

PEACE STUDIES JOURNAL

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Editors

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ABOUT PEACE STUDIES JOURNAL

The Peace Studies Journal (PSJ) is a leading and primer journal in the field of peace, justice, and conflict studies internationally. PSJ, founded in 2008 out of the initiative of the Central New York Peace Studies Consortium was established as an informal journal to publish the articles presented at the annual Peace Studies Conference, but in 2009 PSJ was developed into an international interdisciplinary free online peer-reviewed scholarly journal. The goal of PSJ is to promote critical scholarly work on the areas of identities politics, peace, nonviolence, social movements, conflict, crisis, ethnicity, culture, education, alternatives to violence, inclusion, repression and control, punishment and retribution, globalization, economics, ecology, security, activism, and social justice.

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PEACE STUDIES JOURNAL

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Essay: The Positive-Negative Conflict Paradigm: Rethinking the Moral Dynamics of Peace and Transformation

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THE POSITIVE-NEGATIVE CONFLICT PARADIGM: RETHINKING THE MORAL DYNAMICS OF PEACE AND TRANSFORMATION

Aliyu Sani Kafinga

Abstract

This paper advances the Positive-Negative Conflict Paradigm (PNCP) as a transformative framework for understanding the moral dynamics that shape peace and conflict in human societies. Drawing upon peace theory, moral philosophy, feminist and critical scholarship, systems theory and spiritual consciousness studies, the study proposes that conflict is not merely a pathological breakdown of peace but a morally charged polarity through which human consciousness and society evolve toward higher harmony. The paper introduces a critical distinction between positive coherence, which supports human flourishing, relational repair and adaptive regulation, and negative coherence, which represents internally consistent but harmful alignment organized around violence, exclusion or domination. This distinction, framed as a moral diagnostic paradigm grounded in Kafinga's positive-negative hermeneutics, is further refined by addressing epistemological challenges in diagnosing coherence, specifying

mechanisms of cross-scale interaction and incorporating system-environment relations, including exogenous disruption and adaptive negative coherence. The framework reinterprets moral distress as a potential signal for positive transformation and reconceptualizes peacebuilding as the restoration of positively-oriented coherence across scales. By integrating insights from physics, biology, psychology, sociology and spiritual philosophy within a unified analytical lens, the paper offers a rigorous conceptual foundation for both analyzing the roots of conflict and designing holistic interventions for sustainable peace. The paradigm is situated within the broader Unified Science of Peace and the Metaphysical Peace Transformation and Spiritual Synthesis Theory.

1. Introduction

Conflict and peace are two of the most enduring paradoxes of human existence. Throughout history they have shaped civilizations, moral systems and the evolution of human consciousness. The dominant traditions of peace research, beginning with Johan Galtung's foundational distinction between negative and positive peace, have largely understood conflict as a problem to be eliminated or resolved through structural transformation and nonviolent processes (Galtung, 1969). While this framework advanced the field beyond the notion of peace as mere absence of war, it still retains an implicit dualism: peace is good, conflict is bad; peace is order, conflict is chaos.

Human well-being is closely linked to coherence between values, actions and identity. When individuals act in ways that align with their internal framework, they experience stability and integration. Conversely misalignment produces fragmentation and distress (Higgins, 1987). However a critical caveat is necessary: coherence is not intrinsically good. Individuals can achieve internal coherence around destructive values, racist ideologies for example or commitments to violence (Bandura, 1999). A terrorist may experience a state of perfect alignment between values, identity and action. Coherence therefore must be critically evaluated.

Yet human experience persistently shows that conflict is also the crucible of growth, creativity and moral awakening. Every moral revolution from personal reconciliation to social justice movements emerges through struggle, contradiction and tension. This observation calls for a deeper re-examination of the moral dynamics underlying conflict itself. As Kafinga (2025) articulates within the Metaphysical Peace Transformation and Spiritual Synthesis Theory (MPT-SST):

Peace is not merely the absence of conflict; it is the resonance of Divine Order within all existence... Conflict becomes negative when it misaligns with this resonance, and positive when it is transformed through conscious submission into balanced alignment with the Divine Order; thereby restoring, restituting and healing the fractured harmony of existence. (Kafinga, 2025, p. 8)

The Positive-Negative Conflict Paradigm (PNCP) proposed in this paper arises from this inquiry. It argues that conflict is not inherently pathological but morally ambivalent, composed of both constructive and destructive energies that coexist within individuals and societies (Kafinga, 2026a, 2026b). Conflict in this view is a moral field of tension in which opposing values, needs

and aspirations encounter one another, generating the potential either for destruction or transformation. The outcome depends not on the mere management of differences but on the moral consciousness that governs human interaction within those differences (Kafinga, 2026c, 2026d).

The paper introduces a critical distinction between positive coherence and negative coherence, grounded in Kafinga's positive-negative hermeneutics. This interpretive approach evaluates systems, actions and meanings based on whether their functional outcomes support or undermine human flourishing, relational integrity and peace (Kafinga, 2025, 2026e). This distinction provides the evaluative foundation for understanding coherence as a structural property that must be assessed not merely for its presence but for its orientation and consequences.

Positive coherence refers to alignment that supports human flourishing, relational integrity, adaptive regulation and the capacity for repair and reintegration (Kafinga, 2026b, 2026d). It is characterized by openness to feedback, capacity for self-correction and compatibility with broader systemic well-being. Negative coherence is defined as internally consistent systemic alignment that stabilizes patterns of harm, domination, exclusion or distortion while resisting corrective feedback (Arendt, 1963). It occurs when beliefs, values, emotions and behaviors are tightly integrated around destructive orientations such as violence, exclusion, domination or self-deception.

This distinction resolves a critical limitation in coherence-based models. Without it coherence risks being misinterpreted as inherently desirable, obscuring the reality that highly organized harmful systems including extremist ideologies, abusive relational structures or internally rationalized destructive behaviors can exhibit strong internal alignment (Stern, 2003).

The present work is situated within the broader Unified Science of Peace project, which seeks to integrate transdisciplinary insights into a coherent metatheoretical framework for understanding and cultivating sustainable peace (Kafinga, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c, 2026e). The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 establishes the theoretical and conceptual foundations. Section 3 introduces the Positive-Negative Conflict Paradigm. Section 4 develops the moral diagnostic paradigm distinguishing positive and negative coherence. Section 5 advances the multi-scale coherence model. Section 6 presents historical illustrations of positive and negative conflict across contexts. Section 7 explores the implications for peacebuilding and human transformation. Section 8 concludes by outlining implications for future research directions and the broader vision of the Unified Science of Peace.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

2.1 The Evolution of Peace Paradigms

The study of peace entered academic discourse largely through the pioneering works of Johan Galtung, who introduced the distinction between negative and positive peace (Galtung, 1969). Negative peace referred to the absence of direct violence, while positive peace denoted the presence of social justice and harmony among human relationships. Galtung's model shifted the focus of peace research from ceasefire and war prevention to structural transformation,

highlighting the systemic roots of violence, what he termed structural and cultural violence (Galtung, 1996).

Yet while Galtung's typology expanded the horizon of peace theory, it remained rooted in an externalist framework. Peace and violence were primarily understood in terms of social systems and observable interactions. The inner dimensions of human consciousness, the moral and spiritual energies that shape conflict, were treated as secondary or private matters. Consequently peace studies advanced in structural sophistication but lost touch with the moral ontology of conflict, the inner drama of human good and evil that precedes external action.

Following Galtung, John Paul Lederach deepened the peace discourse through his Conflict Transformation Framework (Lederach, 1997, 2005). Lederach viewed peacebuilding as an ongoing process of relationship building that requires moral imagination, empathy and creative engagement with difference. His emphasis on relational ethics and the moral imagination marked an important step toward restoring human consciousness to the center of peace practice. Still Lederach's model focused largely on practical peacebuilding processes, leaving the metaphysical foundation of moral tension unexplored.

Similarly, John Burton's Human Needs Theory offered another major contribution by identifying unmet human needs such as security, identity and recognition as the root causes of conflict (Burton, 1990). Burton's approach humanized conflict but was fundamentally psychological and rationalist. It recognized that structural arrangements cannot create peace unless they satisfy fundamental human needs. Yet the moral polarity of conflict, the inner struggle between creative and destructive impulses, remained outside the scope of this analysis.

2.2 Critical and Feminist Contributions

The PNCP also draws on critical and feminist peace scholarship, which has significantly enriched understanding of conflict's moral dimensions. Feminist scholars have demonstrated that conventional peacebuilding approaches often neglect gendered power dynamics, reproduce patriarchal structures and fail to address the specific vulnerabilities and agency of women in conflict (Cockburn, 2001; Reardon, 1993). The personal is political: conflicts within households and communities are connected to broader political and structural dynamics.

Critical peace scholars such as Richmond have questioned the liberal peacebuilding model, arguing that externally imposed peace processes may reproduce colonial power relations and fail to address local agency and indigenous peace practices (Richmond, 2014). Similarly postcolonial scholars have demonstrated that Western peacebuilding frameworks often universalize particular moral and political assumptions while marginalizing non-Western perspectives (Chandler, 2010; Sabaratnam, 2017).

These contributions are important for the PNCP in several ways. First they highlight the need to attend to power asymmetries in conflict analysis, a dimension that earlier peace theory sometimes neglected. Second they demonstrate that moral frameworks are not culturally neutral; the PNCP's diagnostic dimensions must be applied with attention to local context and culturally specific understandings of justice and dignity. Third feminist and critical scholarship reveals that

what appears as conflict may in fact be resistance to structural oppression, and what appears as peace may be the suppression of legitimate demands for justice.

2.3 Psychological and Emotional Dimensions

The psychological and emotional dimensions of conflict have received increasing attention in peace research (Bar-Tal, 2013; Volkan, 1997). Collective trauma, identity threat, fear, humiliation and revenge dynamics profoundly influence conflict trajectories and may create conditions for destructive orientation even when actors hold constructive intentions.

Volkan's work on chosen traumas and collective identity demonstrates how historical grievances become transmitted across generations, shaping group identity and conflict dynamics (Volkan, 1997). Similarly Bar-Tal's research on intractable conflicts emphasizes the role of collective memory, victimhood narratives and emotional barriers to peace (Bar-Tal, 2013).

These psychological dimensions are crucial for the PNCP's analysis of conflict orientation. A group may hold constructive intentions, justice, accountability and dignity, while remaining trapped in cycles of fear and retaliation that prevent constructive engagement. Conversely psychological healing and emotional transformation may be prerequisites for movement along the destructive-constructive continuum.

2.4 The PNCP within the Moral-Spiritual Continuum

The Positive-Negative Conflict Paradigm extends these traditions by introducing the moral-spiritual continuum as the foundational reality of conflict. It argues that every conflict contains two inseparable forces: Positive Conflict Energy (PCE), the moral drive toward truth, justice and transformation, and Negative Conflict Energy (NCE), the egoic or destructive impulse that seeks domination, separation and control (Kafinga, 2025, 2026a, 2026c).

Unlike Galtung's peace typology, which separates violence and peace as structural conditions, the PNCP sees them as coexisting moral potentials within the same relational field (Galtung, 1969, 1996). The moral quality of conflict depends on which energy predominates in human response. Thus conflict becomes an arena of moral testing, a crucible for the evolution of human consciousness.

In this view peace cannot be achieved merely by removing external conditions of violence; it requires the transmutation of negative conflict energy into positive moral awareness. This process mirrors the ancient spiritual insight found in multiple traditions: the dialectic of opposites, light and darkness, good and evil, creation and destruction, is the engine of evolution. Heraclitus declared that conflict is justice, while the Bhagavad Gita interprets the battlefield as a metaphor for the moral war within the self. Similarly in Christian mysticism St. Augustine saw peace as the tranquility of order, an order that can only emerge through moral struggle and surrender to divine will.

Thus, the PNCP reclaims conflict as a sacred process of moral transformation. It bridges modern peace research and ancient spiritual wisdom, uniting the empirical and the transcendent in a single coherent paradigm.

2.5 Conflict as Moral Polarity

At the core of PNCP lies the notion of moral polarity. Human beings are moral agents whose actions are shaped by the constant tension between self-centered and other-centered impulses (Taylor, 1985). Conflict in this sense is not merely social interaction gone wrong but the external manifestation of this internal polarity.

Negative Conflict arises when the egoic impulse dominates, when power, pride, fear or revenge dictate response. It is reactive, destructive and self-perpetuating. Positive Conflict emerges when the moral or spiritual self governs action, when compassion, justice and truth-seeking guide engagement. It is transformative, creative and reconciliatory.

Every conflict contains both tendencies. The purpose of peace practice therefore is not to avoid conflict but to cultivate awareness that transforms negative polarity into positive moral force. This is what MPT-SST calls the moral resonance of divine order within human consciousness (Kafinga, 2025, 2026a, 2026e).

From this standpoint peacebuilding becomes a process of moral alchemy, the conversion of destructive energies into constructive potential through forgiveness, empathy and moral insight. The PNCP reframes peace practice as both ethical and spiritual discipline, requiring participants to transcend egoic identities and realize the interconnectedness of all existence

2.6 Metaphysical Peace Transformation and Spiritual Synthesis Theory (MPT-SST)

The PNCP is grounded within the Metaphysical Peace Transformation and Spiritual Synthesis Theory (MPT-SST), which provides a spiritual and metaphysical dimension to understanding conflict and peace (Kafinga, 2025, 2026a, 2026b). MPT-SST conceptualizes peace not merely as the absence of violence or the presence of justice, but as the resonance of Divine Order within all existence (Kafinga, 2025).

According to MPT-SST conflict becomes negative when it misaligns with this resonance, and positive when it is transformed through conscious submission into balanced alignment with Divine Order (Kafinga, 2025, 2026a). This perspective views conflict as a manifestation of moral tension between justice and injustice, between alignment with and deviation from universal harmony.

The MPT-SST framework contributes several key insights to the PNCP. First conflict is understood as a necessary tension that arises when human systems deviate from divine order. Positive conflict serves as a corrective mechanism that restores balance and harmony. Second constructive conflict transformation involves not only social, political and institutional change but also spiritual awakening and alignment with higher principles (Kafinga, 2026c, 2026d). Third peace is understood holistically, emanating from the individual soul, radiating through

relationships, transforming societies and culminating in cosmic harmony (Kafinga, 2025, 2026e). Fourth the framework draws on universal spiritual principles that transcend particular religious traditions, making it applicable across diverse cultural and religious contexts (Kafinga, 2026b).

2.7 Integrating Science, Morality and Spiritual Consciousness

The PNCP also aligns with emerging paradigms in integral theory and transpersonal psychology, which recognize that human behavior is shaped by states of consciousness. Scholars like Ken Wilber and David Bohm argue that fragmentation in human society reflects fragmentation in human perception (Wilber, 1995; Bohm, 1980). Peace therefore demands not only institutional reform but also the awakening of holistic consciousness.

In integrating scientific and spiritual insight the PNCP introduces the notion of Moral Resonance Theory, the idea that peace emerges when the vibrational field of human intention aligns with universal moral order (Kafinga, 2025, 2026b, 2026e). This resonates with the MPT-SST's synthesis between atomic humanity and divine spirituality, where the individual self becomes a microcosm of universal harmony. In this moral physics of peace, destructive conflict represents disharmony in the moral frequency of human consciousness; reconciliation is the re-synchronization of this frequency through truth and compassion.

3. The Positive-Negative Conflict Paradigm

3.1 Conflict as a Field of Moral and Social Tension

The PNCP conceptualizes conflict as a dynamic field of tension in which actors, values, identities, needs and structures encounter one another under conditions of disagreement or incompatibility (Kafinga, 2025, 2026a, 2026e). This field may generate destructive or constructive trajectories.

The paradigm rejects two opposing simplifications. The first is the assumption that all conflict is inherently destructive. The second is the romanticization of conflict as inherently emancipatory. Conflict is morally ambivalent. Its significance emerges through the interaction of intention, action, structure, relationship and consequence.

The central distinction is therefore between negative conflict orientation and positive conflict orientation. A negative conflict orientation is characterized by tendencies toward domination, dehumanization, revenge, exploitation, exclusion or the deliberate reproduction of unnecessary harm. This orientation is not defined solely by intensity, a quiet system of oppression may embody a destructive conflict orientation even in the absence of visible violence.

A positive conflict orientation is characterized by tendencies toward justice, accountability, recognition, dignity, correction and transformation while maintaining ethical constraints on the methods used to pursue these objectives (Kafinga, 2026a, 2026b, 2026d).

These orientations should not be treated as permanent identities. Individuals, groups and conflicts may move between them. The analytical task is therefore to assess the dominant orientation of a conflict at a given time while remaining attentive to the possibility of movement.

Within the MPT-SST framework this distinction is further deepened: positive conflict is understood as a struggle for justice, balance and freedom, a moral and spiritual struggle that aligns with divine order. Negative conflict by contrast represents deliberate harm driven by ego, oppression or domination, violating divine and natural order (Kafinga, 2025, 2026a, 2026e).

3.2 Negative Conflict Orientation

Negative conflict orientation emerges when the pursuit of power, security or group interests becomes detached from ethical concern for human dignity (Bandura, 1999; Arendt, 1963). Its manifestations may include dehumanization of opponents, indiscriminate violence targeting non-combatants, domination and exclusion as organizing principles, revenge as the primary motivation, deliberate humiliation and degradation of opponents, manipulation and exploitation of vulnerable populations, destruction of relationships beyond what is necessary to address legitimate grievances, reproduction of cycles of fear and retaliation, instrumentalization of identity differences to mobilize support for violence and rejection of the possibility of coexistence or reconciliation.

Negative conflict is not defined merely by intensity. A quiet system of oppression may embody a destructive conflict orientation even in the absence of visible violence. Similarly a highly contentious confrontation may not necessarily be negative if it is directed toward correction and governed by ethical restraint.

Signs of negative orientation escalation include increasingly absolute and totalizing language about opponents, rejection of dialogue or negotiation as weakness or betrayal, expansion of targets to include increasingly broad categories of enemy, justification of increasingly extreme means as necessary for survival or victory and erosion of internal ethical constraints and accountability mechanisms.

Within the MPT-SST framework negative conflict represents a deviation from divine order, a misalignment with the universal principles of justice, harmony and balance. It is characterized by the dominance of ego, greed and the will to power over the principles of love, justice and mutual recognition (Kafinga, 2025, 2026a, 2026e).

3.3 Positive Conflict Orientation

Positive conflict orientation refers to the constructive moral potential of disagreement and resistance (Kafinga, 2026a, 2026b, 2026d). It emerges when conflict is directed toward the correction of injustice, the protection of dignity, accountability, recognition or the transformation of harmful relationships and structures.

Its possible characteristics include principled resistance to injustice and oppression, ethical restraint in the selection and application of means, pursuit of accountability for wrongdoing,

recognition of the human dignity of opponents, openness to dialogue where dialogue is possible, willingness to transform harmful structures rather than simply capture them, refusal to equate disagreement with dehumanization, orientation toward repair, coexistence or constructive social change, maintenance of distinction between opponents and enemies and willingness to acknowledge one's own capacity for wrongdoing.

Positive conflict does not mean painless conflict. Constructive transformation may involve disruption, sacrifice and profound disagreement. The distinction lies not in whether conflict produces discomfort, but in whether its dominant trajectory moves toward greater destruction or toward ethically defensible transformation.

Signs of positive orientation development include increasing recognition of shared humanity with opponents, willingness to engage in dialogue and mutual learning, development of ethical guidelines governing conduct, distinction between legitimate targets and protected populations, willingness to acknowledge grievances on multiple sides and openness to compromise on means while maintaining principled objectives.

