peace than when Western methods are imposed upon non-Western cultures. To use a specific example, certain West African dance styles can be used to resolve conflicts and reconcile groups through the shared experience of dance. This practice as a conflict resolution tool will be the focus of this paper and the following pages will examine the viability of traditional African dance as an alternative to more conventional conflict resolution methods as well as how the two approaches differ on a very basic, cultural level.

This paper starts with a literature review discussing various sources on the theories behind the Westernization of conflict resolution as well as on the differences between Western and indigenous methods, and on creative, artistic alternatives to conventional conflict resolution practices such as negotiation and mediation. From here, the paper launches into the subject matter with a discussion of where Western cultural assumptions come from and how they have become ingrained in frequently-used approaches to conflict resolution. The following section touches upon generalized characteristics of both Western and non-Western styles of resolution. Then, the paper delves into the artistic possibilities for conflict resolution, giving a more general

overview before looking more specifically at dance and specifically a West African dance style called dounouba.

In order to supplement the background information, my research includes firsthand participation in learning and performing a West African dance called dounouba (other spellings do exist—dunuba, doundounba, dunumba, and dounumba being the most widely-used alternatives), which has ties to conflict resolution. Through my own reflections and the reflections of other volunteer dancers and the audience members, this paper provides a more complete view of the role that traditional African dance plays in resolution and reconciliation. I have included a participatory segment for the project because of the unique way in which the arts are typically used for resolving conflict. It is not simply a way of reaching an agreement; it requires a great deal of personal and emotional contributions on the part of the participants. Arts used to reach peace is not something that can be merely read about—to truly understand the process and its effects, one must actively participate and learn from the experience. For this reason, examples from my own personal experience and the accounts of the other involved parties will be included in this paper in the final section. Copies of the actual reflections from the dancers who volunteered can be found in Appendix A.

Literature Review

The literature used for the following research is focused on three separate ideas: how culture plays into conflict resolution, the differences between typical Western and non-Western approaches to conflict, and the potential of artistic methods in conflict resolution. First off, many sources acknowledge the fact that frequently used conflict resolution techniques such as negotiation and mediation are often prescribed as universal and that there are challenges that come with making this assumption. John Paul Lederach's work *Preparing for Peace: Conflict*

Transformation across Cultures (1995) looks at how the conflict resolution trainings the author has been involved with have often inadvertently promoted cultural dominance. Lederach examines the mistakes often made by conflict resolution practitioners and makes suggestions on how to learn from the culture in question. His writing provides a background on how culture is embedded in approaches to the international peace and conflict resolution (IPCR) field. This helps to support the argument that conflict resolution has been inadvertently westernized in many instances. Western dominance over other cultural viewpoints is a common theme and also appears in literature by Kevin Avruch (2002). Avruch describes the way in which culture determines people's actions on a subconscious level. He takes this further to examine how Western culture has unintentionally come to dominate conflict resolution methods through the glorification of certain Western-based methods. Similarly, but on a broader level, Louis Kriesberg, in *Constructive Conflicts: From Escalation to Resolution* (2003), looks at more macro-based cultural systems that influence one's style of resolving conflict. His focus is on social systems and how such groupings help to determine how one reacts to certain situations. These authors contribute to the theories developed in this paper by providing an examination of the influence of culture on decision-making in general and conflict resolution more specifically.

The idea that culture affects one's approach to conflict and that the Western approach has been favored in some areas of the conflict resolution field requires some explanation. To develop a broad understanding of where the idea of Western biases within conflict resolution comes from, it is necessary to have some knowledge of how the field of conflict resolution evolved. The term itself first showed up in the mid-1950s, with theories and academic work coming mainly out of North America and Europe. For example, the University of Michigan contributed greatly to the growth of the conflict resolution field through the publication of their

Journal of Conflict Resolution starting in 1957 and the founding of their Center for Research on Conflict Resolution in 1959. In the years following, many other institutes and journals cropped up, mainly in Europe and the US. However, the field grew most rapidly during the 1980s, when mediation and negotiation became the prime methods used for resolving conflicts. These approaches drew from domestic experiences with government mediation, collective bargaining, and international diplomacy, among other things (Kriesberg 2007, 456-61). When the field was first starting out, conflict resolution methods came out of this domestically-based background and originated, to a great extent, out of how Western scholars viewed and dealt with conflict. With this bias in mind, current-day methodologies within conflict resolution must consider differing cultural views of conflict which did not initially figure prominently into much of the research and theorizing. As the field progressed, scholars and practitioners certainly drew from other areas and cultural approaches, but this has been a much more recent development and as such, theorists and practitioners in the field must be actively aware of the challenges of working across cultures. There must be an acknowledgement of the other possible styles that exist and the potential for these styles to be applied more successfully in differing cultural environments.

The first step in examining the potential of different cultural styles is understanding how cultures approach conflict differently to begin with. There is a good deal of literature available on the specific differences between typical Western and non-Western ways of dealing with conflict. Polly O. Walker's article "Decolonizing Conflict Resolution: Addressing the Ontological Violence of Westernization" (2004) supports the proposal that it is necessary to be more open to indigenous methods of conflict resolution. Walker also provides an exploration of the differences between how Western and non-Western cultures view and deal with conflict, a discussion that is also tackled in Kevin Avruch, Peter W. Black, and Joseph A. Scimecca's

Conflict Resolution: Cross-Cultural Perspectives (1991) and Johan Galtung's "International Development in Human Perspective" (1980). These works provide a foundation from which to discuss the basic variations in resolution styles and an idea of the gaps that need to be addressed through the use of alternative, creative approaches. The gaps in particular include a lack of focus on the emotional and relationship-oriented factors of conflict.

