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Memorializing the Work of Bishop Cornelius Korir in Advancing Grassroots Peacebuilding in Kenya: Perspectives on *Amani Mashinani*

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Abstract

This special commemoration feature of Journal of Social Encounters focuses on the work of the late Bishop Cornelius Korir in advancing grassroots peacebuilding in North Rift region of Kenya. Bishop Korir is credited for developing a grassroots peacebuilding model popularly known as Amani Mashinani (Peace at the Grassroots) which brings together warring communities to collectively participate in activities geared at promoting peace. In this context, grassroots peacebuilding is understood in the same vein as locally led peacebuilding which is “an approach in which the people involved in, and most affected by, violent conflict work together to create and enact their own solution to prevent, reduce, and/or transform the conflict, with the support they desire from outsiders” (Locally Driven Peacebuilding, 2015).

We memorialize this work in ways it embraces strategies for survival and co-existence among diverse ethnic groups, and has emancipatory potential to show “why and how locally led peacebuilding can add value and, importantly, make the world more peaceful” (Connaughton & Berns, 2020, p. 3).

*Amani Mashinani is a community driven peacebuilding initiative whose activities take place in contexts where violence, distrust, fear, loss, despair and other life challenges threaten prospects for peace. Even so, such damaging circumstances did not deter the strenuous efforts by Bishop Korir to popularize *Amani Mashinani* in the belief that communities have the ability to live together and therefore can find solutions to problems encountered. It is against this backdrop of hope for peace that justifies questions that frame the scholarship presented here about *Amani Mashinani* as a grassroots peacebuilding model. *What factors explain how Amani Mashinani works? How does it bring hope for peace to warring communities? How does Amani Mashinani involve and/or exclude participation of community members? How did Bishop Korir’s positionality in relation to religious, cultural and political contexts he served as a peacemaker influence the undertakings of Amani Mashinani?* With these questions in mind and others not included here, and perhaps likely to come up after reading the essays assembled, it is my hope that peace scholars and practitioners will be motivated to learn more about grassroots peacebuilding.*

Relevance of *Amani Mashinani* to Grassroots Peacebuilding Scholarship

In this special commemoration feature, we seek to theorize the role of *Amani Mashinani* in promoting grassroots peacebuilding in two ways. Firstly, within the context of complex intersecting factors considered to be the cause of inter-ethnic conflicts in North Rift Valley region of Kenya and secondly, in view of factors that support *Amani Mashinani* as an avenue to bring some glimpses of peace to communities divided by conflict. In this regard, contributors of this special feature explore how *Amani Mashinani* stands as a rich site of knowledge about ways to advance the theory and practice of grassroots peacebuilding in North Rift region of Kenya. The essays featured draw from peace studies, Biblical and Catholic teachings about the role of

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Church during crisis, and African cultural values to highlight undertakings of *Amani Mashinani* to build and sustain local peace.

Mac Ginty and Richmond's (2013) notion of 'local turn' model in peace and conflict studies, is a recognition of, among others, "the significance of local agency and resistance, of the unintended consequences of external blueprints, of rights and needs in everyday contexts" (cited in Welty, Bolton & Kiptoo, 2020, p. 61). This turn supports the move towards recognizing other alternatives and more analysis on the role of culture in peacebuilding (Mac Ginty 2008). Certainly, *Amani Mashinani* fits this understanding of local turn in peacebuilding given its focus on local culture to support collective efforts to build and sustain peace. Additionally, our analysis devotes attention to the multidimensional wisdom of Bishop Korir which merits further scholarly interest in its own right, and has potential to enrich the conceptualization of the 'local turn' in peacebuilding scholarship. Realistically, it is the knowledge embodied in the daily experiences of victims of violence that informs how warring communities move forward in the post-conflict setting. We believe that what is now known about *Amani Mashinani* is relevant to supporting efforts by governmental and non-governmental organizations to promote grassroots peacebuilding.