Within the MPT-SST framework positive conflict represents alignment with divine order, a struggle that restores balance, corrects injustice and heals fractured harmony. It is the pain that births order, the corrective tension that purifies, corrects and harmonizes human systems with higher truth (Kafinga, 2025, 2026a, 2026c).

3.4 The Moral Polarity Continuum

The PNCP posits that all conflict exists along a moral polarity continuum, where negative and positive energies coexist in dynamic tension (Kafinga, 2026c, 2026d, 2026e). The trajectory of a conflict toward either destruction or transformation depends on moral consciousness: the awareness and intentionality of the actors involved.

Conflicts dominated by Negative Conflict Energy lead to cycles of retaliation, systemic degradation and social fragmentation. Conflicts aligned with Positive Conflict Energy facilitate ethical reflection, empathy and cooperative resolution. Most real-world conflicts oscillate along this continuum, producing moments of both regression and breakthrough.

By conceptualizing conflict as a polarity rather than a binary, PNCP allows scholars and practitioners to perceive the moral architecture of human interaction, revealing opportunities for ethical intervention and conscious transformation.

3.5 Ethical and Spiritual Implications

The PNCP situates conflict within a moral-spiritual field, where human consciousness is both the generator and the mediator of outcomes (Kafinga, 2025, 2026a, 2026b). Ethical reflection, dialogue and restorative practices are not ancillary, they are central to the transformation of negative energy into positive energy. This framework aligns with the insights of spiritual traditions. Buddhism emphasizes mindfulness and compassion in transforming anger into understanding. Hinduism frames ethical struggle as the dharma-driven resolution of inner

conflict. Judaism, Christianity and Islam all value reconciliation, forgiveness and moral accountability as pathways to social and spiritual harmony.

In contemporary peacebuilding these spiritual insights converge with secular approaches such as Lederach's relational ethics, Hicks' dignity-based conflict resolution and Burton's human needs theory, forming a unified moral-ethical foundation for practical intervention (Lederach, 1997, 2005; Burton, 1990).

3.6 Conflict as Moral Teacher

The PNCP frames conflict as a sacred teacher (Kafinga, 2026a, 2026c, 2026e). It signals where human systems and individuals are out of alignment with justice, compassion and ethical order. By approaching conflict through this lens, recognition of moral energy acknowledges that conflict contains both positive and negative forces. Ethical intervention takes deliberate actions to nurture positive energy while mitigating destructive impulses. Transformation through moral resonance occurs when moral and spiritual awareness harmonizes the energies of conflict, creating sustainable reconciliation and holistic renewal (Kafinga, 2025, 2026a, 2026d).

This perspective shifts peacebuilding from mere dispute resolution to moral and spiritual engagement, encouraging actors to cultivate self-awareness, empathy and ethical intentionality.

4. Positive and Negative Coherence: A Moral Diagnostic Paradigm

4.1 The Distinction and Its Justification

A critical clarification within the coherence-based framework advanced in this paper is that coherence as a structural property of systems is not intrinsically good (Stern, 2003; Checkland, 1999). Coherence refers to the degree of alignment and integration among components within a system, but it does not in itself specify the moral orientation or consequences of that alignment. Systems can exhibit high internal coherence while producing destructive, exclusionary or harmful outcomes.

This distinction necessitates the introduction of a moral diagnostic paradigm based on the differentiation between positive coherence and negative coherence, evaluated through the Kafinga positive-negative hermeneutics (Kafinga, 2025, 2026a, 2026c). This hermeneutic approach, developed within the broader Unified Science of Peace metatheory, assesses systems, actions and meanings according to whether their functional consequences support or undermine conditions for human flourishing, relational repair, adaptive capacity and peace (Kafinga, 2026a, 2026b, 2026d).

Positive coherence refers to alignment that supports human flourishing, relational integrity, adaptive regulation and the capacity for repair and reintegration (Ryff, 1989). Positive coherence is evaluated in relation to conditions that sustain life, dignity, relational reciprocity and the reduction of systemic harm across affected populations, particularly the most vulnerable. It is characterized by openness to feedback, capacity for self-correction and compatibility with broader systemic well-being. In this form coherence is generative, enabling individuals and

systems to sustain stability while remaining responsive to changing conditions and ethical demands (Capra & Luisi, 2014).

Negative coherence by contrast is defined as internally consistent systemic alignment that stabilizes patterns of harm, domination, exclusion or distortion while resisting corrective feedback (Arendt, 1963). It occurs when beliefs, values, emotions and behaviors are tightly integrated around destructive orientations such as violence, exclusion, domination or self-deception. In such cases the system may exhibit stability and internal consistency, yet this stability is organized around distortion or harm. Negative coherence is often resistant to feedback, suppressing dissonance rather than integrating it, thereby reinforcing fragmentation at higher systemic levels (Festinger, 1957). This phenomenon has been examined in contexts of political violence and ideological entrenchment, where internal coherence within groups correlates with reduced capacity for moral responsiveness to out-group suffering (Stern, 2003; McCauley & Moskaleiko, 2008).

4.2 Refining the Concept: Agency and Category Distinction

A further refinement is necessary to avoid category errors in the application of the moral diagnostic paradigm (Hacking, 1999). The concept operates across two distinct modalities.

Negative Coherence as Systemic Pathology (Non-Agentic): In biological or mechanical systems negative coherence refers to internally coordinated functioning that undermines the integrity of the larger system. Cancer is a paradigmatic example: malignant cells exhibit high internal coherence (coordinated proliferation and resource allocation) but operate against the survival of the host organism (Hanahan & Weinberg, 2011). Here the diagnosis of negative is made from the perspective of the superordinate system (the body) and does not imply moral agency.

Negative Coherence as Ethical Distortion (Agentic): In human cognitive and social systems negative coherence involves conscious or semi-conscious agency. An extremist group for example achieves internal alignment (shared ideology and coordinated action) at the cost of external fragmentation and harm (McCauley & Moskaleiko, 2008). In this modality negative coherence carries an ethical dimension, as it involves choices, values and the capacity for self-reflection. The psychological mechanisms underlying such alignment including moral disengagement, ideological absorption and trauma-induced identity consolidation have been examined in depth within the trauma and terrorism literature (Kafinga, 2026c; McCauley & Moskaleiko, 2008; Volkan, 1997).

This distinction is critical. Conflating the two risks either anthropomorphizing biological processes or naturalizing ethical failures. The moral diagnostic paradigm therefore explicitly acknowledges that while the structural logic of coherence applies across scales, the normative evaluation must account for the presence or absence of agency, intentionality and the capacity for self-correction (Taylor, 1985).

4.3 The Epistemological Challenge: Who Diagnoses Coherence?

A further epistemological grounding is required to address the question: who determines whether a coherence is positive or negative? This is not merely a technical question but a matter of power

and perspective (Foucault, 1980). The moral diagnostic paradigm addresses this by anchoring the diagnostic process in the positive-negative hermeneutics, which evaluates systems based on their functional outcomes: human flourishing, relational repair, adaptive capacity and peace (Kafinga, 2025, 2026a, 2026e). However to avoid the imposition of a singular, potentially hegemonic, perspective, the diagnostic process must be pluralistic and participatory, open to falsification and multi-perspectival.

The determination of what constitutes flourishing or repair cannot be the sole purview of an external observer such as a researcher, a state or a global institution. Instead the framework mandates a participatory diagnostic, where affected stakeholders particularly those who have been marginalized or harmed are central to the evaluation (Freire, 1973). A coherence that produces order for a dominant group but fragmentation for a subjugated group is by this standard negative coherence, as it fails the criterion of relational repair and systemic well-being.

The designation of a coherence as positive is always provisional. A system that appears to support flourishing may later reveal hidden costs or externalities (Popper, 1963). The framework therefore incorporates a principle of fallibilism: claims to positive coherence must remain open to critique, revision and new evidence. This aligns with the earlier emphasis on openness to feedback as a hallmark of positive coherence.

The diagnostic process draws on multiple knowledge systems including empirical science, local and indigenous knowledge and ethical traditions to build a comprehensive picture of a system's impacts (Santos, 2014). A coherence that is internally consistent but systematically silences dissent or excludes certain voices is by definition operating in a mode of negative coherence, as it suppresses the feedback essential for adaptive integration. This participatory and multi-perspectival approach is consistent with methodological frameworks developed within the Unified Science of Peace (Kafinga, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c).

4.4 Transformation as Reorientation

Within this moral diagnostic paradigm moral transgression may be understood not only as incoherence but also in some cases as the emergence or stabilization of negative coherence (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004). For example repeated engagement in harmful behavior may initially produce dissonance, but over time through processes of rationalization and reinforcement the individual may reorganize into a state of internally coherent but ethically distorted functioning. This represents a transition from incoherence to negative coherence, a state that is often more resistant to change than initial misalignment (Vaisey, 2009). The role of trauma in accelerating or deepening such transitions has been documented in studies of radicalization and identity consolidation under threat (Kafinga, 2026c; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008; Volkan, 1997).

The process of transformation therefore is not merely the restoration of coherence but the reorientation of coherence toward positive alignment (Nussbaum, 2011). This involves reopening the system to feedback, reactivating dissonance as a signal and restructuring values, perceptions and behaviors toward integrative and life-supporting configurations. In this sense the goal of ethical development and peacebuilding is not coherence alone but positively oriented coherence, coherence that sustains both internal integration and external relational harmony

(Galtung, 1969, 1996). Prior work on moral injury, trauma recovery and peacebuilding has emphasized that such reorientation requires both individual psychological integration and transformation of the relational and structural contexts in which individuals are embedded (Kafinga, 2026c; Lederach, 1997; Volkan, 1997).

4.5 Illustrative Examples Across Domains

To render the moral diagnostic paradigm concrete, this section provides illustrative examples drawn from pathological (clinical) and historical (collective) contexts. These examples demonstrate how the distinction between positive and negative coherence operates across scales and informs both diagnosis and intervention.

4.5.1 Pathological Examples: Individual-Level Coherence

Positive Coherence: Therapeutic Integration

Consider a patient undergoing trauma-focused therapy for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) following childhood abuse. Initially the individual exhibits incoherence: dissociative symptoms, contradictory self-narratives ("I was loved" vs. "I was harmed"), emotional dysregulation and self-destructive behaviors (Kafinga, 2026c; Volkan, 1997). Through trauma-informed therapy the patient gradually integrates fragmented memories, develops coherent self-narrative, aligns actions with recovered values such as setting boundaries and seeking healthy relationships and achieves emotional regulation. This represents the emergence of positive coherence: alignment that supports flourishing, relational repair and adaptive regulation. The patient remains open to feedback, capable of self-correction and integrated across cognitive, emotional and behavioral domains.

Negative Coherence: Rationalized Self-Deception

Contrast this with a case of moral disengagement in a perpetrator of intimate partner violence. Initially the individual experiences incoherence: dissonance between self-image as a good partner and violent behaviors, accompanied by shame and distress [10]. Over time through rationalization ("she provoked me"), victim-blaming ("she deserved it"), minimization ("it was just a push") and identity consolidation within abusive peer groups, the individual achieves negative coherence. Beliefs, values, emotions and behaviors become tightly integrated around domination and control. The system exhibits internal consistency; the individual no longer experiences dissonance, yet this stability is organized around harm. The coherence is negative because it stabilizes patterns of abuse while resisting corrective feedback [11]. This transition from incoherence to negative coherence illustrates a core insight of the moral diagnostic paradigm: coherence alone is insufficient as a normative goal. The therapeutic task is not merely to restore coherence but to reorient it toward positive alignment [5][34][41].

4.5.2 Historical Examples: Collective-Level Coherence

Negative Coherence: The Crusades (1096-1291)

The Crusades represent a paradigmatic case of negative coherence at the civilizational level, a series of religiously-sanctioned military campaigns in which Latin Christendom achieved extraordinary internal alignment around intentions of conquest, forced conversion and territorial expansion that produced catastrophic human suffering across the Eastern Mediterranean, Europe and the Middle East (Riley-Smith, 2005). The Crusading movement achieved remarkable coherence across identity, structure and interaction over nearly four centuries.

The Crusades constructed a powerful identity framework that fused Christian religious identity with military violence. Pope Urban II's call at Clermont (1095) promised *remissio peccatorum* (remission of sins) for those who took the cross, framing holy war as salvific act (Asbridge, 2004). The ideology of *miles Christi* (soldier of Christ) transformed violence from sin to sacred duty (Tyerman, 2006). Anti-Muslim polemic and theological justification of holy war provided comprehensive ideological coherence (Tolan, 2002).

Papal authorization provided central legitimizing authority (Riley-Smith, 2005). Military orders including the Knights Templar, Knights Hospitaller and Teutonic Knights created permanent standing armies with monastic discipline and sophisticated logistical systems (Nicholson, 2001; France, 1994). The Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem established governance structures that sustained Crusader presence for nearly two centuries (Prawer, 1972).

The Crusades created sustained patterns of organized violence across European kingdoms (Tyerman, 2006). The Fourth Crusade's sack of Constantinople (1204) demonstrated how Crusading coherence could redirect against fellow Christians (Queller & Madden, 1997). The Albigensian Crusade (1209-1229) extended holy war to internal European enemies (Pegg, 2008).

The system was organized around catastrophic harm: massacre of Jerusalem's inhabitants in 1099, destruction of Jewish communities in the Rhineland massacres (1096), forced conversion of Baltic and Slavic peoples and long-term religious polarization (Chazan, 1996; Christiansen, 1997; Hillenbrand, 1999). The system was highly resistant to corrective feedback; repeated military failures were reinterpreted as divine testing rather than systemic critique (Riley-Smith, 2005). This represents negative coherence: internally consistent alignment that stabilized patterns of holy war and religious violence while resisting fundamental reorientation toward peace.

Positive Coherence: The Indian Independence Movement under Mahatma Gandhi (1915-1947)

The Indian independence movement particularly under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership exemplifies positive coherence at the collective level (Gandhi, 1927). The movement achieved alignment across identity, structure and interaction. Moral identity was constructed around *satyagraha* (truth-force), *ahimsa* (nonviolence) and *swaraj* (self-rule), values that unified diverse religious, caste and linguistic groups (Parel, 2006). Institutional mechanisms included the Indian

National Congress, ashrams as training grounds for disciplined nonviolent action, decentralized organizing structures and civil disobedience campaigns (Brown, 1989). Coordinated nonviolent resistance including boycotts, marches and strikes, mass mobilization, negotiation with colonial authorities and internal accountability mechanisms characterized the movement's interaction patterns (Dalton, 1993).

The system remained open to feedback, morally grounded and oriented toward collective liberation. Gandhi's willingness to suspend campaigns when violence erupted demonstrated the movement's commitment to nonviolent principles even under provocation (Guha, 2018). This represents positive coherence: alignment that supported moral resistance, adaptive strategy and collective liberation.

Negative Coherence: The Berlin Conference and the Scramble for Africa (1884-1885)

The Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 represents a paradigmatic case of negative coherence at the collective level, a moment when European powers achieved extraordinary internal alignment around intentions of exploitation, domination and extraction that systematically undermined human flourishing across the African continent (Pakenham, 1991). Between November 1884 and February 1885 representatives from fourteen European nations and the United States convened in Berlin under the ostensible purpose of regulating trade and navigation in the Congo Basin. In reality the conference formalized the Scramble for Africa, a coordinated process through which European powers partitioned the African continent among themselves without any African representation or consent (Hochschild, 1998).

The participating states achieved remarkable coherence across three dimensions. European nations constructed a shared identity around racial hierarchy, articulated through ideologies of the civilizing mission (*mission civilisatrice*), scientific racism and social Darwinism that positioned Europeans as superior and Africans as requiring subjugation (Said, 1978). The conference established institutional mechanisms including the Principle of Effective Occupation, notification requirements and free trade zones that coordinated European expansion while minimizing conflict among colonial powers (Craven, 2015). The conference created new patterns of interaction among European states: negotiation rather than war over African territory, collective legitimization of colonial claims and shared frameworks for managing exploitation (Mbembe, 2001).

The system achieved extraordinary internal coherence yet was organized around systematic harm: enslavement and forced labor, violent suppression of resistance, destruction of indigenous political and economic systems and resource extraction that enriched Europe while impoverishing Africa (Rodney, 1972). The Belgian Congo under King Leopold II exemplified the extreme consequences: an estimated ten million Congolese died from violence, disease and starvation (Hochschild, 1998). This represents negative coherence: internally consistent systemic alignment that stabilized patterns of harm while resisting corrective feedback.

Positive Coherence: The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1995-1998)

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), established in 1995 after the end of apartheid, exemplifies an institutional attempt to cultivate positive coherence at the societal level (Boraine, 2000). Following decades of systemic racial oppression characterized by profound social incoherence, laws contradicting human dignity, institutions organized around exclusion and deep fragmentation between racial groups, South Africa faced the challenge of national transition. The TRC process aimed to restore alignment across three dimensions.

Reimagining national identity from apartheid's racial hierarchy toward the Rainbow Nation ideal was articulated in the postamble to the Interim Constitution and embodied in Archbishop Desmond Tutu's leadership (Constitution of South Africa, 1993; Tutu, 1999). Establishing institutional mechanisms including the TRC itself, amnesty provisions and reparations committees designed to balance accountability with restorative justice characterized the structural dimension (Boraine, 2000). Creating public spaces for testimony, confession, forgiveness and symbolic repair enabled victims and perpetrators to engage across previously unbridgeable divides (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2003).

The TRC process was not without criticism; some argued it prioritized forgiveness over justice and its outcomes were incomplete (Mamdani, 2002). However it represented an intentional effort to cultivate positive coherence: alignment organized around relational repair, human dignity and the reduction of systemic harm. Its generative capacity is evidenced by South Africa's avoidance of large-scale civil war despite deeply entrenched division, a rare outcome in post-colonial transitions (Gibson, 2004).

Adaptive Negative Coherence: Jewish Communities in the Russian Pale of Settlement (Late 19th Century)

A more complex historical case involves adaptive negative coherence: systems that adopt internally consistent but exclusionary practices as defensive responses to existential threat. Consider the history of Jewish communities in the Russian Pale of Settlement during the late nineteenth century. Facing persistent pogroms, state-sponsored violence and legal discrimination, these communities developed highly cohesive internal structures: strict religious observance, endogamy, distinct dress and language and insular social networks (Bartal, 2005). This coherence was negative in its exclusionary effects, it reinforced boundaries between communities and sometimes hindered broader coalition-building, yet it was adaptive to conditions of extreme threat. As external conditions changed with emigration and political emancipation, many individuals and communities underwent transformation, reorienting coherence toward integration without assimilation.

This case illustrates a critical corollary: diagnosing negative coherence requires attention to the system-environment relation. Negative coherence that emerges as a survival adaptation may require transformation of external conditions before internal reorientation becomes possible (Kafinga, 2026c; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The moral diagnostic paradigm therefore does not simply condemn negative coherence but analyzes its etiology and context to inform appropriate intervention.

5. A Multi-Scale Coherence Model

5.1 Foundational Levels of Coherence

Building upon the foundational understanding of coherence outlined above, this study advances a multi-scale coherence model that situates the principle of coherence as a unifying thread across different levels of reality, ranging from physical matter to complex human societies (Wilber, 1995; Bohm, 1980). This model aligns with interdisciplinary scientific insights indicating that stability, functionality and persistence across systems depend on the coordinated interaction of constituent elements within structured relational frameworks (von Bertalanffy, 1968; Laszlo, 1972).

At the subatomic level coherence is expressed through the stable interaction of protons, neutrons and electrons, governed by fundamental forces such as the strong nuclear force and electromagnetic interaction (Krane, 1987). The stability of atoms depends on precise quantitative relationships, particularly the neutron-proton ratio and electron configuration. Disruptions at this level produce measurable instability such as radioactive decay, demonstrating that coherence must be balanced to sustain structure (Griffiths, 2017). The subatomic level is employed as a structural analogy rather than a direct causal model, highlighting isomorphic principles of stability rather than implying equivalence across domains.