Another work by Lederach, entitled *The Moral Imagination* (2005), goes beyond comparisons of Western and non-Western approaches and examines the potential for more creative approaches to conflict resolution and reconciliation. He mainly looks at how the "artistic process" can contribute to deeper and more successful resolution and reconciliation. His ideas are excellent support for this paper's argument that more creativity and cultural tailoring are needed in conflict resolution, to avoid a Western-bias. More specific examples of artistic and other creative approaches to conflict resolution can be found in Marian Liebmann's *Arts Approaches to Conflict* (1996), more specifically a section by Karen Callaghan about movement therapy, and the book *People Building Peace* (1999) published by the European Centre for Conflict Prevention. These works add to the literature by providing more concrete examples of the ways in which creative approaches to resolution can be successful and applicable in real-life situations, taking the discussion beyond theory.

In the next two sections, the paper takes a closer look at the first two themes of the literature review: the cultural factors that influence conflict resolution styles and the basic differences between how Western and non-Western cultures view and deal with conflict. These sections are vital to forming the theoretical background of why culture-based conflict resolution approaches must be considered in the IPCR field. The first section illustrates why culture cannot be ignored when it comes to resolution and reconciliation; it makes clear the fact that even when

we are unaware of it, culture affects our actions. The second section provides an idea of how Western and non-Western cultures differ in their resolution styles in order to provide a deeper look at the emotional and relationship-based factors that are often overlooked in Western approaches.

Cultural Influences on Conflict Resolution

To begin, it is vital to have a deeper understanding of the ways in which Western-style conflict resolution has dominated the field in many ways. This is not to say that there are not practitioners and theorists out there who take a more nuanced and culturally-aware approach, it is just to say that the most popular approaches have typically been consistent with a Western bias. As noted above, Lederach and Avruch suggest that often such biases are presented inadvertently through the internal assumptions that the scholars and practitioners of the IPCR field make in their work. It is difficult to be aware of these assumptions as they are ingrained in one's deeper cultural knowledge, something Kevin Avruch (2002) describes as "a logic for dealing with uncertainties" (36). He writes that culture is a collection of "socially transmitted or learned solutions to life's problems," but it is not a straightforward system of reasoning (36); in other words, one is not often aware of this process taking place. Cultural decision-making is more of an internal "recipe for behavior" that has become embedded in one's everyday activities, decision-making, and approaches to nearly everything (36). Avruch's description of culture's role in determining our everyday thought-processes explains the way in which culture dictates the way we do things in almost every aspect of our lives. This is an extremely important consideration to keep in mind when trying to understand the ways in which culture comes out during conflict resolution. Even if it is unintentional, one's way of resolving and reconciling conflict is, inevitably, affected by the culture that one has been steeped in.

In particular, these internal cultural assumptions can be seen in one's approaches to conflict and how to solve it. In the words of John Paul Lederach (1995), "People from different cultural settings have developed many ways of creating and expressing as well as interpreting and handling conflict" (10). Louis Kriesberg (2003), in his book, makes a statement along the same lines, pointing out that, "All or many of the members of a social system" share similar approaches to "pursuing and settling conflicts" (149). These shared methods for approaching conflict arise from the cultural "recipes for behavior" as described by Avruch. These ideas coming from Lederach and Kriesberg also implicitly indicate that the different approaches to conflict may not be complementary. In other words, Western ways of looking at and dealing with conflict may not be the same as many other cultural contexts and may actually be incompatible with some cultures' approaches to conflict. Problems arise with this when peace practitioners see their methods as universal and do not see culture "as embedded in the model presented" (Lederach 1995, 51). Instead, Western ways of dealing with conflict are often improperly presented as being "culturally neutral" (Lederach 1995, 51) when they actually include "implicit cultural assumptions" arising from one's cultural background (Lederach 1995, 66). This assumption of universality can have serious consequences for conflict resolution practitioners working in foreign countries. Without the understanding that Western styles of conflict resolution may not be appropriate in other cultures, peace practitioners risk alienating the groups they work with and, at the very least, failing to find a successful solution that is accepted by the parties to the conflict. This can occur as a result of the parties feeling that their needs are not being sufficiently addressed or that their toes are being stepped on in some way.

When IPCR practitioners and theorists assume that their methods of resolution and reconciliation are universal, they unintentionally practice a form of cultural imperialism and

marginalize the parties that they are attempting to work with by ignoring the fact that there might be other ways of doing things. According to Walker (2004), “Western methods have assumed hegemony in the fields of conflict resolution and mediation” (527). This is largely a result of the historical development of the conflict resolution field, as addressed in the background section of this paper. Fortunately, there are some scholars in the peace and conflict resolution discipline who are aware that Western methods often overshadow other cultural alternatives and the body of literature regarding Western dominance of conflict resolution methodology is significant.