In his book, "*Amani Mashinani (Peace at the Grassroots): Experiences of community peacebuilding in the North Rift of Kenya*" (2009), readers are exposed to the vignettes and witticisms Bishop Korir used to communicate information about peacebuilding. Bishop Korir de-escalated tensions in communities by drawing from local cultural values and Christian teachings not seen as oppositional to the end goal of achieving peaceful co-existence. This strategy served to create shared meanings relevant to embracing mutual agreements about how locals work together to accomplish their goals for peace. Furthermore, it prioritized advocacy for holistic actions which in turn promote interdependence among community members to overcome catastrophes of inter-ethnic violence. Actions taken to bring communities together included the use of African values communicated using satire, metaphors, illustrations, rituals, and proverbs which community members could easily understand, agree and act upon for the sake of peace. Lessons about value of life and love for your neighbor were interweaved in messages advocating communal agricultural activities, connector projects, sharing of meals and traditional beer among others local rituals emphasizing the sense of community.

This special feature is a contribution to the academic literature about the emerging community driven peacebuilding approaches, 'local turn' and locally led peacebuilding as subset of the peacebuilding field (see Connaughton & Berns, 2020; Matok & Kellet, 2017; Locally Driven Peacebuilding, 2015; Mutua, 2015; Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013; Odendall, 2013, Mac Ginty, 2008). Central to locally led peacebuilding is the focus on building relationships to unite communities. The emerging recognition of relational responsibility in peacebuilding (Brigg, 2016 cited in Moix, 2020, p.25) is reorienting the field of peacebuilding. According to Moix (2020) "relational responsibility can be defined as a sense of commitment and compassion toward others based upon a recognition or experience of our interconnection and interdependence" (p. 26). Moix (2020) links relational responsibility to motivating factors including faith, hope, individual character, family, children and transformative experiences (p. 24-25). In *Amani Mashinani*, relational responsibility is driven by the intent to promote peaceful co-existence in the post-conflict setting which is under the threat of conflict recurrence given that

the major cause of the conflict –land tenure–has not been resolved. Thus the need for renewed social bonds and trust is desirable for communities in North Rift who are highly interdependent as community members. They still live together and share communal resources such as schools, places of worship, market places, and health centers. They are neighbors or relatives through inter-ethnic marriages. With this in mind, Bishop Korir’s work in centering cultural traditions in peacebuilding was well calculated to improve relationships among the warring communities. In order to sustain efforts towards peaceful co-existence, peace educators and practitioners can take interest in the value of relationships re-energized by Bishop Korir through his interactions with a people whose trusted sense of familial connections, neighborliness, common culture and spirituality, and bonding as Kenyans had been broken by conflict.

Last but not least, the contributors to this special feature advance peacebuilding scholarship by examining the contexts that define the roles played by local community members in grassroots peacebuilding. Specifically, the roles of the church, religious leaders, elders, local leaders, women, and youth are discussed. Whilst the focus is on the role of Bishop Korir, those who played different roles in *Amani Mashinani* as well as benefited from his leadership are acknowledged as important sources of information about the contexts of his work. In all, the essays are a recognition of, and a tribute to Bishop Korir’s contributions to the field of peacebuilding. Similarly, such recognition is supported by extensive media coverage of his work (see media coverage by Koskei, 2018; Kipsang & Bii, 2017; Makori, 2017) as well as recognition by the government with the highest civilian medal and an award from the Kenya Human Rights Commission. These achievements attest to Bishop Korir’s success as a champion of peace.