At the biological level coherence manifests in the coordinated functioning of cells, tissues and organ systems. Biological organisms maintain internal stability through homeostatic regulation, a process by which physiological systems dynamically adjust to maintain equilibrium in response to internal and external changes (Cannon, 1932). For instance neural, endocrine and immune systems operate in an integrated manner and disruption in their coordination leads to disease states (Sterling, 2012). This indicates that life itself is sustained through multi-layered coherence across interacting subsystems.

At the cognitive level coherence emerges in the alignment between perception, cognition, emotion and behavior. Cognitive science demonstrates that individuals experience psychological stability when their beliefs, actions and emotional states are aligned, while misalignment produces cognitive dissonance, a measurable state of psychological tension (Festinger, 1957). Neurobiological studies further indicate that coherent brain activity including synchronized neural oscillations is associated with effective information processing and adaptive behavior (Fries, 2005). Thus coherence at the cognitive level directly influences individual stability and decision-making (Damasio, 1994).

At the social level coherence is expressed through the alignment of values, institutions and patterns of interaction within communities and societies. Social systems depend on shared norms, functional institutions and coordinated behaviors to maintain order and prevent conflict (Durkheim, 1897). Empirical research in sociology and political science shows that institutional breakdown, norm fragmentation and value polarization are key drivers of social instability and conflict (Putnam, 2000; Parsons, 1951). This reflects the same structural principle observed at lower levels, namely that imbalance in relational systems produces systemic disruption (Luhmann, 1995).

5.2 The Identity-Structure-Interaction Triad

Across these levels a consistent pattern emerges. Each system regardless of scale contains three fundamental dimensions: identity, structure and interaction (Giddens, 1984). At the subatomic level these correspond respectively to protons, neutrons and electrons. At the biological level they correspond to genetic identity, regulatory systems and metabolic interactions. At the cognitive level they correspond to belief systems, neural regulation and behavioral expression. At the social level they correspond to cultural values, institutional frameworks and social relations (Capra, 1996).

This structural continuity supports the formulation of a multi-scale coherence principle, which may be stated as follows: Systemic stability across all levels of reality depends on the balanced coherence of identity, structure and interaction within a given system (Morin, 2008). This principle provides a unifying analytical lens through which phenomena traditionally studied in isolation, physics, biology, psychology and sociology, can be understood as manifestations of a shared underlying logic of organization (Ostrom, 2005). This multi-scale approach is a central component of the Unified Science of Peace metatheory (Kafinga, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c).

5.3 Mechanisms of Cross-Scale Interaction

A key advancement in this model is the specification of mechanisms by which coherence (or incoherence) propagates across scales (Bhaskar, 1975). This addresses a common limitation in multi-scale frameworks: the risk of merely asserting analogy without demonstrating causal or constitutive connection. The model identifies three primary mechanisms.

Constitutive emergence: Higher-level systems such as cognitive and social are constituted by lower-level systems such as neural and biological, but possess emergent properties that are not reducible to them (Siegel, 2012). Incoherence at a lower level such as chronic neurochemical dysregulation can constrain the possibilities for coherence at a higher level such as impairing the capacity for value-behavior alignment. Conversely positive coherence at a higher level such as a supportive social environment can scaffold the development of coherence at lower levels such as promoting neural integration through secure attachment (Bateson, 1972).

Feedback loops and circular causation: Coherence is maintained through recursive feedback. A disruption at the social level such as institutional collapse generates distress at the cognitive level such as anxiety and identity fragmentation, which in turn can lead to behaviors such as withdrawal or aggression that further erode social cohesion (Meadows, 2008). This circular causation means that intervention at any level can have cascading effects, but also that systems can become locked into reinforcing cycles of negative coherence (Hofstadter, 1979).

Structural isomorphism: The model does not claim that the content of identity, structure and interaction is the same across scales, but rather that the relational logic is isomorphic (Holling, 1973). This isomorphism allows for the transfer of analytical tools and insights across domains. For instance the principles of homeostatic regulation in biology can inform our understanding of institutional resilience in sociology, not because institutions are alive, but because both systems

face the same functional challenge: maintaining stability in the face of perturbation (Capra & Luisi, 2014).

5.4 Incorporating External Context and System-Environment Relations

No system exists in isolation. A significant enhancement to the multi-scale model is the explicit integration of system-environment relations (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Incoherence is not solely a function of internal misalignment; it often arises from or is exacerbated by external pressures (Farmer, 2004). The model therefore distinguishes between endogenous incoherence, exogenous disruption and adaptive negative coherence.

Endogenous incoherence refers to fragmentation arising from internal contradictions, such as a conflict between stated values and actual behaviors within an individual or institution (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Exogenous disruption refers to incoherence imposed by external forces, such as colonialism dismantling indigenous governance structures (a social-level disruption) or chronic stress from structural violence such as poverty or racism leading to cognitive and biological dysregulation (Marmot, 2004).

Adaptive negative coherence is a crucial phenomenon where a system adopts negative coherence as a defensive adaptation to a hostile external environment (Hirschman, 1970). A community under siege may develop highly cohesive but exclusionary practices (negative coherence at the inter-group level) as a survival mechanism. In such cases the negative coherence is a response to external incoherence or threat. This reframes intervention: restoring positive coherence in such contexts requires not only internal transformation but also addressing the external conditions that made negative coherence adaptive in the first place (Sen, 1999). The interplay between trauma, threat perception and the consolidation of rigid identity structures has been extensively examined in the context of political violence and terrorism (Kafinga, 2026c; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008; Volkan, 1997).

5.5 Multi-Scale Application of the Moral Diagnostic Paradigm

The distinction between positive and negative coherence, as articulated within the moral diagnostic paradigm, remains applicable across all scales now with greater precision. The following summary presents the application of this diagnostic framework across scales.

At the subatomic level positive coherence is exemplified by stable atomic configuration while negative coherence is exemplified by radioactive decay or nuclear instability. The key diagnostic question is whether the configuration sustains structural integrity (Krane, 1987; Griffiths, 2017). At the biological level positive coherence is exemplified by homeostatic regulation and healthy cell function while negative coherence is exemplified by cancer or autoimmune disorder. The key diagnostic question is whether the subsystem serves the integrity of the whole organism (Cannon, 1932; Sterling, 2012; Hanahan & Weinberg, 2011). At the cognitive level positive coherence is exemplified by value-behavior alignment and adaptive self-regulation while negative coherence is exemplified by rationalized self-deception and rigid ideology. The key diagnostic question is whether the individual maintains openness to learning and relational connection (Festinger, 1957; Fries, 2005; Damasio, 1994). At the social level positive coherence

is exemplified by just institutions, inclusive norms and relational repair while negative coherence is exemplified by extremist groups, authoritarianism and systemic oppression. The key diagnostic question is whether the social arrangement promotes flourishing for all members particularly the most vulnerable (Durkheim, 1897; Putnam, 2000; Parsons, 1951; Luhmann, 1995).

This summary illustrates that coherence alone is insufficient as a normative criterion; its quality and orientation must be assessed within its specific scale and context, using diagnostic questions tailored to the nature of the system (Collier, 1994). The moral diagnostic paradigm thus provides a structured approach for such assessment.

6. Historical Illustrations: Positive and Negative Conflict Across Contexts

Positive conflict has been the engine of social progress throughout history. Across continents and epochs it has awakened moral consciousness and shaped modern societies. The following historical illustrations demonstrate how conflict when guided by moral principle can generate constructive transformation. Conversely these examples also illustrate how conflict when driven by destructive impulses can generate catastrophic harm.

6.1 American Revolution (1775-1783)

A classic case of positive conflict was the American colonies' resistance against British taxation without representation. This was a principled struggle for political autonomy and human dignity (Wood, 1992). The result was the birth of democratic governance and the foundation of modern constitutional rights.

PNCP Analysis:

The moral orientation was toward justice, self-determination and political autonomy. The means of engagement involved principled resistance, political mobilization and armed struggle within ethical constraints. The object of transformation was colonial structures of domination. Relational consequences included the creation of new political relationships based on consent and representation. Transformative outcomes included democratic governance, constitutional rights and inspiration for subsequent anti-colonial movements.

The American Revolution demonstrates that conflict directed toward the transformation of unjust political structures can generate lasting positive outcomes. However the revolution also had limitations including the preservation of slavery and the exclusion of women and indigenous peoples from the new democratic framework, highlighting that even positive conflicts may contain unresolved contradictions that require continued transformation.

6.2 Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement (1950s-1960s)

A profound example of moral, nonviolent positive conflict. King's dream of equality transformed American society by confronting systemic racism through peaceful resistance (Branch, 2011; King, 1963). The conflict was painful but it realigned national conscience toward justice.

PNCP Analysis:

The moral orientation was toward justice, dignity, love and equality. The means of engagement were nonviolent resistance, civil disobedience, moral suasion and legal challenges. The object of transformation was racist structures and institutions. Relational consequences included recognition of shared humanity across racial lines. Transformative outcomes included the Civil Rights Act (1964), Voting Rights Act (1965) and ongoing social transformation.

The movement was explicitly grounded in moral principles and the recognition of shared humanity. King's emphasis on nonviolence and the beloved community demonstrated that conflict could be directed toward justice while maintaining ethical constraints on methods. The movement's openness to feedback, adapting strategies based on conditions and responding to criticism, exemplifies positive coherence.

6.3 African Independence Movements (20th Century)

Nations like Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria achieved freedom through organized, morally justified resistance to colonial oppression (Nkrumah, 1957). Leaders like Kwame Nkrumah and Jomo Kenyatta embodied positive conflict by challenging imperial structures through strategic mobilization not vengeance.

PNCP Analysis:

The moral orientation was toward self-determination, dignity and liberation. The means of engagement involved strategic resistance, political mobilization and negotiation. The object of transformation was colonial structures of domination and exploitation. Relational consequences included creation of new national relationships and Pan-African solidarity. Transformative outcomes included political independence, self-governance and inspiration for decolonization.

These movements were oriented toward self-determination and dignity, employed strategic resistance rather than indiscriminate violence, sought transformation of colonial structures, created new national relationships and produced independence and self-governance. However the legacy of colonialism continued to affect post-independence governance, demonstrating the need for sustained transformation across multiple dimensions.

6.4 South African Anti-Apartheid Struggle

Nelson Mandela's leadership represents positive conflict par excellence, resistance that sought racial equality and reconciliation not revenge (Mandela, 1994; Sampson, 1999). The transformation from apartheid to democracy was not merely political but deeply moral and spiritual.

PNCP Analysis:

The moral orientation was toward justice, reconciliation and equality. The means of engagement involved resistance, negotiation and truth-telling. The object of transformation was apartheid structures of racial oppression. Relational consequences included recognition, accountability and repair through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Transformative outcomes included democratic governance, constitutional protections and racial reconciliation.

The movement was oriented toward justice and reconciliation, employed both resistance and negotiation, sought transformation of apartheid structures, created conditions for recognition and repair through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and produced democratic governance and constitutional protections. The TRC process in particular exemplifies an institutional attempt to cultivate positive coherence at the societal level.

6.5 #EndSARS Movement (Nigeria, 2020)

A modern illustration of youth-led positive conflict, rooted in ethical defiance against police brutality, reawakened civic consciousness and reshaped national discourse on justice and governance (Omilusi, 2021).

PNCP Analysis:

The moral orientation was toward accountability, protection of dignity and justice. The means of engagement were peaceful protest, social media mobilization and public advocacy. The object of transformation was police reform and institutional accountability. Relational consequences included solidarity among participants and intensified conflict with state institutions. Transformative outcomes included public awareness, pressure for reform and demonstration of civic agency.

The movement demonstrated constructive potential through civic engagement, solidarity and demands for accountability. However it also faced challenges including vulnerability to co-optation, violent repression and criminal infiltration. The case supports the PNCP's continuum approach: legitimate grievances and constructive potential coexisted with destructive dynamics.

6.6 Black Lives Matter (USA, 2013-Present)

Though controversial in its expressions, the Black Lives Matter movement symbolizes a constructive moral confrontation with systemic injustice (Taylor, 2016). Sparked by recurring police brutality and racial discrimination, it gained global attention after the tragic death of George Floyd in 2020, whose dying words "I can't breathe" became a universal cry for human dignity (BBC News, 2020).

PNCP Analysis:

The moral orientation was toward justice, dignity and recognition of human worth. The means of engagement were peaceful protest, advocacy, social media mobilization and legal challenges.

The object of transformation was racist structures, policing practices and systemic inequality. Relational consequences included increased racial awareness, solidarity and resistance. Transformative outcomes included policy reforms, public dialogue and ongoing advocacy.

In metaphysical terms this movement represents the soul's cry against dehumanization, the struggle to reassert the divine breath within a suffocating moral order. The movement has generated significant policy reforms and public awareness while facing challenges including criticism of its tactics and internal debates about strategy.

6.7 Kenyan Gen Z Youth Movement (2024-2025)

A contemporary manifestation of positive conflict is evident in the recent Gen Z-led youth movement in Kenya opposing the Finance Bill 2024 (DW News, 2024; Citizen Digital, 2024). The bill introduced harsh tax reforms that disproportionately affected ordinary citizens, igniting widespread peaceful protests across the nation. Through digital mobilisation on platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), TikTok and Instagram, Kenyan youth coordinated non-violent demonstrations under hashtags like #RejectFinanceBill2024 and #RutoMustGo. Although several clashes erupted, the movement's dominant tone remained non-violent and justice-oriented, driven by moral outrage rather than political manipulation. Eventually the government bowed to public pressure, scaling back more than 90 percent of the proposed tax increases and pledging further consultation.

PNCP Analysis:

The moral orientation was toward justice, accountability and civic participation. The means of engagement were nonviolent protest, digital mobilization and public advocacy. The object of transformation was unjust tax policy and governance accountability. Relational consequences included generational solidarity, civic engagement and intensified conflict with state. Transformative outcomes included policy reversal, public awareness and demonstration of civic agency.

This uprising embodies what the MPT-SST framework conceptualises as positive conflict, a struggle not for destruction but for correction, not for chaos but for transformation (Kafinga, 2025, 2026a, 2026c). Like earlier liberation movements the Kenyan Gen Z protests channelled discontent into collective moral action, transforming resistance into reform and thereby reaffirming the possibility of peace through principled confrontation.

6.8 Comparative Analysis and Synthesis

Across all examples a consistent pattern emerges. The American Revolution, Civil Rights Movement, African Independence Movements, South African Anti-Apartheid Struggle, #EndSARS, Black Lives Matter and Kenyan Gen Z Movement all demonstrate positive conflict orientation with varying degrees of success and challenge.

Key lessons include that legitimate grievances do not guarantee constructive conduct, constructive movements may contain destructive elements, destructive conflicts may create

opportunities for transformation, context and power dynamics and institutional conditions significantly influence conflict orientation, psychological and emotional dimensions shape whether conflicts move toward destruction or construction, and positive conflict can generate lasting social transformation when guided by moral principle and ethical restraint (Kafinga, 2025, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c, 2026d, 2026e).

7. Implications for Peacebuilding and Human Transformation

The Positive-Negative Conflict Paradigm extends beyond theoretical analysis, providing a practical blueprint for personal, social and structural transformation. By conceptualizing conflict as a moral polarity and coherence as a diagnostic criterion, PNCP illuminates pathways through which negative energies can be consciously transmuted into constructive forces that foster sustainable peace.

7.1 Peacebuilding Should Not Suppress All Conflict

A central implication of the PNCP is that peacebuilding should distinguish between destructive conflict and legitimate disagreement (Kafinga, 2025, 2026a, 2026c). Suppressing dissent may create temporary stability while preserving injustice. Peacebuilders and policymakers should therefore create institutions through which grievances can be expressed and transformed constructively.

Implications include distinguishing between conflict (disagreement, grievance and resistance) and violence (physical harm, coercion and domination), creating institutions and mechanisms for expression of grievances, protecting rights of assembly, speech and participation, addressing root causes of grievances rather than only symptoms and recognizing that constructive conflict may challenge power structures and create discomfort.

Risks of suppressing all conflict include injustice preserved and normalized, grievances driven underground and intensified, violence becoming the only available expression of grievance, sustainable peace undermined by unresolved injustice and stability achieved at the cost of dignity and justice.

7.2 Personal Transformation

Within the MPT-SST Universal Synthesis, PNCP operationalizes transformation, showing how conscious moral engagement converts destructive tendencies into constructive action [3][4][6]. At the individual level the PNCP frames conflict as a mirror of moral consciousness. Each conflict presents an opportunity for self-reflection, ethical assessment and spiritual growth. Practical strategies include reflective dialogue: journaling, meditation or guided reflection to recognize destructive tendencies and moral responsibility. Ethical decision-making consciously chooses constructive responses over reactive behaviors. Spiritual alignment through practices such as mindfulness, prayer or moral contemplation cultivates inner harmony and resilience. Through these practices the individual transforms conflict from a source of stress and fragmentation into a catalyst for self-actualization and moral awakening.

7.3 Relational and Community Transformation

Within the MPT-SST Universal Synthesis, PNCP operationalizes transformation, showing how conscious moral engagement converts destructive tendencies into constructive action (Kafinga, 2026a, 2026b, 2026d). At the individual level the PNCP frames conflict as a mirror of moral consciousness. Each conflict presents an opportunity for self-reflection, ethical assessment and spiritual growth.

Practical strategies include reflective dialogue: journaling, meditation or guided reflection to recognize destructive tendencies and moral responsibility. Ethical decision-making consciously chooses constructive responses over reactive behaviors. Spiritual alignment through practices such as mindfulness, prayer or moral contemplation cultivates inner harmony and resilience.

Through these practices the individual transforms conflict from a source of stress and fragmentation into a catalyst for self-actualization and moral awakening.

7.4 Structural and Institutional Implications

At the systemic level PNCP informs policy-making, governance and organizational design (Kafinga, 2025, 2026a, 2026e). Negative conflict energy at this level can manifest as institutional corruption, bureaucratic inertia or social injustice, whereas positive energy can drive equitable policies, participatory governance and ethical leadership.

Key structural strategies include ethically informed policy frameworks ensuring legislation and regulations promote justice, equity and human dignity. Participatory governance creates platforms for moral dialogue between citizens, institutions and policymakers. Conflict-sensitive organizational culture encourages moral awareness, accountability and constructive engagement within institutions.

Such interventions operationalize PNCP's principle that sustainable peace emerges from alignment of moral intention with systemic structures. Institutions thus become facilitators of moral resonance, translating ethical insight into tangible societal transformation.

7.5 Ecological and Global Implications

PNCP also extends to environmental and global conflict, recognizing that human moral consciousness shapes our relationship with the natural world (Kafinga, 2026a, 2026c, 2026d). Negative energy at this scale manifests as ecological degradation, resource exploitation and environmental injustice. Positive conflict energy motivates stewardship, restoration and collaborative solutions.

Applications include community-based environmental initiatives such as tree planting, pollution control and sustainable resource management. Ethical climate policies integrate moral responsibility for future generations into legislation and corporate governance. Global moral dialogue encourages cross-cultural, transnational collaboration to address conflicts arising from migration, resource scarcity and climate change. By extending the moral polarity lens to

ecological and global systems, PNCP aligns human ethical development with planetary wellbeing, demonstrating that peace is inseparable from moral responsibility at all scales.