As acknowledged by Lederach (1995), the main problem in practice is that “the explicit and expert knowledge of the [conflict resolution] trainer is assumed to be and is valued as more trustworthy and relevant than that of the participants....The experts’ knowledge is central and the participants’ knowledge is peripheral” (50). This is not just a problem in local-level trainings, which are the focus of Lederach’s book; the Western dominance of the conflict resolution field also presents itself in widely disseminated materials that are generally accepted as excellent sources for “universal” methods to approaching conflict. For example, in Avruch’s (2002) writing he discusses the widely accepted and praised theories of Roger Fisher and William Ury in their book *Getting to Yes*. It is a key book in negotiation theory and the model it advocates is practiced throughout the world. However, Avruch argues that “Fisher and Ury’s theory corresponds deeply to the *idealized* Anglo middle-class model of what negotiation looks like” (2002, 79). He goes on to make the case that the Western model of resolution is actually a “folk model” that has been elevated to the status of “expert’s ‘theory’” by ignoring the cultural and social assumptions behind the model (Avruch 2002, 79). In other words, because of the dominance of Western scholars and practitioners in IPCR, what is really a culturally-specific model has been promoted to universal theory. Such “universal” models subjugate other non-

Western methods of conflict resolution and reconciliation, such as tribal councils and religious ceremonies, which constitute more informal methods of resolving conflict and do not fit within a negotiation or mediation framework.

The biggest problem with this approach is that it ignores any possible contributions from alternative cultural methods for resolving conflict. Downplaying other methods is a serious issue because it basically ignores approaches that may actually be more applicable and successful in different cultural settings. As Lederach (1995) puts it, Western approaches to conflict resolution are “dominated by a narrow vision” (70) and practitioners need to start acknowledging the various alternative approaches that exist. One of the author’s main points in *Preparing for Peace* is that cultures different from one’s own can be used as a resource in finding effective conflict resolution and reconciliation methods. Rather than seeing Western ways as the only routes to take, one should listen to how other cultures deal with conflict and incorporate their ideas and views into practices that may be more appropriate in diverse cultural settings. There is a great deal that can be learned from other cultural approaches to conflict. In the words of Lederach (1995), culture is “a rich seedbed for producing a multitude of approaches and models in dealing with conflict” (120).

Western versus Non-Western Styles of Resolution

Before proceeding further it is necessary to explore relatively consistent differentiating characteristics that authors find between Western and non-Western approaches to conflict resolution. Such a comparison presents the characteristics that are important to other cultures but which are frequently missing from conventional, westernized methods. It is these gaps between the two styles that this paper suggests may be filled by working with more creative approaches to conflict resolution. It should be noted that this comparison is a simplification and not all

Western negotiators and mediators act in the manner described. The same goes for the non-Western style of resolution. The following description is merely an attempt to present a general idea of the central characteristics of each style.

A major characteristic of Western style resolution is an aversion to incorporating, or even allowing, emotions in the resolution or reconciliation process; emotions are something to “get past.” This arises from a white middle-class American idea of what is appropriate in a negotiation situation (Avruch et al. 1991, 7). In contrast to this, Polly O. Walker (2004) writes that, within indigenous cultures such as that of the Native American population, “...emotional expression is encouraged as an integral part of the [conflict resolution] process” (541). Furthermore, Johan Galtung (1980) describes Western cultural assumptions as “analytic” while non-Western beliefs tend to be “holistic” (313). Western approaches to conflict resolution are very much results-oriented and the resolution process is seen as linear; the focus is not on building relationships (Quinney 2002). Walker sums up quite nicely how this diverges from indigenous cultures’ attitudes:

...Indigenous approaches to addressing conflict are more accurately described as conflict transformation in that they seek to address the conflict in ways that heal relationships and restore harmony to the group. In contrast, Western conflict resolution methods prioritize reaching an agreement between individual parties over mending relationships that have been damaged by the conflict (528).

Walker illustrates one of the biggest gaps between the two styles of resolution is the focus on relationships and it is not a gap that can be easily brushed aside; ignoring the specific needs of certain cultures to address relationship issues could have serious problems in the long-term peace process. Because these two styles arise from inherent cultural beliefs, bridging these differing approaches can be complicated, particularly if one is not even aware that they present a problem. The first step to moving beyond the dominant Western notions of conflict resolution is to

acknowledge that these basic differences exist and to be aware of the cultural assumptions that peace practitioners make without being aware that they are actually making them. Again, while these differences are not universal or all-inclusive they present a general pattern of major cultural differences that can be very useful in bridging cultural gaps, as will be discussed below.

Creative Approaches to Resolution

As examined in the previous section, Western-style resolution often takes a stance that contrasts greatly with the traditional viewpoints of many non-Western and indigenous cultures. To summarize, indigenous cultures tend to take a holistic approach, they focus more so on the relationships affected by conflict, and they are more likely to allow emotions to come out during the resolution process or even to specifically encourage the purging of emotions. This diverges from Western tendencies, which are very results-oriented and linear, and do not leave a lot of room for expressing emotion or deeper consideration of the relationships at hand. In light of these differing approaches and systems of thinking, it is wise for peace and conflict resolution practitioners to have some knowledge, or at least know of the existence, of alternative, creative methods of resolution in order for them to consider all the options when working with a vastly different culture. There is a good deal of information on arts approaches to conflict resolution and reconciliation, although much of it is on a micro level and looks at art therapy or individual cases of arts techniques being used. However, the arts field has a lot more to offer to conflict resolution, especially when one is focused on cross-cultural approaches. Yet, instead of seeing these differences as a problem that is impossible to overcome, they should be seen as an opportunity to attempt more creative, artistic approaches to conflict resolution, approaches that may be more likely to coalesce with non-Western methods.