Memorializing Bishop Korir

In the context of understanding *Amani Mashinani*’s relevance to grassroots peacebuilding, this commemoration feature provides an opportunity for peace scholars and practitioners to examine how Bishop Korir formed his ideas, principles and practices about peace. We also wish to celebrate Bishop Korir’s life by endeavoring to keep his work alive. A Malian proverb informs us- “In Africa, when an old man [woman] dies, it is like a library being burnt down” (Amadou Hampate Ba). Specifically, the library embodied in Bishop Korir as an elder, knowledge-producer and keeper must not be forgotten with his death! We memorialize the work of Bishop Korir using this adage as a framework that outlines African traditions about knowledge production and dissemination from generation to another, and in life and after death. The adage is relevant to Bishop Kori’s work in *Amani Mashinani* in two ways. Firstly, it acknowledges aspects of African culture about knowledge, wisdom, respect for elders, and commitment to preserve knowledge for present and future generations. In African oral traditions, knowledge is transferred from one generation to the next through multiple oral means, including proverbs, stories, riddles, song and dance. This continues in our written productions, including the essays assembled here.

Secondly, the metaphorical significance of the adage frames how and why we memorialize Bishop Korir’s work. Korir exemplifies what renowned Kenyan philosopher Henry Odera Orika (1990) has called the broader “folk sagacity” and critical, “philosophical sagacity,” embodied in traditional African culture. By examining the what, why, where and how questions about *Amani Mashinani*, the contributors to this special feature endeavor to sustain local knowledge production and dissemination about how inter-ethnic conflicts are perceived, interpreted, and

managed in the North Rift region of Kenya. Additionally, the contributors show how knowledge is collectively produced and circulated to benefit the entire community.

Santos (2018) argues that epistemologies of the South go beyond authorship individualism privileged in epistemologies of the North. Bishop Korir worked with sages drawn from diverse local communities to seek a solution to problems between them. He organized with others to identify problems, plan agendas for dialogue sessions, and consult elders from warring communities. As the guest editor of this special feature on Bishop Korir, I do not wish to minimize the role of other ‘authors’ of the knowledge we share in the essays assembled here. I acknowledge the sages who continue to center African epistemologies in peacebuilding. They have supported Bishop Korir’s work that has produced knowledge relevant in advancing the understanding the ‘local turn’ in grassroots peacebuilding.

Contextualizing Bishop Korir’s Work

The context of Bishop Korir’s work is useful in expounding insights into his legacy as a peacemaker who privileged local efforts in peacebuilding. One way to explain the context of Bishop Korir’s work is to examine responses to questions that elucidate the issues we are interested in remembering him. Some of these probable questions include the following: “What is the context(s) in which the Bishop did work for peace? How did the context (s) shape his ideas, principles and actions? And in terms of its current relevance, is the context still the same today? What has changed or remained the same? These questions offer responses critical in helping us contextualize the relevance of Bishop Korir’s work in the present and future scholarship and practice of grassroots peacebuilding.

As earlier noted, the context in which Bishop Korir worked was marked with fierce inter-ethnic conflict. Nonetheless, he believed that actions taken by communities in good faith could transform conflict. Elias Opongo illustrates in his essay how Bishop Korir worked with communities to make peace. Opongo discusses the complexity of the context in which Bishop Korir worked by observing that “one may not think a model of peacebuilding which is anchored on a strong foundation of an inclusive twelve-step process in a community deeply divided can transform conflict but Bishop Korir efforts did”. Opongo details how *Amani Mashinani* provided a space to develop and promote relationships building and interdependence among inter-ethnic communities in the North Rift. Each step gives us glimpses of Bishop Korir’s work as a peacemaker, religious leader and a community leader through his interactions with members of the warring communities. The interactions with both perpetrators and victims of violence, during and after the conflict positively impacted processes and communal activities initiated to move communities forward.

Bishop Korir utilized existing social networks to support processes and activities geared at mobilizing communities to work towards peaceful co-existence. He was aware of the fact that the communities in conflict shared many cultural values, beliefs and practices. For example, the communities were not strangers to each other since they had lived together for a long period of time and were familiar with local cultural traditions and religious beliefs (Mutua & Kilonzo, 2017). For Bishop Korir, the local cultural context was an opportune moment to affirm that relational experiences matter in peacebuilding as long as they serve to yield positive outcomes for the communities. African traditional values privilege the centrality of relationships in communities and service to others as resounded in Ubuntu philosophy (I am because we are and

because we are I am). In particular, Kenyans are familiar with the value of collective work for the benefit of the community at large as embedded in the philosophy of *Harambee* and *Chama* (Lets pull together). It is no surprise that Bishop Korir welcomed oral traditions to engage communities in building relationships and problem-solving. Richard Kimeli's essay introduces Nandi speaking communities' tradition of *Ketebekok* which is a participatory sit-down and dialogue technique where community members sit at *kok* (neighborhood/village) to identify ways to develop relationships, restore peace and promote co-existence.