7.6 Peace Education and Moral Discernment

Peace education should move beyond teaching students that conflict is inherently bad (Kafinga, 2025, 2026a, 2026b). Learners should develop the ability to distinguish disagreement from violence, resistance from revenge, accountability from humiliation, transformation from domination, constructive confrontation from destructive escalation, legitimate grievance from illegitimate conduct, moral alignment from moral deviation and positive coherence from negative coherence.

Components of peace education for moral discernment include critical thinking about conflict narratives and moral claims, dialogue and perspective-taking across difference, ethical reasoning about means and ends, historical analysis of constructive and destructive conflicts, emotional literacy and capacity for constructive engagement, development of nonviolent resistance skills, understanding of power, privilege and structural inequality, spiritual and moral formation and systems thinking about cross-scale coherence.

7.7 Power-Sensitive Peacebuilding

Given the importance of power asymmetries, peacebuilding must be power-sensitive (Richmond, 2014; Chandler, 2010; Sabaratnam, 2017). Recognizing that power asymmetries shape conflict dynamics and peacebuilding possibilities is essential. Addressing not only symptoms but also power relations supports the empowerment of marginalized groups. Creating conditions for more equitable participation recognizes that peacebuilding is not neutral, it may reproduce or challenge power structures.

Power-sensitive strategies include inclusive participation in peace processes, attention to historically marginalized voices and perspectives, redistributive economic and social policies, institutional reforms that address power asymmetries and accountability mechanisms that apply equally to powerful and powerless actors.

7.8 Psychological and Psychosocial Support

Given the importance of psychological and emotional dimensions, peacebuilding should incorporate psychological and psychosocial support (Bar-Tal, 2013; Volkan, 1997; Kafinga, 2026c). Trauma healing and psychosocial support address collective victimhood while acknowledging others' suffering. Narrative transformation and perspective-taking develop emotional literacy and capacity for constructive engagement. Reconciliation processes address psychological dimensions through dialogue that builds empathy and recognition, truth-telling and acknowledgment and restorative practices that address emotional dimensions of conflict.

Key approaches include trauma-informed peacebuilding, psychosocial support for individuals and communities, dialogues that build empathy and recognition, truth-telling and

acknowledgment that address psychological needs and restorative practices that address emotional dimensions of conflict.

7.9 Contextual and Culturally Appropriate Peacebuilding

Given the importance of context and culture, peacebuilding should be contextual and culturally appropriate (Santos, 2014; Mbembe, 2001). Recognizing that moral frameworks are not culturally neutral engages with local and indigenous peacebuilding approaches. Adapting diagnostic dimensions to cultural context addresses historical and structural conditions. Supporting local agency and ownership of peacebuilding ensures culturally appropriate interventions.

Key considerations include local understandings of justice, dignity and appropriate conduct, indigenous peacebuilding practices and institutions, historical context and patterns of oppression, cultural diversity and pluralism in peacebuilding approaches and local ownership and participation in peace processes.

7.10 Integrating Science, Ethics and Spirituality

A distinguishing feature of PNCP is its holistic synthesis of empirical, ethical and spiritual dimensions (Kafinga, 2025, 2026a, 2026e). Peacebuilding is not only a matter of negotiation or structural reform but also of conscious moral cultivation. This integration supports empirical assessment measuring conflict patterns, human needs and systemic conditions, ethical deliberation applying moral principles to guide interventions and policy, and spiritual engagement fostering inner awareness, compassion and ethical resonance that sustain positive transformation.

Through this triadic approach PNCP demonstrates that human transformation is both practical and transcendental, connecting micro-level individual growth with macro-level societal and ecological renewal.

8. Conclusion: The Moral Diagnostic Paradigm as a Unifying Framework for Peace

The Positive-Negative Conflict Paradigm offers a moral-transformative approach to understanding the relationship between conflict and peace (Kafinga, 2025, 2026a, 2026b). Its central proposition is that conflict is neither inherently destructive nor inherently constructive. Conflict is a dynamic field of moral and social tension whose trajectory is influenced by consciousness, ethical orientation, methods of engagement, institutional conditions, power dynamics, psychological dimensions, spiritual orientation, contextual factors and human agency (Kafinga, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c, 2026d, 2026e).

The integration of insights from the moral diagnostic paradigm into the Unified Science of Peace significantly expands its theoretical depth (Kafinga, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c). It situates peace not merely as a social or political condition but as a manifestation of balanced, positively-oriented coherence within complex, multi-layered systems (Lederach, 1997; Wilber, 1995). Conflict in this context is reinterpreted as a form of systemic imbalance or incoherence that may originate

at any level and propagate across scales through the mechanisms of emergence, feedback and structural isomorphism (Galtung, 1969, 1996; Capra & Luisi, 2014).

The paradigm distinguishes between destructive and constructive orientations without reducing complex conflicts to fixed moral categories. Conflicts may contain both tendencies and may move along a continuum. A legitimate struggle may become destructive through unethical methods. A painful confrontation may become constructive when it contributes to justice, accountability, dignity and social transformation (Kafinga, 2026a, 2026b, 2026d).

The analytical contribution of the PNCP is expressed through the moral diagnostic paradigm's focus on coherence orientation. By evaluating whether systems and conflicts exhibit positive coherence (supporting flourishing, repair and adaptive regulation) or negative coherence (stabilizing harm, domination and exclusion), the framework provides a more systematic basis for assessing conflict dynamics and designing appropriate interventions (Kafinga, 2026c, 2026e; Arendt, 1963).

Thus, peacebuilding from the perspective of the moral diagnostic paradigm requires interventions that diagnose the nature of coherence (positive or negative) across relevant scales using a participatory, fallibilistic and multi-perspectival approach (Kafinga, 2025, 2026a, 2026c). It must address both endogenous incoherence and exogenous disruptions, recognizing that negative coherence may be an adaptive response to unjust or threatening external conditions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Farmer, 2004). It should restore alignment across identity, structure and interaction within and between systems, working simultaneously at cognitive, relational, institutional and structural levels (Giddens, 1984; Capra, 1996; Morin, 2008). And it must reorient coherence from negative to positive by reopening systems to feedback, reactivating productive dissonance and restructuring values, perceptions and behaviors toward integrative and life-supporting configurations (Kafinga, 2026c; Nussbaum, 2011; Volkan, 1997).

By addressing coherence holistically across scales and with a rigorous ethical and epistemological framework grounded in the moral diagnostic paradigm, more sustainable and resilient forms of peace can be achieved (Lederach, 1997, 2005; Burton, 1990). The multi-scale coherence model refined with mechanisms of cross-scale interaction and a robust diagnostic paradigm offers a powerful conceptual toolkit for both analyzing the roots of conflict and designing interventions that support authentic, lasting human flourishing (Collier, 1994; Schirch, 2013).

This study advances the claim that peace is not merely the absence of conflict but the presence of positively-oriented coherence across interacting systems (Kafinga, 2025, 2026a, 2026b). As such the moral diagnostic paradigm provides not only an analytical tool but a unifying scientific and ethical framework for understanding and cultivating sustainable peace in complex human societies. This framework builds upon and extends the Unified Science of Peace metatheory (Kafinga, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c), contributing a coherence-based diagnostic paradigm that operationalizes the metatheoretical principles for application across multiple scales of analysis.

Situated within the broader architecture of the Unified Science of Peace and the Metaphysical Peace Transformation and Spiritual Synthesis Theory, the paradigm emphasizes the interaction

among consciousness, ethics, spirituality and social structure (Kafinga, 2025, 2026a, 2026e). Sustainable peace cannot be understood exclusively as an institutional achievement or an internal psychological condition. It emerges through the interaction of moral awareness, ethical action, spiritual alignment, transformed relationships and structures capable of supporting justice and human dignity (Kafinga, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c, 2026d).

The practical implication is equally important. Peacebuilding should not seek to eliminate all conflict. A society without visible conflict may still contain fear, exclusion and structural injustice (Galtung, 1969, 1996). The objective of sustainable peace is therefore not silence. It is the development of social conditions in which disagreement, grievance and moral resistance can be expressed without systematic dehumanization and transformed without reproducing cycles of destruction (Lederach, 1997, 2005).

Conflict may destroy but it may also reveal injustice, expose moral contradictions and generate opportunities for transformation. Within the MPT-SST framework positive conflict is understood as the struggle that restores balance, corrects injustice and heals fractured harmony. It is the pain that births order, the corrective tension that purifies, corrects and harmonizes human systems with higher truth (Kafinga, 2025, 2026a, 2026e).

The central challenge is therefore not simply whether conflict exists. It is what human beings do within conflict, how they relate to one another, whether they attend to power asymmetries and psychological dimensions, whether they align with spiritual principles of justice and harmony, and whether the tension generated by disagreement is directed toward degradation or toward a more just and sustainable peace (Kafinga, 2026c; Bar-Tal, 2013; Volkan, 1997).

By integrating empirical research, ethical reasoning and spiritual consciousness, PNCP within the MPT-SST framework provides a holistic, academically rigorous and visionary pathway for sustainable peace (Kafinga, 2025, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c, 2026d, 2026e). It calls for a new moral consciousness in peace studies, where conflict is embraced as a moral teacher and transformative catalyst guiding humanity toward ethical, relational and spiritual harmony.

In the words of this paradigm and with this conceptual justification of the PNCP within the MPT-SST Universal Synthesis:

Peace is not merely the absence of conflict, but the resonance of divine moral order within all existence. (Kafinga, 2025, p. 8)

This definition provides the conceptual foundation for the typology of Positive Conflict and Negative Conflict, demonstrating that every conflict contains both destructive and constructive moral energies. Understanding and engaging these energies intentionally allows individuals, communities and systems to transform negative potential into positive, ethical and sustainable outcomes, operationalizing the principles of the MPT-SST Universal Synthesis (Kafinga, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c, 2026d, 2026e).

Ultimately the PNCP calls for a new moral and spiritual consciousness in peace studies. It challenges scholars and practitioners to reconceive conflict not as a failure of human society but

as a necessary and sacred process through which ethical awareness, social harmony and spiritual insight are realized. By embracing conflict as a moral teacher and transformative catalyst, humanity can cultivate sustainable peace that is both structurally just and spiritually resonant.

Future research should focus on empirical operationalization of the moral diagnostic paradigm, development of intervention protocols that target cross-scale mechanisms and case study applications in diverse conflict-affected contexts to validate and refine the model's predictive and prescriptive capacities (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The paradigm is offered as a conceptual framework open to refinement, critique and empirical evaluation.

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Essay: Traditional Approaches to Conflict Resolution in the Balikumbat and Ndop Subdivisions of Cameroon

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TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE BALIKUMBAT AND NDOP SUBDIVISIONS OF CAMEROON

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Abstract

This paper investigates traditional conflict resolution methods between Balikumbat and neighboring chiefdoms. Rooted in the pre-colonial and colonial eras, inter-ethnic conflicts in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions of Cameroon intensified in the 1960s. This was driven by rapid population growth and a rising demand for arable land. Their adverse consequences on the affected populations attracted great attention as a multitude of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms were used in efforts to diffuse tensions and restore lasting peace. To realize this research, data was primarily acquired through the qualitative research method. For our findings, 25 persons who actively or passively participated in the resolution efforts were selected and interviewed with the help of question guides. The results of our findings established that traditional methods were particularly important because in the few instances where they were used, they provided opportunities for reconciliation contrarily to modern methods which proposed solutions but failed to restore lasting peace. We conclude that for lasting peace to be

possible, traditional methods of conflict resolution could be encouraged to ensure a more effective and participatory process that involves traditional institutions and approaches in the resolution of conflicts.

1. INTRODUCTION

The African continent is endowed with a rich cultural heritage and a wide variety of customs and traditions. Traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution embedded in these customs and traditions were particularly important in the resolution of conflicts within or between different countries and communities (Austine & Justus, 2023). In the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions of Cameroon in particular where culture is still deeply rooted in the lives of the people, effective local conflict resolution mechanisms were developed. The effectiveness of these methods played a significant role in the restitution of peace despite the little recognition accorded these mechanisms by the State. Balikumbat and neighboring chiefdoms which have had their own fair share of inter-ethnic conflicts developed traditional conflict resolution mechanisms which either prevented conflicts from escalating or prevented the resumption of violence after a period of calm. During the many conflicts that plagued these villages, these mechanisms continued to demonstrate their importance, especially in situations where the state failed in its primary duty of maintaining peace and security. In effect, traditional authorities act as intermediaries between the administration and their people. The exercise of legitimate authority embedded in the values and customs of the people enable them to maintain public order and effectively resolve conflicts (Tinoh, 2026). As such, thanks to traditional socio-political institutions in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions such as the *fon* (traditional head of the village and commonly used in the North West region of Cameroon), traditional councils, secret societies and cultural associations, diverse indigenous methods were used in the resolution of conflicts.

1.1. Definition of Key Terms

1.1.1. Conflict

The term Conflict is a derivation from the Latin word “*conflictus*” which means strike together (Mishra, 2015). It is a clash between one or more parties who have common interests and who get into competition to ensure that these interests are realized and protected. Such conflicts may manifest through, actions or behaviors, or remain latent in which case it remains dormant for some time (Miller, 2005). We also talk of conflicts when individuals or communities, struggle over power, scarce resources and values with the opposing factions ready to do everything within their power to achieve their aims including neutralizing or even eliminating rivals (Mccandless & Karbo, 2011).

Such conflicts were rampant in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions of Cameroon as ethnic groups such as Balikumbat and Bafanji were always at loggerheads. The incompatible goals pursued by these *fondoms* (villages headed by *fons*) over important economic assets such as arable land was a principal source of tensions. This often led to confrontations with notable examples being the 1995 and 1998 conflicts between Balikumbat and Bafanji and the Balikumbat-Bambalang conflict of March 2011.

1.1.2. Conflict Resolution

Nancy Peterson (2007) defines conflict resolution as a process of permanently bringing a dispute or conflict to an end by ensuring that the interests of the disputing parties are taken into consideration, and adequately addressed which paves the way for mutual satisfaction. Conflict resolution is the process of finding solutions to conflicts that are embraced by both parties to achieve peaceful co-existence. This is possible when the parties in dispute understand each other's position accurately and above all, when they are willing to discuss it because they want to resolve the conflict regardless of their disagreement (Eshankeh, 2004).

Conflict resolution practices differ from place to place, and from continent to continent depending on the type of conflicts, context and immediate physical and socio-cultural environment of the people. This accounts for the different methods of conflict resolution since a method that works in resolving a dispute may not necessarily meet the same success if it is applied to another case and under different circumstances. An approach can be defined as the specific manner of dealing with something or someone or how one thinks about something (Oxford University Press, 2026). Consequently, while we talk of traditional methods of conflict resolution in most African communities including the different ethnic groups in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions of Cameroon, the use of modern methods has gathered momentum and has come to undermine the important place that was hitherto held by these traditional conflict resolution systems.

Traditional simply means, "being part of the beliefs, customs or way of life of a particular group of people that have not changed for a long time" (Oxford University Press, 2026). Traditional methods of conflict resolution therefore refer to the use of methods that make up part of the practices and shared local belief systems in resolving differences by embedding them into conflict resolution processes. Bukari (2013) is of the opinion that these local conflict resolution mechanisms have social, economic, cultural and religious-spiritual dimensions that are deeply intertwined with the traditions, customs and related world views of a people with a strong influence on different aspects of societal life.

Endogenous conflict handling mechanisms therefore refer to those methods used in the resolution of conflicts taking into consideration the cultural context of the people (Mutisi, 2009). These traditional methods are known by various names; endogenous methods, indigenous knowledge systems or local mechanisms and are common on the African continent as the people have remained attached to their customs and traditions, despite increasing acculturation and its adverse effects. Traditional methods of conflict resolution are considered healing processes in which all stake holders contribute positive energy. They make up part of the African culture and values and instill confidence in the people who trust and identify themselves with them. Such traditional methods used local actors and institutions in the mediation and negotiation of conflicts between Balikumbat and her neighbors. This explains why the use of these terms on the traditional basis and in the context of this work is referred to as local negotiation and local mediation.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

To evaluate the role, effectiveness and challenges of local negotiation and mediation mechanisms in resolving conflicts in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions

To analyze the role of "avoidance" as a proactive, temporary conflict management mechanism and assess the impact of "community conferencing" in resolving conflicts in the area of study

To identify and examine the role of libations, rituals and oath-taking in the resolution of conflicts in the subdivisions of study

To determine the extent to which gift exchanges, cultural festivals and condolence visits promoted empathy, dialogue, reconciliation and the repair of social fractures in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions of Cameroon.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study is very important as it examines conflict resolution mechanisms that can significantly contribute to the restoration of social harmony in the affected communities. This is because while modern courts have gained the reputation of prioritizing punishment over sustainable reconciliation, traditional methods of conflict resolution in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions sought to address the underlying causes of differences between the different villages.

Further, the study highlights the importance of speed and accessibility in the resolution of differences using the traditional conflict resolution mechanisms and shows how the use of formal, western-style and often slow court systems have encouraged the escalation of conflicts in the subdivisions of study. This research underscores the fact that the search for solutions to land, farmer-grazier and inter-ethnic conflicts by traditional actors who were most often directly affected enriched the conflict resolution process with the kind of sincerity that could hardly be found in imported and culturally-insensitive conflict resolution mechanisms.

In addition, the study exposes the increasingly challenging and evolving context under which traditional conflict resolution mechanisms is used. This has especially been accentuated by the modernization and politicization of the chieftaincy institution, with resulting accusations of corruption and discriminatory practices. The study therefore examines possible channels that could facilitate the integration of traditional and formal mechanism of conflict resolution. This hybrid approach could ensure sustainable peace and development in the villages of the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions already under the plague of growing poverty.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous studies have investigated how African communities through diverse actors and institutions utilize traditional methods to resolve disputes and restore harmony. Kariuki (2015) opines that elders constitute one of the most relevant institutions in the resolution of conflicts in African societies. These elders who intervene either individually or within a council play the role

of the third party in the dispute resolution system. Using the example of the Gacaca court system in Rwanda and the Tswana in Botswana amongst others, the author shows how the use of methods such as negotiation, mediation, reconciliation and arbitration by elders informally bring parties together to resolve conflicts, keep societal harmony and reconstitute communal ties.

This view is supported by Tinoh (2026) who explores the role of African traditional actors and institutions in the resolution of conflicts in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions of Cameroon. He examines how effectively traditional actors such as the *fon*, chairmen of traditional councils, king makers and quarter heads intervened to resolve conflicts in the area. The author is of the opinion that the success of these actors could be largely attributed to their knowledge of their environment and the customs and traditions of the people. He reveals that traditional institutions such as the council of elders, the *fon*, *fons* associations, secret societies, noble societies and development and cultural associations provided appropriate traditional forums for the handling of intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic differences.

Complementary to this view, Theresa and Oluwafemi (2014) affirm that traditional actors such as priests, priestesses, secret cults, elders and chiefs play a significant role in finding solutions to conflicts. They examine truth as a major principle of traditional conflict resolution in African societies, emphasizing on the necessity for the disputing parties, the mediator, the arbitrator, and even the traditional judge to be truthful. They believe that through such a principle, different conflict resolution mechanisms such as mediation, arbitration, negotiation, and adjudication could effectively lead to reconciliation which is the most important aspect of the process, especially when parties are ready to “give a little and get a little”.

This view is supported by Ghebretkle and Rammala (2018) who reveal that most African societies are endowed with dispute resolution processes that help them in the prevention, management and resolution of conflicts. According to the authors, Africa today still combines and displays diverse practices in culture, religion and tradition that endured colonization and Westernization. They posit that while some of these conflict resolution mechanisms differ from society to society, there nonetheless exist practices and philosophies such as *Ubuntu* that overlap different societies and regions.