The use of artistic strategies in conflict resolution is strongly argued by John Paul Lederach in his book *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (2005). Lederach does not necessarily frame his argument in the context of bridging cultural divides, but he makes a point of emphasizing the “professionalization” that has taken place in IPCR that has led practitioners to consider themselves as “more technicians than artists” (2005, 73). This is troublesome when one considers the major dissimilarities between Western and indigenous conflict resolution. How can IPCR practitioners get through to non-Western parties to a conflict if they are focused solely on the technical aspects of resolution and ignore the deeper cultural complexities of the situation? According to Lederach, “moral imagination” is “a capacity to perceive things beyond and at a deeper level than what initially meets the eye” (2005, 26). Furthermore, it “has a quality of transcendence. It breaks out of what appear to be narrow, shortsighted, or structurally determined dead-ends” (2005, 27). In other words, the author’s concept of moral imagination requires taking an artistic approach to conflict resolution that allows one to move beyond conventional methods and open one’s self up to a deeper understanding and examination of the issues at hand. To do so requires a certain creativity, something that conventional approaches very often lack.

Therefore, utilizing the moral imagination also calls for an approach that is not necessarily a regular component of conventional Westernized methods. For example, in Lederach’s words, relationships are “the center and horizon of the human community” (2005, 61). This re-centers the focus of peace and conflict in a way that may actually be more helpful to indigenous groups. Moreover, much of the moral imagination approach aims to affect individuals and societies on a more emotional level, something that definitely fits more with non-Western attitudes and certainly encourages an artistic and creative outlook. Basically, Lederach

is saying that something is missing from conventional resolution, something that can be fulfilled through the arts. In his words, “The artistic five minutes, I have found rather consistently, when it is given space and acknowledged as something far beyond entertainment, accomplishes what most of politics has been unable to attain: It helps us return to our humanity, a transcendent journey that...can build a sense that we *are*, after all, a human community” (Lederach 2005, 153-4). While this approach may seem too unstructured to some people, maybe that is what this field needs—creative approaches to conflict that look beyond what is primarily used in the dominant culture.

As a result of the vast spread of Western influence, the act of resolving a conflict most often focuses on the disagreement between two or more parties, not on the internal difficulties faced by individuals or on the web of relationships within each party and between them. Building on Lederach, tapping into these internal feelings and interrelationships is vital to reconciliation and opens up the possibility for greater creativity. Widely-used Western approaches of simply reaching agreements and leaving conflict resolution processes at that will likely not be sustainable in the long-term if the parties in conflict have neither resolved their emotions relating to the conflict nor transformed the relationships in question. There are many reasons why the artistic approach is essential to this reconciliation process. For one thing, the arts go beyond rational thinking to reach areas of ourselves that are both necessary for reconciliation and impossible to get in touch with through conventional methods. To clarify this further, it is helpful to return to Lederach’s (2005) piece:

Intellectual rationality is but one element of the human experience but it is the element that most wishes to control the others. The artistic process initially breaks beyond what can be rationally understood and then returns to a place of understanding that may analyze, think it through, and attach meaning to it. This is much like the process of reconciliation. Brokenness wanders all over our souls. Healing requires a similar journey of wandering. It is not possible to cognitively plan and control the healing (160).

As Lederach explains, there is an important non-intellectual process that is necessary for true reconciliation, one that can be potentially accessed through the “artistic process.” The most significant implication of the above statement is that reconciliation requires not only an agreement between the conflicting parties, but *healing* as well. And healing is something that needs to come from within; fortunately, the arts are a skillful way of “build[ing] a bridge between the heart and the mind” (Lederach 2005, 160) and beginning to heal one’s self. While this is certainly a unique perspective to take regarding conflict resolution, it may very well be what is needed to ensure long-term, sustainable peace, instead of a short-term agreement that does not touch on the deeper complexities of the situation and allows cycles of violence to continue.

When reflecting on the arts as a tool of attaining peace, there are two approaches to consider. One may use the “process of making art” as the tool of reconciliation and resolution, or one may regard the end product as the tool (Epskamp 1999, 287). For the purpose of this study, we will focus on the former. In other words, the actual act of creating art “is used as an educational or therapeutic instrument” to support reconciliation and resolution (Epskamp 1999, 287). To narrow down the focus even further, this capstone focuses solely on the performing arts. Kees Epskamp describes how the performing arts can be applied in conflict situations. According to him, using performing arts and focusing on the process of making art can be used for reconciliation and rehabilitation more fruitfully than other arts-based approaches because it “invite[s] people to work together – to create collectively, to a much greater degree than the visual arts” (1999, 287). The performing arts, including dance, drama, and music, require people to work together, something which seems simple until you enter a community ravaged by conflict, in which case working together becomes much more complicated and difficult. But this

is why the performing arts ought to be examined more closely when attempting to bring about reconciliation and encourage positive peace—they can enable transcendence beyond the intellectual level that is often a barrier to a much-needed healing process. That is to say, performing arts, such as dance, allow their participants to access a part of themselves that cannot otherwise be accessed through intellectual processes. At the same time, working with fellow artists can lead to development of relationships and increased understanding of the societal “other”—those groups which have become set apart because of the conflict.