So far, we know Bishop Korir incorporated his indisputable knowledge about local culture to build healthy relationships. Essentially, this knowledge about local culture was not limited to knowing how to follow the expected cultural protocols to mobilize community elders to dialogue, but also to change some practices of the culture which were not inclusive of all members of the community. Bishop Korir was concerned about the underrepresentation of women in grassroots peacebuilding processes notably among the Kalenjin community. It turned out that his vision for an active role of women in peacebuilding processes was welcome. As it is the case in any conflict, women are the victims of physical and psychological violence, sexual violence, economic violence and cultural violence. Susan Kilonzo and Kennedy Onkware discuss the role of women in peacebuilding among the Kikuyu and Kalenjin communities in Uasin Gishu County. Specifically, the authors examine the role of women in the twelve steps of *Amani Mashinani*. The analysis reveals the barriers to women's participation and opportunities that *Amani Mashinani* offered women to participate as active decision-makers in peacebuilding processes.

Another context that impacted Bishop Korir's work is the economic conditions that resulted into fierce competition and conflict over limited resources in the North Rift region. Bishop Korir endeavored to address economic disparities from within the warring communities. William Kiptoo's essay discusses how Bishop Korir responded to the economic challenges by introducing the idea of connector projects. According to Kiptoo, the projects were intended to promote social cohesion and income generating opportunities without making communities dependent on the Church. Community members had the onus to identify projects to develop and implement from within the community. The financial support and capacity building training for connector projects provided community members the means and skills to manage the projects. Communities are indebted to Bishop Korir's tenacity to promote self-reliance in a context without abundant resources.

In reflecting on the content of the four essays assembled here, it's without a doubt that the need to restore relationships in the aftermath of violence cannot be underestimated. I am reminded of an interview with Bishop Korir in the summer of 2016 when he reiterated the need to build relationships to transform conflict in the hands and hearts of communities in Kenya. He noted with appreciation that the reward of building relationships is well modeled in post-genocide Rwanda where reconciliation efforts are geared at transforming the hearts of victims of the genocide. He categorically stated that taking away violence from the hands of its perpetrators was not the epic evidence of peace. A major takeaway for me from the interview was that concerted efforts that grow trusting relationships between victims and perpetrators of violence are a valuable investment in humanity. We can bring together best practices that motivate communities to see peace as a condition that makes families, local communities, and a country

prosper culturally, politically and economically. As a matter of fact, the essays in this special feature illustrate Bishop Korir's efforts to build relationships as the foundation of community centered response to improving life conditions and promoting peaceful co-existence in the post-conflict setting.

Pragmatism in grassroots peacebuilding

Whilst the record of Bishop Korir's work is well known, there is still the need to talk about what motivated him to privilege pragmatism in grassroots peacebuilding. What I mean by pragmatism in grassroots peacebuilding is how Bishop Korir put agency back to communities affected by conflict to become key participants in the search for peace. Bishop Korir set the example by interacting with these communities in anticipation that similar interactions amongst the communities would open opportunities to resolve their problems. In my view, a dominant factor influencing this call for active participation by communities was his strong views about the intersection of conflict, community participation, development and peace. Bishop Korir maintained that the participation of the warring communities in managing their problems was important as long as they had goodwill towards each other. *Amani Mashinani* became the focal point for optimism, collective action and community. This perspective localized problems encountered and allowed communities to think about peace as something not granted or guaranteed by the national government. Bishop Korir deconstructed some views about national government policies not well understood by the warring communities. For example, since the 1992 ethnic conflicts until the 2007/8 post elections violence, there was no indication that the government was going to resolve conflicts occurring over disputes about land ownership. To address this problem at the local level, Bishop Korir encouraged communities to prioritize productive use of the land for food production. The Catholic Diocese of Eldoret provided seeds to communities to plant in order to ensure some degree of food security and skills training and financial support to jumpstart peace connector projects.