According to Austine and Justus (2023), African societies resolve and manage conflicts through a set of established conventions or rules. They expose the dangers of neglecting culture in the conflict resolution process since culture and language symbolism play a significant role. According to the authors, the manner of doing things differ by people, race and identity group and while the police agency plays a key role in the fight against crime in Europe, oath-taking and divination still constitute means of handling differences in some African societies, even though on a limited scale.

Nkwi (1986) paints a vivid picture of inter-chiefdom relations in the Bamenda grasslands of Cameroon. He exposes the type of relations that existed among villages, how the different chiefdoms ensured peaceful and cordial relationships and how they resolved their differences. Treaties and alliances, as well as marriage liaisons and the exchange of gifts were some of the methods that were used by chiefdoms in the grass fields not only to consolidate diplomatic ties but equally to take final steps in the settlement of boundaries.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

For this study, the qualitative case study research design was used, enabling the researcher to carry out an in-depth examination of the traditional mechanisms that were used in the resolution of conflicts in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions of Cameroon. Using multiple data sources including interviews, observations, and the exploitation secondary literature, the qualitative approach enabled the researcher to explore how culture which continues to have a significant influence on the lives of the people have embedded conflict resolution mechanisms at the grassroots, allowing for the sustainable addressing of deep-rooted underlying factors that define inter-ethnic relations. The design enabled a comprehensive understanding of conflicts within the specific cultural context of the chiefdoms in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions and how the bottom-top approach in the resolution of conflicts continues to demonstrate its importance in a continuously evolving Cameroonian context.

3.2 Sources

For this research, we gathered data from both primary and secondary sources. Information was gotten from interviews, observations, and the exploitation of published and unpublished books and journal articles. One-on-one interviews were conducted with 25 high-ranking traditional authorities in the Balikumbat, Bafanji and Bambalang villages, especially those who directly or indirectly took part in the resolution of conflicts in our area of study.

Visits to the concerned villages in the Ndop plains permitted the researcher to observe the relationship between Balikumbat and the adjacent chiefdoms of Bafanji and Bambalang that was characterized by tensions. It was such observation that led to an analysis of the avoidance conflict management mechanism, as it was evident that longstanding disagreements had badly affected the political, economic and social relationships between these chiefdoms.

An exploration of multiple secondary sources on inter-ethnic conflicts, including land disputes and farmer-grazier conflicts in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions of Cameroon, legal instruments, and policy papers also provided useful data for this paper. Exploiting and comparing information from legal texts, archival documents from the National Archives Buea and Regional Archives of Bamenda and interviews enabled the researcher to conduct a holistic analysis of the traditional conflict resolution mechanisms in the subdivisions of study.

3.3 Sampling Procedure

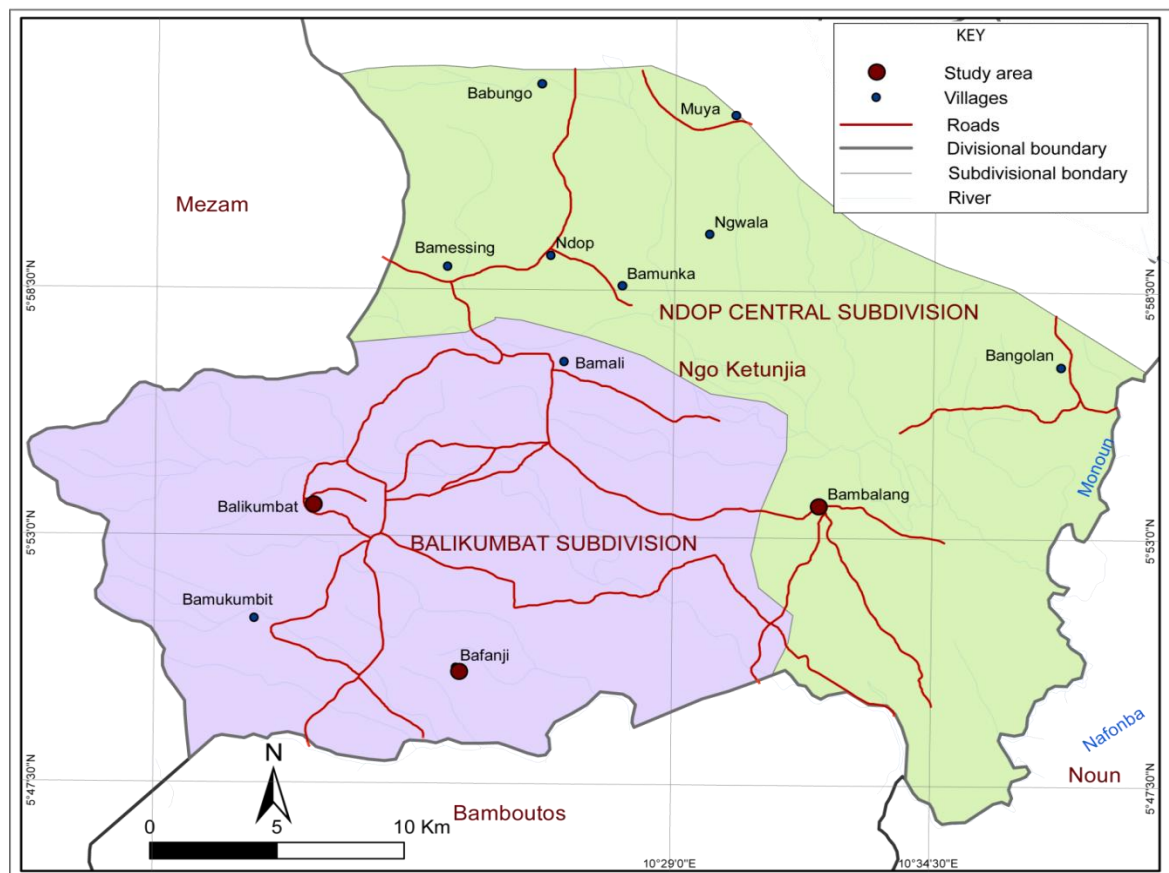
This study utilized non-probability sampling, non-randomly selecting and interviewing 25 village leaders and key stakeholders based on their community status, conflict experience, or their expertise in indigenous conflict resolution. Specific question guides were designed to reflect the traditional settings of the target villages, as well as the ranks and backgrounds of the respondents. The question guides featured open-ended and semi-structured questions, allowing the respondents to provide detailed insights into inter-village relations. This format enabled

participants to fully share relevant contexts, as well as their personal emotions and lived experiences. This facilitated a more comprehensive understanding and evaluation of the effectiveness of the traditional mechanisms used in the resolution of conflicts between Balikumbat and adjacent chiefdoms.

While face-to-face interviews were conducted by the researcher who personally visited the villages of Balikumbat, Bafanji, Bambalang and the Divisional Delegation for Social Affairs for the Ngoketunjia division to gather relevant information from social workers, traditional rulers, chairmen of village traditional councils, members of secret/sacred traditional societies and respected village elders, an established network with professionals in the humanitarian field enabled the researcher to obtain relevant information from respondents through email. Data obtained from interviews and archival documents were compared with information from secondary sources to provide an inclusive analysis of the traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution in the chiefdoms of the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions.

Figure 1

Balikumbat and Ndop subdivision and their fondoms



Source: National Institute of Cartography, 2026

4. DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS AND RESULTS

Traditional methods of conflict resolution such as local negotiation, local mediation, community conferencing, and avoidance were extensively used in the resolution of conflicts between Balikumbat and her neighbors. Generally, with these methods, one or both parties to a conflict request intervention by an elder, council of elders or any community member. Occasionally, elders unite and take the initiative to form a local council to represent the community's interest. These local peace processes are generally low cost and are mostly financed through community sources. In the case of the conflicts in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivision, rituals, libations and oath taking were equally used, even though on a limited scale when compared to the use of the same approaches in the resolution of conflicts in periods long past.

4.1. Local Mediation and Negotiation

4.1.1 Local Negotiation

Local negotiation was used in the resolution of conflicts between Balikumbat and neighboring ethnic groups. Negotiation can only occur when the two parties are willing to meet each other in order to work towards finding solutions to conflicts (Belie, 2024). Local negotiations are facilitated when actors who do not have a political, social and economic stake in continuing the conflict, come together to build a favorable atmosphere for peace (Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2017)).

On different occasions, the people of Balikumbat and Bafanji through their representatives met in order to find solutions to differences (D.S. Nyongbet, Personal Communication, December 28, 2014). Such representatives, who were in most cases elders, played a primordial role in promoting solidarity and peace between these villages. This was because of their significant status in the community which instilled confidence and made the people to turn to them to enquire what was happening and what had to be done to restore peace and harmony.

For instance, the interim Chairman of the Balikumbat traditional council affirmed that he personally met the Chairman of the Bafanji traditional council on two occasions to discuss the issues at stake. During these meetings, they agreed that the disputed piece of land should not be cultivated upon.

I personally met the chairman of the Bafanji Traditional Council saying that the disputed piece of land should not be cultivated upon. This has not been respected by the Bafanji side. On the last day of our meeting with Bafanji at Kenang (Balikumbat), I told the Bafanji people to tell the truth in order to put a final end to the dispute. In a nut-shell, conflicts can only resolved when both parties come out with the plain truth and nothing else. (D.N. Peter, Personal Communication, 13 August, 2014)

However, many Balikumbat sources are of the opinion that Bafanji has continuously given a blind eye to the different peace initiatives brought forth by the Balikumbat. This has been accentuated by conflicting positions that have often led to refusals to make concessions needed to reach a compromise. For instance, after the 1995 conflict, it is reported that *fon* Doh told the entire village to live peacefully with their Bafanji counterparts. This according to the people of Balikumbat was the only way the two brotherly chiefdoms could go back to the mutual harmony they shared before the conflict. He proposed to the Bafanji *fon* that a meeting be organized for the two to meet and discuss but the *fon* of Bafanji did not respond positively (D.A. Njuwat, Personal Communication, December 29, 2014). This was a significant stumbling block to the peace process considering the fact that the two communities could never live in peace if the fundamental problems that led to the violence had not been tackled.

The lack of the will to negotiate often made situations worse since parties to a conflict can only arrive at mutually acceptable solutions when they collaborate in their search for strategies aimed at ending the conflict (Jeong, 2010). What the indigenes of the two communities have failed to understand is that you will never get into trouble by admitting that you may be wrong. That will stop all argument and inspire your opponent to be just as fair, open and broad-minded as you are. According to Carnegie (2006), if discussions between disputing parties are to be genuine, the representatives must ask certain questions in preparation for negotiations;

Could my opponents be right? Partly right? Is there truth or merit in their position or argument? Is my reaction one that will relieve the problem, or will it just relieve any frustration? Will my reaction drive my opponents further away or draw them closer to me? Will my reaction elevate the estimation good people have of me? Will I win or lose? What price will I have to pay if I win? If I am quiet about it, will the disagreement blow over? Is this difficult situation an opportunity for me? (p.129).

The failure of the representatives of the disputing villages to pose fundamental questions in view of resolving conflicts has led to worsening relations and increased the possibilities of other tumultuous situations especially since the communities in dispute have continued to hold conviction that they justified in their positions and no form of intimidation can make them compromise. Such positions have come to undermine the numerous efforts that have been made towards finding solutions to these conflicts for according to the principled-negotiation theory of conflict resolution, when negotiators bargain over positions, they tend to lock themselves into these positions (Jeremy, 2025).

4.1.2 Local Mediation

Mediation is the process of negotiating differences with the assistance of a mutually selected impartial neutral-third party (JAMS Mediation Services, 2026). The parties in a dispute engage in dialogue that diagnoses the origins of their differences, what they desire to achieve and solutions that permit just win-win results for both (Potthast, 2003). Local Mediation as used in this context refers to the local actors and institutions that tried to mediate in the conflicts between Balikumbat and her neighbors. With this traditional mechanism, conflicting parties are more

likely to accept guidance from these mediators than from other sources because an elder's decision does not entail any loss of face and is not backed by social pressure (Potthast, 2003).

A vivid example of the use of local mediation in the resolution of conflicts in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions was the significant mediation effort made by the *fon* of Bagam. In effect, when the Balikumbat-Bafanji 1995 conflict temporarily came to an end, the *fons* of the 13 villages that make up the Ngoketunjia division were invited to a meeting by the Senior Divisional Officer (SDO) for Ngoketunjia. The *fon* of Balikumbat was accused of attacking the Bafanji village. This was followed by accusations and counter accusations. Consequently, the *fon* of Bagam opted to mediate between the two *fons*. He distributed letters inviting the two *fons* for a meeting to order to discuss the problem and bring it to a final end (D.P. Nengbud, Personal Communication, August 11, 2014).

According to some sources, despite the goodwill that was expressed by the *fon* of Balikumbat who kept to his word and attended the meeting that was called by the *fon* of Bagam, the *fon* of Bafanji showed up but did not show any signs of somebody who wanted peace (D.P. Nengbud, Personal Communication, August 11, 2014). These local mediation efforts most probably would have proven more effective if the two parties had consented to it, for the *fon* of Bagam acting as the mediator would have led and channeled discussions of the problems and consequently mitigated the possibilities of the outbreak of future conflicts.

Again, the Ndop Cultural and Development Association (NDECA) in an attempt to peacefully resolve conflicts between Balikumbat and Bafanji actively got involved in efforts that were made towards mediating differences between the two villages. For instance, on Saturday 26 August 1995, NDECA launched investigations into the Bafanji-Balikumbat land conflicts that had taken many lives. On the 9th of September 1995, It encouraged the *fons* of the thirteen villages that make up the Ngoketunjia division to sign a non-aggression pact aimed at ending to the many inter-ethnic land conflicts in the area (Deyeb, 2014).

Moreover, *fons* Associations such as the North West Fons Association (NOWEFA) and North West Fons Union (NOWEFU) were very active in the search for solutions to the Balikumbat-Bafanji conflicts. Following the cessation of hostilities between Balikumbat and Bafanji in 1995, some thirty *fons* from the Menchum, Mezam and Ngoketunjia divisions under the umbrella of NOWEFU convened a reconciliatory meeting between the *fons* of Balikumbat and Bafanji to find peaceful solution to the conflict (Patrick, 2000). The meeting ended with the adoption of a resolution by 23 *fons* who pledged to avoid violence as a means of settling disputes even though the meeting was boycotted by the *fon* of Bafanji (Patrick, 2000).

4.2 Conflict Avoidance and Community Conferencing

4.2.1 Conflict Avoidance

Conflict avoidance involves avoiding disputes (Wisdomlib, 2026). It is a consciously chosen strategy of deliberately walking away from a conflict as a strategy for its resolution (Tinoh, 2016). This approach was used by Balikumbat and neighboring chiefdoms in an attempt to resolve conflicts in the area. This approach manifested in the avoidance of any form of

interaction between villages that could provoke or intensify conflict situations (N. Totteh, Personal Communication, August 12, 2014).

For instance, soon after the 1995 and 1998 Balikumbat-Bafanji conflicts, the villages conceived new ways of living independently of each other. A bridge was quickly constructed on the Nchuagha swamps by Bafanji to link their village to Bambalang. This was to avoid passing through Balikumbat to Ndop (Ngwochu, 2025). In the same way, the Balikumbat preferred to pass through Bamunkumbit, which was much longer, to Mbouda than through Bafanji (Ngwochu, 2005). Trade was equally greatly affected as the trading activities between the conflicting villages dwindled after the different conflicts as there was general fear that it could rekindle memories of the past and subsequently ignite confrontations. Even the popular motor bike riders from the Bafanji and Bambalang villages avoid carrying passengers to Balikumbat at certain hours of the night as there is the general fear of attacks from their Balikumbat counterparts (D.A. Njuwat, Personal Communication, December 29, 2014).

Also, before the conflicts between Balikumbat and Bafanji, there were many cases of intermarriages between the two villages. The situation progressively changed when the conflicts seriously soiled the relations between the two chiefdoms. This explains why today, intermarriages are uncommon between the two conflicting communities (Monteh & Jabiru, 2012). However, this approach was not the best considering the fact that the best way of approaching a problem is to face it and not to run away from it because it might keep on coming back. For instance, in the months of February and March, there are always clashes on the disputed piece of land since some indigenes of Balikumbat and Bafanji own farmlands in the area and are therefore obliged to encounter one another despite the existing enmity (D.P. Nengbud, Personal Communication, August 11, 2014). However, avoidance had the credit of temporary mitigating the possibility of future confrontations as it helped calm tensions.

4.2.2 Community Conferencing

It is a structured conversation involving all members of the community (offenders, victims, family and friends) who have been affected by a dispute or a crime. Using a script, the facilitator invites people to express how they were affected and how they wish to address and repair the harm that resulted (Nico Halle & Co. Law Firm, 2014). In the case of the Balikumbat-Bambalang conflict, the *fon* of Bambalang acted as the facilitator. This role was in line with his prerogatives of managing village affairs, administering justice and resolving tensions with certain unwritten laws.

In effect, on the advice of the Chairman of the Social Democratic Front (SDF) party who visited Bambalang village on the 21 March 2011 following recent clashes between the Balikumbat and Bambalang villages, the *fon* of Bambalang, Shomitang II announced there was going to be a traditional public holiday during which the people will be called to discuss on the best means of tackling the situation. It was agreed that everybody was to go to the areas which were most affected by the conflict to help assist the victims to reconstruct their abandoned homes (J. Mbappa, Personal Communication, August 2, 2025). This decision was most probably motivated by the fact that the rainy season was at hand and with the rains came the planting season. It was therefore imperative for the people to replace the crops that had been destroyed. To make things

worse, these people could face difficulties getting shelter. This was very important as it highlighted the age old tradition whereby a problem affecting an individual is considered a problem of all the members of that society and when a house is destroyed in the village, the people come out like one person to help the owner to reconstruct.

This community conferencing is one of the most profound traditional aspects of conflict resolution as it often involves the congregation of village elders to assist the chief in settling a problematic issue in the village (Ngwane, 1996). In traditional African societies, dialogue and discussions provided an adequate atmosphere for the resolution of conflicts. The discussions were frank, open and yielded fruits as the victims were sometimes asked to pay a token fine as a symbol of confession (Sodoine, 2011). Words like national conferences and constitutional conferences are a revisit to the traditional African society where conflicts were solved through free dialogue and frank discussions (Sodoine, 2011). This return to village communal life and the utilization of community conferencing contributed in calming tensions and preventing an eventual return of the Bambalang people to violence with their Balikumbat neighbors.

4.3 Libations, Rituals and Oath Taking

Oath taking, traditional rituals and the pouring of libations were also used in the resolution of conflicts between the Balikumbat and neighboring ethnic groups. These methods had the credit of ensuring a real process of reconciliation since they were deeply rooted in the culture and traditions of the people. The belief in the powers of ancestral gods to intervene through these means to restore justice increased their acceptance and continuous use by many African traditional societies. This can be explained by the fact that such practices had existed in pre-colonial African societies and were believed to have effectively solved differences between communities. Libations, rituals and oath taking were often carried out during ceremonies which were loaded with spiritual meaning.

However, it must be mentioned that with the advent of new actors and methods of conflict resolution, most of these methods were relegated to the background. As such, while the Bafanji and Balikumbat under their leaders Gah Gwanyin and Ngwehong respectively made mutual moves at the resolution of conflicts by exchanging royal gifts such as wives, palm oil, animal skins and at certain moments the flesh of animals, their successors did very little to continue in the footsteps of their forefathers (P. Ndimaya, Personal Communication, August 13, 2014). This has been blamed on the state, its actors and institutions which have continued to use conflict resolution strategies that are not adapted to the local realities of conflicts. Nevertheless, these methods have not completely disappeared and thus served alternative conflict resolution mechanisms, especially when the modern methods failed to provide sustainable solutions to inter-village differences.