It is helpful to examine some other specific examples of the ways in which performing arts have been used for resolution and reconciliation in order to better understand the ways in which such approaches work and how they can contribute to the overall goal of peace. Epskamp provides the example of a music school in Cambodia that was created to teach children who were victims of the civil war under the Pol Pot regime. They learned traditional forms of music and dance as a way to preserve their culture but also to help them deal with war trauma (289). This example is geared towards the healing process that was discussed earlier and helps with individual growth and reconciliation as well as the formation of a support community.

Another helpful example of arts-based resolution and reconciliation is the holding of bi-communal events in Cyprus at which, music and poetry are used as tools to build connections and foster peace, which is summarized by John Ungerleider (1999). Cyprus has been divided by ethnicity for more than 30 years, with the Greek Cypriots on one side and the Turkish Cypriots on the other. In response to this division, large festivals organized by the United Nations and groups from both communities have been held in the UN-administered buffer zone that lies on the border of the two territories. At these events, musical artists perform and poetry is recited, demonstrating how the arts can be useful in promoting the development of relationships and

furthering understanding between two sides of a conflict. As Ungerleider (1999) writes, “...music helps keep the vision of peace alive and deeply felt. It is a tool and impetus for communication, collaboration and celebration, cornerstones of a budding common culture, not Greek or Turkish, but Cypriot, non-divisive and hopeful – peace culture” (297). This is a perfect example of how performing arts can bridge conflicts and start the reconciliation process in a way that is likely to be sustainable because of its deep personal impacts.

West African Dance and Exploring an Alternative Form of Conflict Resolution

Now, looking at the reflective process of this project, it is possible to magnify things even further and look specifically at the style of West African dance that I and the other volunteers learned. To begin, it is helpful to note the approach that some West African cultures take towards dance generally. According to Yaya Diallo (1989), a musician from the Minianka tribe in Mali, West African dance “possesses an invisible force that can draw a person farther than he or she imagines” and it often has such an effect on its participants that “the dancer enters into another level of reality, both communal and universal” (109). This certainly seems capable of providing the “transcendence” that Lederach expounds on in *The Moral Imagination*. West African dance has the ability to take the participant out of their comfortable intellectual state, a necessary step for bridging the heart and mind. It also has social benefits which Diallo describes as providing “social reconciliation” (111). He writes that, “The Minianka say that the dance is the first occasion where two enemies can share something” (111). This brings us to the two distinct ways in which dance is able to address conflict. The first, which is very fitting in terms of the theories discussed above, particularly Lederach’s moral imagination theory, is the way in which dance is able to provide an avenue to reconciliation through individual healing and therapy as well as through the rebuilding of relationships and community-strengthening. In other

words, dance connects people with their own internal struggles as well as with the people around them. The other way that dance prompts peace is through a direct means of resolving conflict by releasing the tensions that exist between two conflicting parties. A perfect example of this is dounouba, the style of West African dance that I and the other dancers learned and performed. Before getting into the reflection part of this paper relating to this dance, here is a brief background of this dance.

Diallo explains that dounouba is meant for people who are rivals or are having a serious fight. The dance is a last resort after the two parties have attempted to get counseling and advice from family, friends, and elders. They then meet in the village square and dance dounouba to rapid, aggressive drumming. The dance is meant to bring out pent-up aggression and express hostility in a non-violent way; it is like ritual combat in that it expresses negative feelings without actually causing the other party harm. Although today the dance's meaning has changed somewhat, particularly when it is being presented by performing dance troupes, it was originally "a practical means of bringing real conflicts to a climax and to an end" (Diallo 1989, 111). This very traditional means of addressing and moving past conflict is an important lesson in the study of alternative, artistic means of conflict resolution. The Minianka and the other tribes that participated in such dances saw conflict on a different level than many Western approaches. Dounouba allowed conflict to be manifested in a non-violent, but very physical, creative fashion. The lesson to be gleaned here is that conflict cannot always be effectively addressed through talk. Sometimes it is necessary to address the deeper feelings that can only be expressed through dance, or some other creative method.

This was one of the main points that came up through the participatory piece of this project. The process of this portion of my research was as follows: I met with six volunteer

dancers three to four times over the course of four weeks in order to learn the dounouba style from Marcia Howard, the African dance professor at American University. At the end of these four weeks, four of the volunteers and I performed the piece we learned in front of a small audience as part of a longer presentation on dance and conflict resolution on November 20, 2010. I presented the background for the performance and showed a few short clips from a documentary called *War Dance*. After the dance rehearsals and performance had concluded, the audience members and the dancers who volunteered filled out reflection sheets with questions relating to their own experiences and feelings towards dance and the arts as conflict resolution tools (the dancers' responses can be found in Appendix A). From these responses as well as from the questions that the audience asked of me, the themes developed in this paper were expanded further and were shown to have more facets than I had previously seen. My own personal experience with learning dounouba and the points raised by the volunteers and the audience gave me a more extensive view of the possibilities that exist for the use of dance as a resolution and reconciliation tool. The following section provides a summary of the insights that were gained through the presentation, performance and reflection.