In view of the above, Bishop Korir's imagination and knowledge about the contexts of the conflict in the North Rift re-envisioned locally grounded themes of grassroots peacebuilding as culture, spirituality, relationships, and communal participation of communities. The knowledge that Bishop Korir's work generates alludes to what Santos (2018) describes as "knowledge which are technically and culturally intrinsic to certain practices and exists embodied in social practices" (p. 3). What we have learned about *Amani Mashinani* as a site of knowledge about grassroots peacebuilding in Kenya is that Bishop Korir facilitated self-understanding of the challenges encountered by the communities whose outcome is collective engagement in search of peaceful co-existence. In this regard, Bishop Korir's work stands as a celebration of local struggles to make peace without depending on government support. His work has many innovative facets to peacebuilding. In my view, the most important one is his ability to mobilize communities to become less dependent of the government even when faced with the reality of their suffering. This is illustrated in "*the government will not solve all your problems*" attitude he instilled among warring communities. By so doing, he helped to deconstruct the mundane Kenyan mentality of "*Twaomba serikali itusaidie*" (We 'beg' the government to help us). It is important that communities in conflict address conditions that make them dependent on their government including dismantling conditions that silence collective resistance to hold governments accountable for state sanctioned violence. Ultimately, encouraging communities to

collaborate in mutual understanding about how to transform conflict is a positive one in that the outcome is collective and mutual.

Conclusion

In concluding this introductory essay, I revisit the purpose of this special commemoration feature on Bishop Korir. It is an opportunity to learn more about the work of Bishop Korir and the lessons it offers in advancing grassroots peacebuilding. The metaphorical significance of the Malian adage (*In Africa, when an old man [woman] dies it is like a library being burnt down*) and the scholarship provided by the contributors show the need to keep his work alive as a legacy for present and future generations of peace educators and practitioners. Below, I outline some aspects of Bishop's life critical to defining his legacy and must be honored.

- Service to the church, local communities and country as a peacemaker
- Ability to effectively communicate in times of crisis
- Reverence for African traditional values and ethics
- Promotion of ethnic diversity, religious diversity, dialogue, belongingness and nationalism without nativism
- Commitment to peace education
- Commitment to protect land rights, water resources, and the environment in general
- Advocacy for small arms disarmament, and last but not least,
- Unrelenting championing of human rights, community participation, relational responsibility, justice, reconciliation and peace.

It is my hope that the knowledge shared in the collection of essays will serve as a valuable resource for readers including peace educators and practitioners to draw best practices in grassroots peacebuilding and apply them in their contexts. The essays analyze a wide selection of topics that illuminate perspectives that *Amani Mashinani* has to offer in advancing grassroots peacebuilding. The authors discuss struggles and successes that have generated knowledge relevant to understanding the 'local turn', relational responsibility, the essence of 'locally led peacebuilding' in the field of peacebuilding from an African perspectives. *Amani Mashinani* advances ideals of unity, community and nation building postulated by African thinkers in the 1960s such as Kwame Nkrumah, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, and now articulated as the Afrocentric paradigm by Molefi Asante. Afrocentric paradigm position Africans as subjects not as objects (Asante, 2009). It is recommended that future research in conflict and peace studies, and in particular grassroots peacebuilding, focus on capturing experiences such as *Amani Mashinani* in order to advance an 'epistemological turn'(Santos, 2018, p. 9) capable of grounding knowledge about grassroots peacebuilding in Africa.

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