4.3.1 Libations

A Libation is an amount of alcoholic drink poured out or drunk in honor of a god or a dead relative. It is a gift of wine to a god (Oxford University Press, 2026). In traditional African societies, the process was often facilitated by religious priests who piloted and advised the community on issues relating to the gods, the spirits and ancestors. These religious leaders

ensured that peace existed between the visible and the invisible world. This was done by pouring libations to the ancestors with the hope that peace would be restored (Daniel, 2010).

Like in the days of old, the Balikumbat people prayed and poured libations in honor of their ancestors before engaging into a war with other chiefdoms. This approach was privileged if their cause was considered to be just. In this regard, before engaging in violent confrontations with neighboring chiefdoms, the people of Balikumbat poured libations and carried out sacrifices calling on their ancestors *Ndandji* and *Nsi* to help defeat any opposing *fondoms* that stood on their way (B. Nwana, Personal Communication, August 10, 2014). *Ndandji* and *Nsi* introduced by Ga Gbwanin I witnessed evolutions and became spiritually loaded traditional institutions in Balikumbat. These were lodges that were charged with the task of preparing for war and defeating enemies with the use of magic (Chilver & Kaberry, 1968).

Libations were equally used by the Bafanji to resolve conflicts. As soon as conflicts plagued the Bafanji either from within or from aggressive neighbors, there were visitations to village shrines that were spread out in the different quarters of the village. Here, libations were poured to ask the gods to save the people and protect them from the impending danger and to inspire them to overcome their opponents. A good example of such a shrine is the *Imamange* (A. Tieowa, Personal Communication, August 18, 2014). However, libations were mainly poured in honor of *Mamgieh* who is a legend that is believed to be the mother of the first four sons; Bamali, Bamunka, Bamukumbit and Bambalang who claim a common genealogy linked to the myth “*Mamagieh*”, a mother of a set of quadruplets who became *fons* of these villages (A. Tieowa, Personal Communication, August 18, 2014).

4.3.2 Rituals

Rituals are “a series of actions that are always performed in the same way, especially as part of a religious ceremony” (Oxford University Press, 2026). In many African traditional societies, rituals were common during celebrations and cultural feasts such as death celebrations, harvest ceremonies, marriage ceremonies, and cultural feasts. During such ceremonies, customary rituals which involved the breaking of spears and arrows, drinking and eating, singing and dancing, and the symbolic shedding and drinking of blood were common. According to Boege (2012), these occasions united the people, their history, present and future, the ancestors and the gods for the sealing of conflict resolution.

The popular *lelah* annual dance celebrated by Balikumbat and other Chamba groups is a glaring example. In the days of old, a number of rituals were associated to this dance. The ritual aspects of this annual dance have survived as many sacrifices and rituals are performed during celebrations to call on the gods and ancestors for good harvest and peace especially when the village has passed through a surge of violence. This reaffirms a common view in the chiefdoms of the grass fields which saw warfare as a violent, often bloody conflict between non-related groups, and indispensable ritual purification required to remove supernatural danger and misfortune (Chem-Langhee & Fanso, 1996). The use of rituals in the resolution of conflicts by Balikumbat was vividly captured by Fomin & Ngitir (2011) in the following words:

The Bali-Kumbat, like the Bali-Nyonga, both of the Chamba migrants group, was expansionist and as such forced many small states in the Western Grassfields to enter into ritual boundary pacts and alliances...Balikumbat raided Akum fiercely and went ahead to raid Nkwen, Bambui, Bambili, Bali-Kontan and Bamukumbit...Awing appeared to have successfully resisted the raids to the extent that Balikumbat was forced to enter into a ritual boundary pact with her...The ritual performance involved the Awing-Bali-Kumbat Boundary pact included the *afon* of the two *fondoms* sitting back to back on a ridge each one facing his *fondom*. On that spot, they are purported to have buried some ritual stuffs which included a slave. In that position, they are said to have taken an oath never to violate each other's boundary which has never been despite the changes the colonialists made in clan boundaries in the area. (p. 41)

Similarly to traditional Balikumbat where ritual pacts were sealed to resolve conflicts, sacrificial rituals were performed aimed at ending conflicts between Balikumbat and her neighbors. In Balikumbat for example, rituals of appeasement were performed in the different shrines in the palace of the *fondom*, since the palace also served as the headquarters of the regulatory societies such as the *Ngumbahyit* (Tati, 2011). This was to give the people the necessary blessings needed to overcome their enemies. However, a major difference lies at the level of the rituals performed in the days of old and those carried out today. It is important to mention that, while rituals in traditional Cameroonian chiefdoms often covered relations between two or more groups and was binding on the parties, there has been a notable shift from inter-village to intra-village rituals, even when the problem affects more than one ethnic group. This explains why chiefdoms such as Balikumbat, Bafanji and Bambalang performed rituals in isolation in their different village shrines for the restoration of peace.

Again, after the Balikumbat-Bambalang conflict of 2011, the village of Bambalang performed rituals in honor of the death and those who had sustained injuries. This ritual ceremony was greatly welcomed in the village since the people believed that they had been unjustly attacked by the Balikumbat and justice therefore had to be restored. The ritual activities were carried out in a secret shrine known as *Nishekung* situated beside the palace. Here, goats were sacrificed, roasted and shared to those who were present and the people asked the gods for forgiveness and the power to triumph over their enemies and the restoration of peace (T. Lasha, Personal Communication, December 28, 2014).

Further, during the visit of the SDF Chairman on March 28, 2011 to sympathize with the Bambalang victims, the opposition leader and his team made a symbolic furrow at the entrance to the palace on which improved grains of maize were planted. This symbolic demonstration was repeated by the *fon* who threw grains of maize around the palace to encourage his people to go back to the farms and take up cultivation as the planting season was close by. The symbolic rituals shifted the attention of the people away from the violent conflict that had brought significant devastation to the village T. (Lasha, Personal Communication, December 28, 2014).

Again, following the bloody confrontation between Balikumbat and Bafanji in 1995, the reconciliation meeting that was organized to look for lasting solutions to the problems of the two villages reunited 23 *fons* who resolved to avoid the use of violence as a means of settling disputes. The traditional rulers went further to decide that where such confrontations had in the past resulted in bloodshed, a traditional rite be performed to cleanse the area of its curse (Patrick, 2000).

4.3.3 Oath Taking

An oath is a promise, especially that you will tell the truth. It is a swear word, especially one which uses God (Hornby, 2005), native gods or a revered object that has a great symbolic significance. Oath taking was used in an attempt to resolve the Balikumbat-Bafanji conflict of 1995. In the efforts to bring the conflict to an end, the SDO for Ngoketunjia called for a meeting of all the *fons* representing the 13 villages that make up the division. During discussions, the *fon* of Balikumbat was accused of attacking the Bafanji village. The *Fon* of Balikumbat stood up and said that if he is being accused in Bamunka, then his brother, the *Fon* of Bamunka should go to the Bamunka palace and get an object so that an oath could be taken to determine who was guilty of provoking the conflict (D.P. Nengbud, Personal Communication, August 11, 2014). This resort to mystical powers to resolve conflicts was a common practice in pre-colonial Africa. Trial by ordeal was a practice whereby recourse could be made to spiritual bodies such as the fetish to establish guilt or innocence. Unfortunately, the *fon* of Bafanji supported by the SDO rejected the idea to the dissatisfaction of the other 12 *fons* present (D.P. Nengbud, Personal Communication, August 11, 2014).

The oath taking act might have gone a long way to putting a definite end to tensions and prevented future conflicts. The refusal of the SDO and the *fon* of Bafanji was probably because of fear of the consequences such an oath could have because like in the Moghamo Clan where guilty parties to an oath usually suffered from atrocious diseases such as swollen stomachs, legs or heads (Wami, 2010), great calamity including death could befall the *fon* of Bafanji had it been he was falsely accusing the *Fon* of Balikumbat. In effect, native gods in nearly all African societies constituted an important component of the processes of peace in the society because of the general trust people had in them and their demonstrated prowess in ensuring that pronouncements came to pass (Wami, 2010). The negligence of this traditional process of ending conflicts was indicative of the relegation of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms to the background to the benefit of other modern actors and mechanisms. In addition, the oath taking method of conflict resolution which was quite potent has been largely eroded by Christianity and modernization (Jaja, 2013).

4.4 Exchange of Gifts, Festivals and Condolences

Following the different violent conflicts between Balikumbat and her neighbors, diverse efforts were made at the resolution of conflicts and the promotion of good cordially relations. As such, the indigenous populations of the villages in dispute made significant symbolic exchanges of various sorts, with the promise never to go to war again. In this regard, there was the exchange of condolences, gifts, red caps and festivals. For instance, during the peace treaty between Bafanji and Balikumbat at Njanung in Bafanji in early 1906, the Chief of Bafanji and

Balikumbat, Ngwehong and Gah Gwanyin respectively, traditionally authorized each other to celebrate their different annual festivals (Victor, 2000). Thus, Gah Gwanyin I gave *Lelah* to Bafanji, and Ngwechong also gave *Nduoh* to Balikumbat (Victor, 2000). In effect, this exchange of tribal rituals and festivals was very symbolic in that the two villages exchanged their war spears to show that they were never to fight each other again. This agreement continued to apply in the succeeding years and helped to shape traditional moves towards the resolution of conflicts between the two villages in the 1990s (Victor, 2000).

In the same light, most traditions of the grass fields of Cameroon recognize certain occasions where friendly relations are strengthened and existing differences handled. This was the case of the exchange of condolences between the villages in dispute in the Balikumbat subdivision. As such, during the burial ceremony of *fon* Galabe III of Balikumbat in 1977, the *fons* of Bafanji, Bambalang and other villages around attended this ceremony. However, the expansionist policies of *Fon* Doh after his ascension to power in 1978 greatly killed the hopes of peace in the area (N. Toteh, Personal Communication, August 12, 2014).

5. CONCLUSION

Traditional institutions and methods of conflict resolution also known as endogenous conflict resolution systems continue to demonstrate their relevance in post-conflict chiefdoms in the North-West region of Cameroon, despite the increasing involvement of international agencies, government and private organizations into the “business” of conflict resolution. This is because “traditional societies in Africa and elsewhere are reputed to hold secrets of peacekeeping locked in their ways and formed from centuries of custom before the disruption of colonization” (Zartman, ed., 2000). In effect, practically all pre-colonial African societies had different conflict resolution mechanisms that were unique and specific to their socio-cultural context (Osamba, 2011). Most of these societies collectively approached issues of governance and conflict resolution that facilitated the settlement of both intra and inter-community conflicts. Balikumbat, Bafanji and Bambalang are typical grass field chiefdoms with well-organized traditional political structures. The organization of these institutions to play precise and concise roles in the villages facilitated the resolution of conflicts that plagued villages of the Balikumbat and Ndup subdivisions. These traditional institutions are rooted in the culture and history of the people and make these methods unique by virtue of their “endogeneity” and use of local actors. These local actors like the elders and the council of elders used methods such as local mediation, local negotiation, oath-taking and libations in the resolution of conflicts. However, there has been a continuous negligence of these traditional approaches to the benefit of new actors such as the administration, the Police, NGOs and the law courts which actively participated in looking for solutions to the conflicts between Balikumbat and neighboring ethnic groups.

5.1 Recommendations

Modern conflict resolution institutions and actors such as the government, ad hoc land enquiry commissions, civil law courts and NGOs depend too much on imported approaches and colonial-era laws that often undermine traditional authorities and their deep knowledge on the underlying causes of conflicts. As such, the harmonization of traditional and formal approaches in the resolution of conflicts could be significant in enriching the actors and process for more successful

outcomes. This could be facilitated by the establishment of state-recognized hybrid dispute resolution forums and platforms that enhance inclusiveness and reconciliation.

Further, increased impartiality and transparency in the traditional conflict resolution process could significantly improve on the effectiveness of these mechanisms in the handling of inter-village differences. Besides maintaining neutrality in politics which has become very divisive on community relations, traditional authorities such as *fons* and quarter heads must ensure that their decision making processes remain transparent. Conditions for effective third party mediation involving neutral village elders and representatives from the civil society could also contribute to reducing growing perceptions of political interference and favoritism in traditional conflict resolution systems.

Traditional conflict resolution mechanisms such as oath-taking and the pouring of libations which had demonstrated their relevance in periods long past have gradually been sidelined in the context of growing acculturation that have significantly influenced the governance systems in many African states today. There is therefore the need to re-engage inter-village ancestral accountability mechanisms that will go a long way to restoring justice and discouraging land-grabbing that have consistently provoked conflicts in the area.

Traditional decision-making systems in the patriarchal societies in the Balikumbat and Ndop subdivisions of Cameroon have been known for limiting the role of women and youths. This has negatively affected conflict resolution in the area as women account for the greatest percentage of those who directly cultivate lands on disputed areas. Youths also actively participate in fighting and other forms of violence during land conflicts. Formally integrating these sidelined groups such as Queen Mothers (*Mafors*) and leaders of youth groups into the major decision making commissions could result in a more inclusive conflict resolution process to achieve representative outcomes.

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Essay: The Twin Brothers of Rift: Ego and Entitlement in Conflict, Peace, and Human Relations

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THE TWIN BROTHERS OF RIFT: EGO AND ENTITLEMENT IN CONFLICT, PEACE, AND HUMAN RELATIONS

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Abstract

Conflicts across interpersonal, societal, and global domains are frequently explained through structural, political, or economic factors, yet the psychological undercurrents that animate these conflicts remain underexplored. This article advances the argument that ego and entitlement function as interlocking psychological forces that catalyze and sustain rifts, from everyday relational breakdowns to large-scale violent conflicts. Drawing from psychoanalytic theory, social psychology, peace and conflict studies, and historical and contemporary case analyses, the article conceptualizes ego and entitlement as mutually reinforcing dynamics that distort perception, escalate grievances, and obstruct reconciliation. Through historical illustrations such as the Nigerian Civil War and World War I, alongside contemporary global conflicts and interpersonal narratives, the article demonstrates how unchecked ego and entitlement undermine peacebuilding efforts. The study further engages peace psychology and conflict transformation frameworks to propose pathways for mitigating these dynamics, emphasizing humility, empathy,

and what peace scholars term the “quiet ego.” Ultimately, the article contributes to peace studies by foregrounding psychological dispositions as central, rather than peripheral, to understanding and transforming conflict.

Introduction: Ego, Entitlement, and the Anatomy of Rifts

Human conflict rarely announces itself as something grand or ideological at its onset. More often, it begins quietly—through minor misunderstandings, unmet expectations, or perceived slights that accumulate over time. A disagreement over household responsibilities, a dismissive comment in a meeting, or a neglected request between friends may appear trivial in isolation. Yet such moments frequently escalate into entrenched rifts marked by resentment, withdrawal, and hostility. While social norms, power relations, and material conditions shape these interactions, this article argues that two deeply embedded psychological dispositions—ego and entitlement—operate as fundamental drivers beneath the surface of many conflicts.

Peace and conflict studies have traditionally prioritized structural explanations for violence, focusing on inequality, colonial legacies, political exclusion, and economic deprivation. These approaches have yielded invaluable insights into the systemic nature of conflict. However, as scholars of peace psychology have noted, structural conditions alone do not explain why conflicts persist, intensify, or become emotionally charged to the point of violence.

Psychological factors—particularly those related to identity, self-perception, and perceived deservingness—mediate how individuals and groups interpret grievances and respond to threats. Ego and entitlement, in this sense, function as catalysts that translate material or political tensions into affective and behavioral escalation.

Ego, broadly understood, refers to an individual’s sense of self, identity, and worth. It is neither inherently pathological nor avoidable; rather, it is a necessary component of human functioning. Entitlement, closely related yet distinct, reflects beliefs about what one deserves from others or from the world. When balanced, these traits enable agency, self-respect, and motivation. When inflated, threatened, or left unexamined, they become sources of rigidity, defensiveness, and moral absolutism. Together, ego and entitlement form what this article conceptualizes as the “twin brothers of rift”—psychological forces that mutually reinforce one another and intensify conflict.

This article adopts an interdisciplinary approach, weaving together psychoanalytic theory, social and personality psychology, peace psychology, and historical analysis. It seeks to demonstrate that ego and entitlement are not merely individual flaws but socially conditioned dispositions that scale upward, shaping group identities, leadership decisions, and national narratives. From interpersonal relationships to international diplomacy, these traits influence how actors interpret harm, justify retaliation, and resist compromise.

The analysis proceeds in several stages. First, the article establishes a theoretical framework for understanding ego and entitlement, drawing from classical and contemporary psychological scholarship. It then examines how these dynamics have manifested historically, with particular attention to the Nigerian Civil War and the outbreak of World War I. Subsequent sections extend

the analysis to contemporary global conflicts and everyday interpersonal relationships, illustrating how micro-level dynamics mirror macro-level patterns. Finally, the article explores implications for peacebuilding and conflict transformation, arguing that sustainable peace requires not only structural reforms but also deliberate engagement with the psychological dimensions of conflict.

By foregrounding ego and entitlement as central analytical lenses, this article contributes to peace studies by bridging the gap between inner dispositions and outer violence. In doing so, it invites scholars, practitioners, and readers to reconsider how peace is imagined—not merely as the absence of war, but as the cultivation of humility, empathy, and relational responsibility at all levels of human interaction.

Theoretical Framework: Ego and Entitlement in Psychological and Peace Studies

Conceptualizing Ego

The concept of ego has a long and complex intellectual history, most prominently articulated within psychoanalytic theory. In Sigmund Freud's structural model of the psyche, the ego functions as the rational mediator between the instinctual drives of the id and the moral demands of the superego. Its role is to navigate reality, delay gratification, and maintain psychological equilibrium. Within this framework, the ego is essential for survival and social adaptation; without it, individuals would be governed either by unchecked impulse or paralyzing guilt.

Subsequent psychological theories have expanded and revised Freud's conception. In contemporary usage, ego often refers more broadly to self-concept, self-esteem, and identity coherence. Social psychologists emphasize that ego is deeply relational, shaped through social comparison, recognition, and validation. From this perspective, ego becomes particularly vulnerable in contexts where status, competence, or moral worth are questioned. Threats to ego—whether real or perceived—frequently elicit defensive responses, including denial, aggression, and withdrawal.

Peace psychology offers further insight by linking ego to identity-based conflict. When individuals or groups strongly identify with particular roles, ideologies, or narratives, challenges to those identities are experienced as existential threats. This phenomenon helps explain why conflicts persist even when material grievances could, in principle, be negotiated. The ego's attachment to being right, superior, or morally justified often outweighs pragmatic considerations of coexistence.

Importantly, ego itself is not synonymous with arrogance or narcissism. A well-integrated ego allows for self-reflection, accountability, and growth. Problems arise when ego becomes inflated, fragile, or overidentified with external validation. In such cases, admitting fault or extending empathy is experienced not as maturity, but as humiliation or loss.

Defining Entitlement

Entitlement, while closely related to ego, occupies a distinct conceptual space. Psychological entitlement refers to a pervasive belief that one deserves more resources, respect, or consideration than others, regardless of actual contribution or circumstance. Unlike confidence or healthy expectation, entitlement is characterized by rigidity and moral absolutism: the entitled individual interprets unmet expectations as injustice rather than disappointment.

Research in personality and social psychology identifies entitlement as a relatively stable trait, though one that is shaped by socialization, cultural norms, and lived experiences. Societies that emphasize individual exceptionalism, competitive success, or zero-sum achievement may inadvertently cultivate entitlement, particularly when recognition and reward are unevenly distributed. Conversely, experiences of marginalization or hardship can also produce entitlement, as individuals come to believe that past suffering entitles them to future compensation or immunity from criticism.