Insights and Reflections on Dance and Dounouba for Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation

As mentioned in the introduction, the potential of using the arts as a conflict resolution tool is not something that can merely be read about; to truly understand the power of dance and other creative tools, one must be exposed to it personally. It really is such a personal thing that everyone experiences it in their own nuanced way, something that makes getting personal feedback from a number of individuals vital to developing a holistic understanding of the potential that exists in dance, and in the arts as a whole. There were two themes that surfaced through the feedback I received that were particularly important to the main ideas of this paper.

These were the personal, emotional use of dance to move past conflict issues and the power of dance to form community bonds or to rebuild relationships post-conflict, which were themes that were also touched upon by Epskamp, Ungerleider, and Diallo. However, the contributions of the dancers with whom I worked and the audience really highlighted these themes in a way that theories cannot.

In exploring the possibility of using dance on a personal level to move past conflict, I found that learning dounouba was a very interesting experience that related closely to my own previous experiences with dance. The movements are meant to be very strong and almost hostile. In this way, they help one to express anger towards another individual without resorting to actual violence. As Professor Howard explained to me, dounouba was typically meant to be a staged conflict; something that helped two people to show their anger and hostility toward each other without actually coming to blows. Looking more broadly at dance as a whole, which is where the majority of my and the other volunteers' experience comes from, one is most certainly able to use dance to express and move past negative feelings as well as emphasize positive ones. From my own personal experience, dancing when I feel stressed or angry is exceedingly helpful in allowing me to both confront what I am feeling and overcome it. One of the volunteer dancers explained her own use of dance as a way of dealing with problems: "...I use dance as a coping tool always. When I am sad or happy, I love to express it through movement. The beauty of dance is you can express every emotion!" Although this expresses an internal sentiment that is not proven through studies or polls, it is an important idea to consider if one is concerned about the individual, emotional effects of conflict. Something that came up quite often in the reflections from the dancers was that dancing helps to release tension and frustration and that it

can be an “outlet for anger.” This is a vital step in resolving conflict because any long-term solutions will certainly be hindered if there are strong negative emotions still in play.

The film *War Dance* is also an excellent example of how dance and other arts, such as music, can be powerful tools for both dealing with and moving beyond conflict and its emotional effects. The documentary focuses on a few children living in a refugee camp in northern Uganda who are participating in a national dance and music competition. The most striking part of the film is the description of each child’s connection with dance and music and how it helps them to face their difficult situation in a war zone. They each explain how dance and music helps them to forget about the horrible things that have happened to them and to feel like more than refugees stuck in a conflict. In this way, dance and the arts go beyond the overcoming of emotions to allow the changing of one’s identity after a conflict—to be seen as a dancer or singer or artist instead of a victim of war. Identity can be profoundly changed by conflict but dance and other forms of art provide the artist with the opportunity to be seen first and foremost as an artist, instead of a victim, because of their potential to tap into deeper emotions and levels of thought. One of the girls in *War Dance* explains that being part of the dance and music competition allowed her to be known not as the girl who lost her parents, but as a great dancer and someone who can do positive things.

Dance can also be viewed as contributing to reconciliation in that it can help to rebuild relationships and form group bonds that may be difficult in a conflict or post-conflict situation. The main feature of dance that was emphasized most prominently by my fellow dancers and the audience members was that it is a form of communication without words. This unique characteristic requires dancers to work together on a much more basic level than, say, in a study group. Dancing in a group means that no one person can go off and do their own thing or they

will wreck the piece that is being performed; it requires everyone to work together. In such a situation, it is not possible to remain isolated or detached from the group. In this way, dance can be a tool to reform community bonds post-conflict. Again using an example from *War Dance*, the end of the film really highlights the power of the arts to unite a community around something positive by showing how everyone comes together to celebrate the success of the children at the competition. It seems that, in many cases, refugee camp populations are not particularly united as a community because their lives revolve around surviving and dealing with the conflict. So, in this case, having a positive event that connects back to a shared appreciation of dance and music is an excellent tool to create a positive group environment that is not stuck in the mindset of conflict.

Dance can also be utilized on the group level to create a bridge between communities or groups that may have been on opposite sides of the conflict by encouraging them to share dance and the arts with each other. In the words of one of the audience members, dance is “a powerful equalizer. All ages and people with different backgrounds can participate and connect with each other.” In other words, everyone can either participate in or have some appreciation of dance. In this way, it is different from other activities that might bring people together, such as sports teams. This is because dance brings the audience into the performance through an emotional connection, something that sports cannot do; one might be impressed by someone’s athletic skills, but a good kick in a soccer game cannot express an emotion the way that a dance step can. Bringing two conflicting groups together with the purpose of sharing dance or another form of artistic expression allows them to see eye-to-eye and share something that lies outside their reasons for conflict, at least for a short period of time. This is particularly significant when looking at non-Western cultures where dance and music are often a main part of everyday life for

people across societal divisions. Dance has compelling potential for creating common ground for groups at odds with each other.

