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Forum Theatre on Post-Election Violence in Kenya¹

Mecca Antonia Burns², Bonface Njereses Beti³, and Caleb Seda⁴

This article introduces a video in which students at the Kerith Brook School in Nairobi, Kenya perform a play about politically instigated crimes which devolve into a seemingly endless cycle of retaliation developed using the Peace Marshall's approach. The goal is to propose solutions to end the violence and forge constructive relationships between youth and elders for a lifetime of civic engagement and mutual peacebuilding. (The link to the video is at the end of the article.)

¹ A version of this article previously appeared in the JSIRRI (Jana Sanskriti International Research & Resource Institute) Newsletter, September 21, 2017.

² **Mecca Antonia Burns** (LPC, RDT-BCT) is a drama therapist and licensed professional counselor based in Charlottesville Virginia. She holds a master's degree in Counseling Psychology and is a certified STAR practitioner (Strategies for Trauma Awareness & Resilience). She is co-founder of Presence Center for Applied Theatre Arts in Charlottesville, Virginia, USA, where she runs a Drama Therapy training program. She has travelled twelve times to East Africa for participatory theatre projects in villages and slums, about which she has co-written several book chapters and journal articles. She has led Theatre of the Oppressed workshops in Spain, Romania, Senegal, Finland and Puerto Rico.

³ **Bonface Njereses Beti** (MA degree in peacebuilding from the University of Manitoba, Canada) is an African artist and multidisciplinary practitioner working with embodied theatre-based processes on trauma and social change. Since 2004 he's worked with Amani Peoples' Theatre and now works with the Green String Network, a Kenyan indigenous organization that applies holistic and practical healing centered approaches to peacebuilding in partnership with grassroots communities. He has utilized TO tools in conflict zones in Kenya, South Sudan, Somalia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, and Canada working on transforming issues of colonialism. Publications include: Truth Comes in Many Colors: Theatre of the Oppressed for Conflict Transformation and Trauma Healing in Kenya, Grassroots Leadership and the Arts for Social Change (Building Leadership Bridges), and Forum theatre for conflict transformation in East Africa: The domain of the possible, in African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review, 5(1), 136-151.

⁴ **Caleb Seda** is Director of the Kerith Brook School, Nairobi. He has been an educator for 21 years having taught Mathematics and Physics in a national public school, and Computer Science and ICT since 1996. Recently he initiated the Kerith Brook Academy as an online school providing quality and affordable education to the global community of learners in prep and secondary schools. Kerith Brook is a name adopted from a community school he directed for many years, to support secondary school education of children from poor families around Nairobi city.

On September 1, 2017 all of Kenya felt a shock wave as the Supreme Court annulled the August 8 General Election. According to Aljazeera, "In the face of international pressure to ignore flagrant electoral violations, the court decided to stick to democracy."

Since 1992, Kenya's presidential elections have been passionately and bitterly contested, often degenerating into deadly, politically-manuevered ethnic violence. As this trend becomes the norm, seeds of hatred are planted into the consciousness of young people and their families, manifesting not only during elections but in the social fabric of the nation as a whole.

Kerith Brook Secondary School in Nairobi educates children who would otherwise be out of school due to socio-economic and academic challenges. Many are orphans or from destitute families. Operating as a Community Based Organization, the school has a mandate to help young people, their families, their communities and hence the nation live in harmony even through difficulties. The political developments happening in Kenya therefore fall within our mandate.

In light of the foregoing, we undertook to find ways to intervene through experiential education.

Through Forum Theatre, we engage young people to identify challenges they experience in the wider society and pose solutions. Caleb Seda adds, "Thanks to Mecca Burns of USA and Sanyu Lydia of Uganda for their profound understanding and skills in Forum Theatre, in which they have tirelessly trained us. Thus, our students are able to engage with audiences in animating both the problems and possible solutions."

In the video below (click on the photo or caption for the link), the students showcase politically instigated crimes which devolve into a seemingly endless cycle of retaliation. The cycle is only broken by a skillful soul-force of compassion combined with practices of justice in which victims and offenders participate

together. Establishing a healing system for the offenders is key to diffusing the hatred and preventing further crime.

It is our intention and call to build partnerships with individuals, organizations, companies and government agencies for the purpose of embedding this model into Kenya's national school curriculum, using the power of young people to change society by bringing everybody on board. In this regard, we welcome the viewers of our work to join hands with us to allow this noble undertaking of the young people to be successful.

People all over the world utilize the arts in peacebuilding. We seek to do research through play-building, to dramatize and transform historical trauma. Playback Theatre serves to reclaim all voices through improvised storytelling and music. Theatre of the Oppressed allows us to try out peace and justice solutions, to break out of cycles of violence and intergenerational trauma. We have developed an approach we call *Peace Marshalls* which includes a *Forum Theatre Toolkit to Address Election Violence*.

Youth hold great potential to address sociopolitical and ethnic identity-based issues. However, when disillusioned by lack of economic opportunities and limited decision-making power, young people are easily enlisted as foot soldiers and rioters in times of election violence. The Peace Marshalls approach is grounded in restorative justice practices and influenced by international organizations such as Nonviolent Peaceforce. The *Forum Theatre toolkit* places youth – the major drivers *and* victims of election-related violence – at the forefront of change. Youth are scaffolded to help fashion peace in their own communities, especially in the wake of election violence. People of all ages learn to analyze scenarios using Image Theatre, and present Forum Theatre to the larger community. Participatory theatre methods can later be used for debriefing: sharing experiences with each other, troubleshooting, and sustaining morale.

Thus we forge constructive relationships between youth and elders for a lifetime of civic engagement and mutual peacebuilding.

Addendum:

We cannot help but ask, as their election approaches:

- What can the USA learn from Kenya and other countries about post-election violence, to help achieve peaceful transitions of power?
- How can nonviolent philosophy be applied, along with restorative justice practices?
- *And what role can theatre play in grassroots activism?*



[Post-Election Violence in Kenya - Video](#)