Within conflict contexts, entitlement functions as a moral amplifier. It reframes grievances as violations of inherent rights, thereby legitimizing anger and retaliation. Entitlement also narrows the moral imagination, making compromise appear as surrender rather than cooperation. In interpersonal relationships, entitlement manifests as unspoken expectations—of loyalty, labor, or emotional availability—that, when unmet, generate resentment. In political and national contexts, entitlement appears in claims to territory, sovereignty, or moral superiority.

Ego and Entitlement as Interlocking Dynamics

While ego and entitlement can operate independently, their interaction is particularly combustible. Entitlement establishes expectations; ego defends them. When expectations are thwarted, ego interprets the frustration as an affront to identity or worth. This interaction produces a feedback loop in which perceived slights escalate into moralized conflicts. The individual or group becomes increasingly invested in proving righteousness rather than resolving the underlying issue.

From a peace studies perspective, this dynamic is especially dangerous because it transforms negotiable disputes into identity-based struggles. Once ego and entitlement dominate, conflicts shift from “What do we need?” to “Who is right?” or “Who deserves more?” Such framing undermines dialogue and fuels cycles of blame and retaliation.

Peace psychology introduces the concept of the “quiet ego” as a counterbalance to this dynamic. A quiet ego is not weak or passive; rather, it reflects a self-concept that is secure enough to tolerate criticism, acknowledge interdependence, and prioritize collective well-being. Cultivating a quiet ego does not eliminate entitlement entirely but contextualizes it within broader ethical and relational frameworks.

This theoretical foundation sets the stage for examining how ego and entitlement have shaped historical and contemporary conflicts. By tracing these dynamics across scales, the article seeks

to demonstrate that the psychological roots of rift are both deeply personal and profoundly political.

Historical Case Analyses: Ego, Entitlement, and the Escalation of Collective Rifts

Ego, Entitlement, and Conflict at Scale

Historical conflicts offer fertile ground for examining how psychological dispositions scale upward from individuals to institutions and states. While wars are often attributed to structural inequalities, geopolitical rivalries, or economic pressures, such explanations risk obscuring the affective and identity-driven dynamics that animate decision-making. Leaders do not merely act as rational agents responding to objective conditions; they interpret events through ego-involved identities and entitlement-laden narratives of legitimacy, honor, and deservedness. When such interpretations dominate, opportunities for de-escalation are frequently ignored or reframed as existential threats.

Peace and conflict scholars emphasize that large-scale violence is rarely inevitable. Rather, it emerges from sequences of choices shaped by perception, emotion, and self-concept. Ego and entitlement operate as psychological lenses that distort these perceptions, narrowing the range of acceptable responses and moralizing violence as necessity. This section examines two historical cases—the Nigerian Civil War and World War I—to illustrate how ego and entitlement, embedded within leadership identities and collective narratives, transformed political crises into catastrophic rifts.

The Nigerian Civil War: Postcolonial Identity, Leadership Ego, and Moral Entitlement

The Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) represents one of the most devastating conflicts in postcolonial Africa, resulting in immense human suffering and long-lasting national trauma. While the war is frequently analyzed through ethnic divisions, colonial legacies, and resource competition, such analyses are incomplete without attention to the psychological dimensions that shaped leadership decisions and collective responses. Ego and entitlement were not incidental to the conflict; they were central to how grievances were interpreted and acted upon.

Following Nigeria's independence in 1960, the newly formed state struggled to integrate diverse ethnic and regional identities into a cohesive national framework. Colonial administrative structures had reinforced regionalism, fostering competition rather than cooperation among the Northern, Western, and Eastern regions. Within this fragile context, political power became deeply entwined with collective ego—each region's leadership perceived itself as uniquely entitled to influence and recognition within the federation.

The January 1966 coup intensified these dynamics. Although framed by its perpetrators as a corrective intervention against corruption and misrule, the coup was widely interpreted through an ethnic lens. The selective targeting of Northern and Western leaders, combined with the survival of prominent Eastern figures, generated a perception of ethnic entitlement to power. This perception was less about empirical reality and more about ego threat: Northern elites

experienced the coup as a symbolic humiliation and an assault on their collective status within the nation.

The counter-coup of July 1966, followed by widespread violence against Igbo civilians in the North, further entrenched entitlement-based narratives on both sides. For many in the Eastern Region, survival itself became moral justification for political separation. Entitlement here emerged not as arrogance but as moral absolutism: the belief that past victimization conferred an unquestionable right to self-determination. Simultaneously, the federal government's insistence on territorial unity was reinforced by an ego investment in sovereignty inherited from colonial statehood. To concede autonomy was framed not as pragmatic compromise but as weakness and loss of authority.

Leadership personalities amplified these tendencies. Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu's charismatic authority and intellectual confidence contributed to a leadership ego that framed secession as both inevitable and righteous. His interpretation of the Aburi Accord illustrates how ego and entitlement intersected. For Ojukwu, the agreement validated Eastern autonomy and confirmed his legitimacy as protector of his people. Any subsequent reinterpretation by the federal government was experienced not merely as political disagreement but as betrayal.

On the federal side, General Yakubu Gowon's leadership was constrained by competing pressures: maintaining national unity, appeasing regional elites, and preserving personal legitimacy as head of state. Within this context, reneging on the spirit of Aburi can be understood as an ego-defensive response. Accepting a loose confederation threatened not only the centralized state but also Gowon's symbolic authority. Entitlement to rule—rooted in international recognition and inherited colonial boundaries—outweighed humanitarian considerations.

Peace studies scholars emphasize that protracted conflicts are sustained not only by material incentives but by moral narratives that justify continued violence. In the Nigerian Civil War, ego and entitlement crystallized into such narratives. Each side framed itself as morally superior and existentially threatened, rendering compromise illegitimate. As the war progressed and civilian suffering intensified, these narratives hardened rather than softened. Admitting error or revisiting initial assumptions would have required leaders to confront ego loss—an outcome perceived as more threatening than continued violence.

The war's conclusion, marked by Biafra's surrender and the federal government's declaration of "no victor, no vanquished," illustrates the paradox of ego in post-conflict settings. While rhetorically conciliatory, the absence of deep psychological reconciliation allowed latent grievances to persist. The conflict formally ended, but the rift—rooted in wounded collective egos and unresolved entitlement claims—remained embedded within Nigeria's political and social fabric.

World War I: Honor, National Ego, and the Entitlement to Power

World War I offers a contrasting yet complementary case in which ego and entitlement operated within highly industrialized states and complex alliance systems. The war's origins cannot be

reduced to a single cause; however, peace scholars increasingly recognize the centrality of honor culture, prestige anxiety, and entitlement narratives in driving escalation. These psychological dimensions transformed diplomatic crises into an all-encompassing global conflict.

Pre-war Europe was characterized by intense competition among empires for status, influence, and recognition. National ego was institutionalized through militarism, colonial expansion, and symbolic displays of power. States did not merely seek security; they sought affirmation of their superiority and legitimacy within a hierarchical international order. In this context, entitlement was framed as destiny—an assumed right to territorial expansion, strategic dominance, or cultural leadership.

Germany's position within this order was particularly fraught. Unified relatively late as a nation-state, Germany pursued rapid industrialization and military modernization to assert itself among established powers. This pursuit was not only strategic but psychological. German political and military elites perceived international politics as a zero-sum arena in which respect could only be earned through displays of strength. Diplomatic compromise was often interpreted as humiliation, reinforcing an ego-driven preference for coercive solutions.

Austria-Hungary's response to the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand exemplifies entitlement framed as moral necessity. The ultimatum issued to Serbia was intentionally punitive, designed less to resolve the crisis than to reassert imperial authority. The underlying assumption was that failure to respond decisively would signal weakness and invite further challenges. Ego, in this sense, constrained the range of imaginable responses.

Alliance dynamics further magnified these tendencies. States interpreted their obligations not merely as strategic commitments but as tests of honor and credibility. Once mobilization began, de-escalation became psychologically costly. Leaders feared that restraint would undermine their domestic legitimacy and international standing. Entitlement narratives—such as the right to defend allies or preserve balance of power—justified actions that, in aggregate, produced catastrophic outcomes.

Peace psychology highlights the role of emotional contagion and collective affect in such scenarios. Nationalist rhetoric mobilized populations by appealing to pride, sacrifice, and righteous entitlement. Citizens were encouraged to internalize state egos, framing war as a moral duty rather than a political choice. This diffusion of ego from leadership to populace reduced resistance to violence and normalized mass suffering.

Importantly, World War I demonstrates how ego and entitlement persist even in the face of mounting evidence of harm. As casualties increased and stalemates emerged, leaders doubled down rather than reassessed. To negotiate peace would have required acknowledging miscalculation and shared responsibility—an ego-threatening prospect incompatible with prevailing honor cultures. The result was prolonged violence far beyond any rational assessment of gains.

Comparative Insights: Psychological Patterns Across Contexts

Despite vast differences in context, the Nigerian Civil War and World War I reveal strikingly similar psychological patterns. In both cases, ego transformed political disagreement into existential struggle, while entitlement framed compromise as injustice. Leadership identities became entangled with state legitimacy, narrowing the space for empathy and creative problem-solving.

From a peace studies perspective, these cases underscore the importance of integrating psychological analysis into conflict prevention and resolution. Structural reforms and power-sharing agreements are insufficient if they fail to address the ego investments that sustain hostility. Without mechanisms for acknowledging loss, humiliation, and moral injury, post-conflict societies remain vulnerable to renewed violence.

These historical insights provide a foundation for examining contemporary conflicts, where ego and entitlement continue to shape global politics—often amplified by media, technology, and polarized identity narratives. The next section extends this analysis into the present, exploring how similar dynamics operate in modern geopolitical crises and everyday interpersonal relations.

Contemporary Global Conflicts and Interpersonal Microcosms: Ego and Entitlement in the Modern Era

Ego, Entitlement, and Conflict in a Globalized World

Contemporary conflicts unfold within a globalized environment marked by rapid information exchange, heightened visibility of leadership decisions, and intensified identity politics. While globalization has increased interdependence among states and societies, it has simultaneously amplified ego and entitlement by exposing individuals and nations to constant comparison, validation, and perceived competition. In this context, conflicts are no longer confined to battlefields or diplomatic chambers; they are performed, narrated, and contested in real time before global audiences.

Peace and conflict scholars argue that modern conflicts are increasingly identity-based rather than purely territorial or economic. Ego and entitlement operate as central mechanisms in this shift, shaping how grievances are framed and justified. Leaders and populations alike interpret compromise through the lens of symbolic loss, while aggression is rationalized as self-defense or moral duty. The result is a global conflict landscape in which escalation often appears more psychologically palatable than restraint.

Leadership Ego and Entitlement in Contemporary Geopolitical Conflicts

Recent global conflicts illustrate the persistence of ego- and entitlement-driven dynamics in international relations. In the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, for instance, territorial claims are inseparable from narratives of historical destiny, national pride, and perceived humiliation. Russian leadership discourse has repeatedly framed Ukraine's sovereignty as an

affront to Russia's identity and rightful sphere of influence. This framing reflects entitlement rooted in imperial legacy and reinforced by ego investment in great-power status.

From a peace psychology perspective, such narratives transform political disagreement into moral absolutism. The conflict is no longer about borders or security arrangements but about restoring dignity and correcting perceived historical injustice. This psychological framing reduces the effectiveness of diplomatic incentives, as concessions are interpreted as ego loss rather than pragmatic compromise. The longer the conflict persists, the more deeply ego becomes tied to its continuation, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of escalation.

Similarly, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict continues to exemplify how entitlement narratives—rooted in historical trauma, religious identity, and claims to land—interact with collective ego to sustain protracted violence. Both sides articulate existential narratives in which recognition of the other's legitimacy is perceived as a threat to self-definition. Peace initiatives that fail to address these psychological investments often collapse, not due to technical flaws, but because they demand forms of humility and mutual acknowledgment that entrenched egos resist.

Post-colonial conflicts across Africa, Asia, and the Middle East further illustrate this pattern. Leaders operating within fragile states frequently frame dissent as personal or national disrespect, responding with disproportionate force. Entitlement to authority, often inherited from colonial governance structures, combines with personal ego to suppress dialogue and escalate violence. In such contexts, peacebuilding efforts that focus exclusively on institutional reform risk neglecting the psychological cultures of leadership that reproduce conflict.

Digital Media, Performative Ego, and Amplified Entitlement

The digital age has profoundly altered how ego and entitlement are expressed and reinforced. Social media platforms function as arenas of continuous self-presentation, validation, and comparison. Algorithms reward visibility, outrage, and moral certainty—conditions that are highly conducive to ego inflation and entitlement reinforcement. In this environment, conflict becomes performative, with individuals and groups competing not only for resources or justice but for attention and symbolic dominance.

From a peace studies standpoint, digital spaces complicate conflict transformation by accelerating polarization and reducing opportunities for reflective engagement. Online interactions often lack the relational cues that foster empathy, making it easier to dehumanize opponents. Entitlement manifests as demands for immediate recognition, agreement, or apology, while ego reacts defensively to dissent or critique. These dynamics contribute to what scholars describe as “moralized polarization,” in which disagreement is framed as evidence of moral failure rather than difference.

At the collective level, digital nationalism intensifies identity-based conflicts. Viral narratives of victimhood and righteousness circulate rapidly, reinforcing entitlement to retaliation and suppressing nuance. Leaders, aware of these dynamics, increasingly perform strength and defiance for domestic audiences, even when such performances undermine diplomatic solutions. Ego thus becomes not only a personal disposition but a mediated political strategy.

Interpersonal Conflict as a Microcosm of Global Rifts

The psychological dynamics observed in global conflicts are mirrored in everyday interpersonal relationships. Peace psychology emphasizes that macro-level violence and micro-level relational breakdowns share common mechanisms: identity threat, moral absolutism, and defensive entitlement. Interpersonal conflicts, therefore, offer valuable insight into the emotional logic that sustains larger rifts.

In intimate relationships, entitlement often takes the form of unspoken expectations regarding care, labor, or recognition. When these expectations are unmet, ego interprets the experience as devaluation rather than miscommunication. The resulting defensiveness mirrors state-level responses to perceived disrespect. Just as nations escalate to protect honor, individuals escalate to protect self-worth.

Contemporary relational studies indicate that such dynamics are exacerbated by cultural narratives of individual success and self-actualization. Partners are encouraged to prioritize personal fulfillment, sometimes at the expense of mutual accommodation. While autonomy is essential, its absolutization fosters entitlement to constant validation and support. When relationships fail to meet these inflated standards, withdrawal or confrontation replaces dialogue.

Group dynamics among peers similarly reflect entitlement-ego interactions. Social groups often develop implicit hierarchies of value, contribution, or expertise. When recognition within these hierarchies is perceived as unequal, members may experience moral resentment. Ego then resists vulnerability, framing grievances as evidence of others' failure rather than an opportunity for repair. Over time, such dynamics erode trust and cohesion, producing silent fractures that resemble unresolved political conflicts.

Autoethnographic Reflection as Analytical Insight

Autoethnographic approaches within peace studies recognize that personal experience can illuminate broader theoretical patterns when critically examined. Interpersonal rifts rooted in ego and entitlement frequently emerge not from singular acts of harm but from accumulated moments of misrecognition. When individuals perceive that their efforts, struggles, or identities are consistently undervalued, entitlement hardens into expectation, and ego becomes increasingly vigilant.

In such contexts, conflict escalation often appears sudden but is, in reality, the result of prolonged psychological tension. Entitlement demands reciprocity without negotiation, while ego resists expressing vulnerability. Communication breaks down, not because parties lack goodwill, but because acknowledgment of hurt is experienced as loss of status or moral standing.

Peace psychology suggests that these patterns persist when individuals lack frameworks for naming and regulating ego threat. Without such frameworks, relational conflicts default to blame and withdrawal, mirroring the stalemates observed in international disputes. The refusal to apologize, the insistence on being understood first, and the moralization of one's own pain are not idiosyncratic flaws but predictable outcomes of ego-entitlement entanglement.

The Contemporary Peace Challenge

The convergence of global insecurity, digital mediation, and identity-based politics presents a significant challenge for peacebuilding in the twenty-first century. Ego and entitlement are no longer confined to private psychology; they are institutionalized within political discourse, media ecosystems, and cultural narratives of success and victimhood. Addressing contemporary conflicts therefore requires more than negotiation tables and ceasefires. It demands deliberate engagement with the psychological conditions that make violence appear meaningful, justified, or inevitable.

Peace studies scholars increasingly argue for integrative approaches that combine structural reform with psychological literacy. Such approaches recognize that sustainable peace depends on the capacity of individuals and groups to tolerate ego discomfort, relinquish entitlement to absolute moral authority, and engage in relational accountability. Without this capacity, even well-designed peace agreements remain fragile.

The next section builds on this insight by exploring how peacebuilding and conflict transformation frameworks can intentionally address ego and entitlement. Drawing from peace psychology, restorative practices, and conflict mediation theory, PART IV articulates pathways for cultivating humility, empathy, and what scholars describe as the “quiet ego” in both personal and political contexts.

Implications for Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation

Addressing Ego and Entitlement in Peacebuilding Frameworks

Peacebuilding scholarship has long emphasized the importance of addressing structural violence, inequality, and institutional fragility. However, as the preceding analyses demonstrate, conflicts are sustained not only by material conditions but also by psychological investments in identity, dignity, and moral entitlement. Ego and entitlement function as invisible infrastructures of conflict, shaping how actors interpret harm, assign blame, and evaluate the legitimacy of compromise. Sustainable peace, therefore, requires intentional engagement with these psychological dimensions.

Conflict transformation theory offers a useful lens for this engagement. Unlike conflict resolution, which often seeks to manage or settle disputes, conflict transformation emphasizes altering the underlying relationships, narratives, and patterns that generate violence. From this perspective, ego and entitlement are not obstacles to be bypassed but dynamics to be transformed. Peacebuilding initiatives that ignore ego threat or entitlement narratives risk superficial success followed by relapse into conflict.

One of the central challenges in peacebuilding is that ego loss is often experienced as existential threat, particularly for leaders and groups whose legitimacy rests on narratives of strength, righteousness, or historical destiny. Entitlement compounds this challenge by framing compromise as moral failure. Effective peacebuilding must therefore create conditions in which

humility and acknowledgment are reframed not as weakness, but as ethical and strategic strengths.

The Quiet Ego as a Peace Psychology Intervention

Peace psychology introduces the concept of the “quiet ego” as a constructive alternative to ego suppression or domination. A quiet ego is characterized by balanced self-regard, openness to feedback, empathy for others, and an awareness of interdependence. Importantly, it does not require the abandonment of identity or self-interest; rather, it situates these within a broader moral and relational context.

Empirical studies within peace psychology suggest that individuals and groups with quieter ego orientations are more capable of perspective-taking, less defensive in the face of criticism, and more willing to engage in cooperative problem-solving. These qualities are essential for peacebuilding, particularly in post-conflict settings where mistrust and moral injury run deep. Cultivating a quiet ego enables actors to acknowledge harm without collapsing into shame or retaliation.

In practical terms, quiet ego interventions can be incorporated into peace education, leadership training, and mediation processes. Reflective practices such as guided dialogue, narrative exchange, and mindfulness-based approaches help participants recognize ego activation and entitlement narratives as internal processes rather than objective truths. When individuals learn to identify questions such as “What am I protecting here?” or “What do I believe I am owed?” they gain psychological distance from reactive patterns.

At the collective level, quiet ego principles can inform institutional cultures. Organizations and governments that reward humility, accountability, and learning—rather than dominance and infallibility—create environments more conducive to peaceful decision-making. This shift requires deliberate counter-narratives to prevailing honor cultures that equate strength with rigidity and concession with defeat.