Conclusion

Conflicts are never straightforward and orderly and they are definitely not devoid of emotion. In this light, why should resolution and reconciliation be based solely on reason and logic when the conflict itself certainly is not? The dominant conflict resolution methods of negotiation and mediation used throughout the world very often ignore this question by focusing on what the West, mainly North America and Europe, believes is the best way of resolving conflict. The subconscious cultural assumptions often mean that interveners ignore the emotional aspects of conflict and the internal “mess” that accompany conflict, and fail to learn from the culture of the people that they are supposedly working with. The main argument here is that resolution and reconciliation should focus more on the emotional and relationship side of conflict by taking more artistic and creative pathways. Additionally, peace practitioners should be more willing to learn from the culture that they are dealing with because this will provide them with additional feasible alternatives to conventional Western methods.

Dance, particularly traditional forms of dance such as African, offers up one such creative, cultural alternative. The West African style of dounouba is an excellent example of how dance can be used directly as a conflict resolution tool. Dance in general provides both an outlet for negative emotions related to conflict and a way to rebuild positive relationships. There are many cases that support this artistic approach to conflict, but it must be noted that it is a technique that must be more felt than seen and therefore is difficult to understand only through second-hand reports. Above all, arts approaches to conflict resolution should be looked at with creativity and inventiveness. This alternative pathway must be considered if the conflict

resolution field is to progress and expand in a way that embraces differing cultural views of conflict while also encouraging the use of more imaginative and creative methods of dealing with conflict.

Appendix A
(Note: all responses taken verbatim)

Participant Reflections

Do not include your name; I will try to keep these reflections as confidential as possible.

Please answer the first 2 questions after each individual practice. Include the date of each answer.

1. How did you feel before dancing? Did this change after we finished dancing?

Person 1: Before I danced, I felt stressed because I was running from one class to another and after the dance I felt empowered.

Person 2: First practice: Before practice I felt tentative and stressed. Afterwards I felt like I'd learned something as a dancer. I also felt physically tired, which was kind of a relief. I'm not very good about exercising, so back home I'd use dance as a work out. Here I'm taking tap dance, but since it's beginning tap, it's not much of a workout.

Second practice: Before dancing I was very stressed. I was sort of bummed that this class was more about counting and learning a piece for show, as opposed to working up a sweat trying to make the moves look right.

Person 3: It felt foreign to me at first, but as I got into it, it felt more natural.

Person 4: Excited to try a new Style. Felt energized afterwards, and relieved – big stress reliever and took away all tension.

Person 5: Monday, October 25

I was so nervous to be at Katzen with people I didn't know and a dance I had no previous background in. I stopped dancing in 11th grade (I'm now a freshman) due to studio complications, and had actually been focussing on mainly just tap for two years before. Therefore, my jazz and ballet skills are not up to par. The first couple steps were awkward, but then I realized that dancing is really what I enjoy and to get the most out of my experience I just needed to go for it. I had such a great time at this first practice. I felt more confident with my dancing and feel ready to take on more dancing in my college years.

Monday, November 8

Warming up to the steps we learned the previous week was a little challenging, but then it felt natural. It got to the point where I was a bit frustrated with others' steps that were out of place. When I dance I try to mimic the teacher, and sometimes others were not doing that. Then I had to realize that I'm the student and we are all just learning this for the first time and that I,

too, have absolutely no background in African dance, nor the ability to critique anybody else. By the end of this practice I was so into the different ways I taught my body to move. I had always wanted to take up lyrical or modern but, again, because of my studio situation I never had the chance too. I think I will audition for more than just the tap piece for next semester's AU in Motion production!

2. If dancing changed your state of mind, please elaborate. If you're comfortable, personal details are welcome.

P1: After I danced, I felt amped and elated. I wanted to do more and felt like I could take on more tasks. It was very restorative. The dance was almost empowering because of the intense emotions behind the dance.

P2: First class: It made me a little more relaxed, plus I got all those endorphins from finally exercising.

Second class: Not especially. I'd had a stressful day, and it was nice to turn off my brain for a while and focus on other things, but when class was over all my problems were still there.

P3:

P4: It helped me relax and focus on the movement and exhausted me enough to make me focus – all excess energy was let out and all frustration and negativity was let go.

P5: Monday, October 25

I definitely felt more comfortable allowing dancing to take me away (from reality, I guess, in a few instances). The music and beat creates a great outlet for expression. It took until I ventured away from tap dancing to realize this. And actually, Nikki White (the tap choreographer) had introduced me to a new way of rhythm tap that influenced my state of mind when dancing, as well. I had always been a Broadway tap dancer and in my later years of tap before college started learning rhythm tap. However, Nikki had us tap with just a bongo drummer, which really allows me now just go with whatever I'm feeling. Although it's an awkward and different experience, I really think dancing with AU in Motion this year has given me confidence.

Tuesday, November 9

(I'm embarrassed to admit, but) I went to a club with some of my girl friends on Friday and I realized that I love music and the way it makes me feel. At points the bass in the club was so high that I felt the music go through me and I didn't even care what I looked like. I feel comfortable with my dancing/ rhythm ability and I have been inspired through the African dance experience (as well as dancing at clubs) to pursue my love of dance further.

Answer the next three questions over the course of our practices. There is no specific time you need to do these, just complete them before we do the performance.

3. Do you ever use dance as a coping tool? In other words, do you make a conscious effort to dance when you are stressed/sad/angry/etc.?

P1: Often times I dance to escape from everyday stressors. I never find that I make a conscious effort to dance when I am feeling an intense emotion because for me, it's fun and therapeutic. When I step into a setting that I know I will be dancing in my mood automatically changes.

P2: It's not my first choice of coping tool, but it normally helps when I use it. It's been a little frustrating for me because I can't find a space in Katzen to practice Irish dance (I've been doing it since I was eight). I can't dance in the studios because my shoes would ruin the floor, and the hallway is too slick for me to feel comfortable kicking high. And dancing on cement outside is rotten for my shoes. I didn't think about it before, but I've been crying more here (often in response to stress) than I do back home. Maybe that's partly a result of not having a heavy dance class at least once a week.

P3: Yes, I use dance as a coping tool always. When I am sad or happy, I love to express it through movement. The beauty of dance is you can express every emotion! Even when I am impatient, I use dance as a coping method.

P4: Yes – which is why I need to keep dance in my life every week, non-stop. You never know when you will need it.

P5: I never had used dancing as a coping tool until I came to college. Throughout my life I just went to class and stuck to what I knew. However, after stopping dance for two years I had the whole "you don't know what you have until it's gone" experience. I live on the Tenley Campus and right down the hall from me is the dance studio. So, in the beginning of the semester I went to check it out. Then I brought my tap shoes. Then I brought music. Then I started experimenting with modern dance. Now, I find myself in the studio to get away from my work and even more my dormmates. Yes, people I've met here are for the most part great, but it's getting to the point where I just want me time. Dancing gives me that time.

4. Do you have any personal experience with and/or knowledge of using dance to resolve or reconcile conflict?

P1: When I was young I used dance all the time when I was experiencing negative emotions as a way to release them.

P2: I use Irish dance hard shoe to pound out my own emotions sometimes, but I don't use it to work out conflicts with another person. I've seen my friends use dancing at dances or clubs to signal who in our group of friends is interested in who, which I guess is a form of communication and thus conflict resolution, but I'm not sure that's what you're looking for.

P3: I think in general it just makes relationships stronger and makes communication easier.

P4: No.

P5: I never used dancing to the extent I should have, but after learning African dance and knowing it is about conflict and being "in your face," I can totally see how dancing can be used to resolve conflict. First, it's an outlet for anger sometimes. Also, when people share a common bond that can help.

5. In general, how does dancing affect your feelings and state of mind?

P1: Dancing has a variety of effects on my feelings and my mood. It often times depends on what I need from the dance. If I am sad the dance makes me feel happy, and if I am feeling inadequate dancing empowers me to push forward.

P2: It makes me more proud of my body, and more comfortable in my abilities. It normally leaves me feeling less stressed, and sometimes leaves me really, really happy.

P3: It makes me more sensitive and aware of others and enables me to be thankful for what I have.

P4: Makes me elated, comfortable, and confident.

P5: Dancing can give me confidence and confidence will lead me on. It helps me regroup and teach me about myself, if that makes sense. I can push myself and also make myself uncomfortable. I am not the hip-hop, shake your hips kind of girl, but doing that in dance can let me know that I can really do well out side of my comfort zone.

However, I can remember times in dance when I just completely felt frustrated with certain steps and sometimes that frustration wouldn't go away. But, the final performance brings everything together. I'm bummed that I'm missing the final performance, but knowing that I volunteered with people I didn't know, for a dance I didn't know, makes me happy with myself.

Answer these last two questions after the performance has concluded.

6. In comparison with other types of dance, how did the African piece affect you personally?

P1: I really love African dance because it is such an expressive type of dance. The movements in African dance are very emotionally charged and really force me to become engaged and feel the dance. Other forms of dancing work similarly, but I find African dance to be more organic. Learning this piece affected me in that way, because I felt like I could release whatever emotions I was holding onto in the midst of the dance.

P2: It's less about doing things that make your body look pretty and more about doing things that make you feel powerful. I'd also say that it's the only time I've started off a dance class exceedingly conscious of my race. I was more worried that I'd do the moves right but not get that look that certain dances are supposed to have. Basically, I was more worried I'd look stupid.

P3: I liked doing the African piece because it was something different! I also liked it because it is so strong that it enabled me to release a lot of tension and stress.

P4: Definitely helped me realize that sometimes its not about how high your leg can go but about the meaning and power and release behind the moves.

P5:

7. How did dancing together affect your feelings toward your fellow participants? For example, if you didn't know them that well previously, has your relationship with them developed in any way (either negatively or positively)? Or if you were friends previously, has your relationship changed in any way?

P1: Because I was not able to meet with my fellow participants as much as I would have liked I don't believe my relationship with them has changed, however I think this experience has opened up communication between myself and my fellow participants. As a result, the opportunity to get to know them better presents is self because we dance in this piece together.

P2: My relationship hasn't really changed one way or the other. I tend to get to know people through talking and listening, and since dance doesn't need verbal conversations, I feel like it takes longer than a couple of classes for a dance class to change or create a relationship.

P3: I feel like the people I danced with are more approachable now because I have some sort of connection to them!

P4: Got to know the dancers better and was much more comfortable talking to them afterwards.

P5:

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