Restorative Practices and the Reframing of Entitlement

Restorative justice and restorative peacebuilding approaches offer additional tools for addressing entitlement-driven conflict. Restorative practices focus on repairing harm through dialogue, accountability, and relational repair rather than punishment or coercion. Central to this process is the reframing of entitlement—from entitlement to dominance or immunity, toward entitlement to dignity, safety, and voice for all parties.

In restorative settings, participants are encouraged to articulate not only what they believe they deserve, but how those beliefs emerged from lived experience. This process often reveals that entitlement claims are rooted in unmet needs, historical trauma, or experiences of marginalization. By naming these origins, entitlement loses some of its moral absolutism and becomes open to negotiation.

For peacebuilders, restorative frameworks highlight the importance of creating spaces where ego threat is minimized. Structured dialogue, clear facilitation norms, and shared commitments to

mutual respect reduce the likelihood that acknowledgment will be experienced as humiliation. When individuals feel seen and heard, ego defensiveness diminishes, making room for empathy and responsibility.

These practices are particularly relevant in post-conflict societies, where collective entitlement narratives—such as claims to exclusive victimhood or moral purity—often impede reconciliation. Restorative approaches do not demand equivalence of suffering, but they do challenge zero-sum moral hierarchies that perpetuate resentment. By humanizing all participants, restorative peacebuilding weakens the psychological foundations of renewed violence.

Leadership, Accountability, and Psychological Literacy

Leadership plays a decisive role in either perpetuating or transforming ego-entitlement dynamics. Leaders shape collective narratives, model responses to criticism, and define the moral boundaries of acceptable behavior. When leaders exhibit fragile egos and inflated entitlement, these traits cascade through institutions and populations. Conversely, leaders who demonstrate accountability and reflective capacity can normalize humility at scale.

Psychological literacy should therefore be considered a core competency in peace-oriented leadership. This includes the ability to recognize ego threat, tolerate ambiguity, and distinguish between personal validation and collective responsibility. Training programs for political, military, and community leaders increasingly emphasize emotional intelligence, yet such efforts often remain peripheral rather than central to governance.

Peace studies scholarship suggests that embedding psychological literacy within leadership development enhances conflict prevention. Leaders who understand the emotional dimensions of power are better equipped to resist escalation pressures, manage public narratives responsibly, and engage in principled compromise. Such leaders are also more likely to foster institutional cultures that prioritize dialogue over domination.

Accountability mechanisms further support this process by decoupling authority from infallibility. Transparent governance, independent oversight, and participatory decision-making reduce entitlement by reinforcing the idea that power is conditional and relational rather than inherent. These structures help contain ego by distributing responsibility and validating dissent as a contribution rather than a threat.

Education and the Long Arc of Peace

Education represents one of the most promising arenas for long-term transformation of ego and entitlement dynamics. Peace education that integrates psychological awareness equips individuals from an early age with the tools to navigate conflict constructively. Rather than framing conflict as failure, such education presents it as an inevitable feature of human interaction that can be approached with curiosity and care.

Curricula that emphasize empathy, critical self-reflection, and ethical responsibility counteract cultural narratives of exceptionalism and zero-sum success. When learners are encouraged to

examine their own entitlement assumptions and ego investments, they develop resilience against polarizing ideologies. This is particularly crucial in digital environments, where performative certainty and moral outrage are rewarded.

From a peace studies perspective, education that integrates inner transformation with social justice is essential. Structural inequalities must be addressed alongside psychological dispositions, as the two are mutually reinforcing. A society that reduces material injustice while cultivating reflective, humble citizens is better positioned to sustain peace across generations.

Conclusion: From Rift to Reflection

Ego and entitlement, conceptualized here as the twin brothers of rift, are not aberrations of human nature but intrinsic features of selfhood and social life. They enable agency, ambition, and moral conviction, yet they also carry the potential to distort perception and escalate conflict. When left unexamined, these traits transform disagreements into existential struggles and grievances into moral crusades.

Through theoretical analysis, historical case studies, and contemporary illustrations, this article has argued that ego and entitlement operate across scales—from intimate relationships to global conflicts—shaping how individuals and groups interpret harm and justify violence. The Nigerian Civil War and World War I demonstrate how leadership ego and entitlement can convert political crises into humanitarian catastrophes. Contemporary conflicts reveal how these dynamics persist, amplified by digital media and identity-based politics.

Peacebuilding efforts that neglect these psychological dimensions risk superficial or temporary success. Sustainable peace requires more than institutional reform; it demands cultivation of humility, empathy, and psychological literacy. Concepts such as the quiet ego, restorative practice, and conflict transformation provide pathways for addressing the inner conditions of violence alongside its outer structures.

Ultimately, peace is not merely the absence of war but the presence of relational maturity. It is the capacity to hold identity without domination, to pursue justice without entitlement, and to engage disagreement without annihilation. By turning attention inward as well as outward, peace studies can more fully account for the human forces that both fracture and heal our shared world.

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Essay: The Interfaces of Repressions and Social Movements in Ethiopia from 1991-2018

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THE INTERFACES OF REPRESSIONS AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN ETHIOPIA FROM 1991-2018

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Abstract

This article explores the dynamics between social movements and state repression under Ethiopia's EPRDF regime between 1991 and 2018, by analyzing the interplay of peaceful and violent forms of resistance. A qualitative thematic analysis was conducted on primary and secondary data to discern prevalent patterns and themes concerning resistance and repression. Although the 1991 regime transition marked a crucial juncture in preventing authoritarianism and establishing a new democratic framework in Ethiopia, the EPRDF persisted in suppressing ideological adversaries to preserve its political authority. Nevertheless, the EPRDF's repressive methodologies proved counterproductive within the political landscape, provoking both violent and non-violent resistance and consequently triggering tidal waves of social movements from 1991 to 2004, 2005 to 2012, and 2013 to 2018. These opposition strategies, facilitated by opportune political circumstances, were instrumental in modifying state suppression aimed at

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democratization. The EPRDF's strategies of repression acted as a catalyst for transformation, influenced by political developments such as an exclusive transitional agreement and the establishment of a federal system, internal divisions within the TPLF and EPRDF, and a series of undemocratic electoral processes. Furthermore, political opportunities, including the death of Meles Zenawi and the subsequent leadership void, alongside increased internet accessibility and digital media platforms, contributed to this transformative process. Consequently, the reciprocal relationship between repression and both violent and non-violent resistance during the EPRDF regime led to recurrent instances of transformative resistance and political openings, which ultimately eroded the EPRDF's hegemony and rendered it obsolete by 2018.

1. Introduction

In Ethiopia, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)-led Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (hereafter EPRDF) seized control of the state in 1991 and began experimenting with a revolutionary democratic ideal. The EPRDF was a coalition of four ethnically defined unequal regional parties: the TPLF, the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), and the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM). The three others joined the TPLF in the coalition, each believed responsible for governing its respective ethnically defined regional state in a form of ethno-federalism.

The demands of transitioning from warfare to peace, specifically the transformation of rebels into political parties, were significantly influenced by the enduring consequences of the civil war initiated in 1974. These legacies encompassed the robust solidarity and cohesive leadership that emerged from the prolonged armed conflict, the established precedents and organizational frameworks that the insurgents developed for governing controlled territories, and the credibility acquired through military victory (Lyons, 2021). The ascent of the EPRDF was an outcome of this extensive armed struggle, yet it also offered prospects for a peaceful transition. During this period, multiple factors were operative, including the shift from a wartime to a post-war environment, the transition from military to civilian governance, and the movement from centralized to decentralized authority. These developments presented a propitious opportunity to investigate authentic solutions for Ethiopia's persistent instability (Yonas, 2024).

Despite initial hopes, EPRDF's transitional process prioritized power consolidation over power sharing and aimed to turn the armed rebel organization into a dominating authoritarian political party. With its origins as a victorious insurgent group, the EPRDF consolidated power as an authoritarian party by managing two contradictory logics—one that built on the hierarchy and cohesion of the rebel movement that won the war, and the other that drew on Ethiopia's diversity and emphasized ethnically defined parties and states (Lyons, 2021). The EPRDF expanded its political control apparatus, raising doubts about its commitment to a multinational democratic federalism system (Alemante, 1992). The EPRDF's democratic rhetoric, aimed at redressing past injustices, gave way to democratic centralism, state-led growth, and a centralized federal structure designed to maintain political control (Vestal, 1999; Mercy, 2024). This approach hindered emerging aspirations for self-rule and failed to address political and economic inequalities.

As a result, the EPRDF's professed commitment to a federal system and democratic politics placed Ethiopia at risk of authoritarian one-party rule. The EPRDF's persecution continued to silence ideological opponents, prompting a mix of violent and peaceful opposition. Its repressive tactics for maintaining autocratic control failed due to unfulfilled goals, but these measures backfired, triggering waves of both violent and nonviolent public uprisings. Resistance against the EPRDF from 1991 to 2018 employed both violent and peaceful tactics, constituting a social movement that functioned as a transformational event. By leveraging political opportunities, this movement undermined the EPRDF's power structure and rendered its hegemonic power politics obsolete by 2018. Although studies on whether repression increases or decreases the frequency of protest are inconsistent and inconclusive, the experience under Ethiopia's EPRDF regime suggests that repression not only promotes social movements and catalyzes protests but also contributes to regime change.

This article is divided into six sections. The first section is this introduction, followed by a brief overview of the research methodology section. The third section of the literature provides a conceptual review of the interface between repression and social movements within an authoritarian setting. The fourth section examines the progression of the EPRDF's repressive tactics and how they catalyzed a series of transformative events that sparked mass movements for democratization in Ethiopia beginning in 1991. The fifth section presents Ethiopia's three waves of social movements between 1991 and 2018, followed by a concluding section.

2. Research Method and Methodology

This article employs a qualitative case study method, utilizing both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were acquired through in-depth key informant interviews (KII) with political leaders, researchers, academicians, and social movement activists, whose identities were coded and utilized anonymously. During the data gathering process, informants were chosen purposefully based on their knowledge of the topic under investigation and notified of their voluntary participation and anonymity. The sample size was determined using theoretical saturation. Besides, secondary data have been used to support and triangulate the primary data on Ethiopia's political dynamics. The primary methodological objective was to understand how EPRDF repression led to both violent and nonviolent opposition using qualitative topic analysis. To ensure the research's validity and reliability, triangulation and cross-referencing were employed using data sources via KII, as well as cross-referencing of findings between interviewees and secondary sources.

3. Repression, Transformative Events, and Social Movements in the Authoritarian Context

Authoritarian regimes employ various repression techniques to prevent popular rebellions and the emergence of opposition leaders (Rød & Weidmann, 2015). In response to these tactics, dissidents engage in either peaceful resistance or violence as part of social movements to achieve their goals (Demetriou, 2022). The four viable responses along this continuum include doing nothing or inaction (survival mode), employing institutional tactics such as negotiation, joining or forming an armed struggle, or joining or forming a nonviolent movement (Kalin et al., 2025). These resistance mechanisms challenge authoritarianism, suggesting that repression can provoke backlash, mobilization, and the spread of protests that destabilize the regime. Repression also

has unintended side effects, which can sometimes lead to violent escalation, radicalization of the populace, and cycles of violence (Davenport, 2007; Hassan et al., 2022).

Repression often backfires, acting as a transformative event that opens new avenues for resistance and regime change (Lachapelle et al., 2021). By altering perceptions of the past and visions of the future, repression creates political opportunities that catalyze the growth of social movements under authoritarian regimes (Mendonça et al., 2019). Repression functions as a causative mechanism within opportunity structures and collective action agencies, driving regime change and democratization by compelling authoritarians to step down or be removed from power (Romero, 2020). It significantly influences the population's motivation for resistance, enabling radical departures from traditional ways of thinking about the system. This shift fosters solutions to collective action challenges, coupled with political opportunities that impact struggles for democratization, movement mobilization, and regime change (*see* Shultziner, 2011, 2018).

Therefore, repression not only fuels resistance but also leads to significant reforms or even regime upheaval, serving as a transformative event that motivates dissidents to act against the oppressor to avoid further repression. Such transformative events can be categorized as internal or external. Internal transformative events arise from dynamics and confrontations between the regime and its opponents within the political system (Shultziner, 2018). External transformative events occur outside the political system but have the potential to influence the actions of both the oppressed and the ruling elite. These events invigorate democratic movements through contagion, diffusion, emulation, domino effects, snowballing, or demonstration effects (Huntington, 1991). For example, recent protests such as the Arab Spring (2010–2012), the Turkish protests in 2013, the Free Fare Movement in Brazil, Ukraine since 2013, and Hong Kong in 2014—supported by the emergence of new technologies and social media—played key roles in mobilizing protests in repressive political contexts, confirming the significance of external transformative events.

In addition to internal and external transformational events, scheduled mass gatherings—organized in advance or recurring annually or at other predictable intervals—that involve or influence large segments of society or the entire population can function as catalysts for regime change (Shultziner, 2018). For example, in nondemocratic regimes, elections can become transformative events when attempts to rig the results are exposed, paradoxically producing outcomes contrary to the regime's intentions (Shultziner, 2011). Furthermore, an annual music festival may serve as a platform for resistance songs and the strengthening of group identity against the regime (Snow et al., 2019). Here, activism—a fusion of art and activism—seeks to influence social movements by fostering internal identity formation, public mobilization, and communication (Stammen & Meissner, 2022). These mass movements exert an instrumental effect on the regime's power by mobilizing audiences through evoking wonder, destabilizing the status quo, and creating new subjectivities by redistributing the sensible (Shultziner, 2011; 2018). Such events have the potential to become focal points for mobilization against autocracy, promoting solidarity and enabling collective action by uniting significant segments of the populace simultaneously.

Social movements enable citizens to seek redress for their political grievances and challenge authoritarianism through collective action (Minkoff, 1997; Lukito et al., 2022). They create political structures and processes that differ significantly from established political systems (Törnberg, 2018). Specifically, in political contexts where repressive regimes perpetuate social injustice and exploit marginalized populations (Galtung, 1996), the availability of political opportunities alters the strategic calculus and increases the likelihood of cross-group cooperation to oppose the regime (Smithey & Kurtz, 2018). These political processes mobilize structures and frame the dynamics of political opportunity structures (Chang & Kim, 2007). Public indignation, dissent mobilization, and increased support for opposition movements manifest through large-scale demonstrations, disruptive direct actions, or creative symbolic initiatives (Porta, 2008). The public's strengthening moral incentives serve to define injustice, delegitimize the state, and deepen ideological convictions by exposing repression (Honari, 2018). Thus, tools of repression are integral to the political opportunity structure, as they prompt the assessment of novel strategies, signal the potential for collective action, foster camaraderie, and strengthen organizational networks (Chang & Kim, 2007; Porta, 2008). Repression initiates mobilization by signaling the possibility of collective action, making the relationship between repression and social movements crucial to understanding regime change. Repeated acts of repression often backfire, and the political opportunities they create give rise to social movements composed of individuals united by shared goals and solidarity, setting aspirational objectives for political reform.

4. Transformative Events During the EPRDF Regime

In Ethiopia, the following main internal and external transformative events, which occurred between 1991 and 2018, catalyzed struggles for regime change and democratization.

Exclusive transitional pact and the process of forming a federation: During the transition period, the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) organized the *Peaceful and Democratic Transitional Conference*, held from July 1 to 5, 1991, which approved the Transitional Period Charter of Ethiopia. Five hundred participants and twenty-two international observers signed this charter (Mercy, 2024). The Charter established the rules governing the TGE and set the principles for the transitional period, spanning from May 1991 to August 1995. The Council of Representatives (CoR), composed of eighty-seven members, was formed to serve as a transitional legislative body and to lay the groundwork for the transitional process (Merera, 2012). The TGE included forty-two members from the war-victorious parties against the Derg, twelve members from the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), and the remaining thirty-three members divided among twenty smaller parties (Amare, 2021). Although the participation list suggests an effort to be as inclusive as possible, there were political parties that were excluded from the conference. For example, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party, the All-Ethiopian Socialist Movement, and the Coalition of Ethiopian Democratic Forces were barred from participating in the transition (Vestal, 1999). Additionally, ethnonationalist political parties such as the OLF, the All-Amhara People's Organization (AAPPO), and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) were marginalized and effectively neutralized during this transitional period (Dias & Yared, 2022). Significant opposition from both Pan-Ethiopian parties and ethnonationalists excluded from the transitional process, steering the country toward single-party hegemonic control. This exclusion underscored the need for collective action among these oppressed and

marginalized groups, raising the possibility of coordinated resistance against the established EPRDF in 1995.

Second, the disagreement between competing political groups over how the transition should be managed made the transitional period critical for both the EPRDF and other political factions (Lyons, 1996; Merera, 2012). On one hand, the primary actors within the EPRDF who initially advocated for secession held power in the central state from which they intended to secede; on the other hand, national liberation politics were divided into two camps: those within the EPRDF and those outside it as the opposition movement (Yonas, 2024). This was particularly evident during the early years of the transition, which were marked by using divide-and-rule tactics to repress and/or co-opt the OLF. Although the EPRDF attempted to appease the OLF by agreeing to allocate an acceptable number of seats in the CoR, these efforts were unsuccessful. Distrust and animosity between the OLF and TPLF reached a climax during the TGE, leading to the dissolution of their strategic alliance and escalating into military clashes (KII#10, 2024, Adama). Furthermore, when two-thirds of the TPLF's armed forces were integrated into the State Defense Army, the reintegration of OLF combatants followed different principles and approaches, resulting in the OLF's armed forces being either eliminated or arrested in 1992 (Aalen, 2002; Lavers, 2024). As the co-option strategy of sharing power with the OLF failed to yield the desired results, the EPRDF adopted a divide-and-rule approach against the OLF by establishing the OPDO during the TGE. Consequently, tensions between the TPLF and the OLF intensified, and the Oromo political constituency perceived the emergence of two rival parties—the OLF and the OPDO—as undermining the OLF's objectives for representative political power at both regional and federal levels (KII#07, 2023, Addis Ababa). Subsequently, the OLF withdrew from the TGE and launched a counterinsurgency campaign as a form of political opposition, posing an "early test" for the EPRDF and its security forces in 1993 (Mercy, 2024, p. 69). Through this divide-and-rule strategy, the transition period witnessed various forms of political repression, with the OLF splitting off to join armed opposition groups and seeking exile overseas. This shift allowed the OLF to recalibrate its strategic actions against the EPRDF until the regime changed in 2018.

Third, the 1992 election was another mass-scheduled transformative event under the TGE. This nominal regional election served as a platform to demonstrate the EPRDF's repression of political opposition (Solomon, 2018). From the outset, opposition political parties such as the OLF, All-Amhara People's Organization (AAPPO), the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromia, the Ethiopian Democratic Alliance Group, and the Gedeo People's Democratic Organization were intimidated and eventually withdrew from the election, citing harassment by the EPRDF (Vestal, 1999). Although the 1992 election was held, it produced the opposite outcome of what the Transitional Charter had promised, serving instead as a scheduled transformative event. The political parties barred from the election subsequently sought alternative methods of resistance against the regime, either by joining the armed opposition or going into exile abroad. The TGE employed political control mechanisms such as an exclusive transitional contract, the formation of a federation that repressed and/or co-opted political parties, and the use of elections as a tool of repression. However, these measures also created political opportunities within the political process that fostered both violent and nonviolent resistance.

Intra-TPLF and intra-EPRDF divisions: following the fall of the Derg, internally, the EPRDF faced a series of internal political problems known as "Armageddon," while externally, the

Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and TPLF alliance against the Derg became entangled in a civil war between Ethiopia and Eritrea from 1998 to 2000, exposing the prevalence of both intra-TPLF and intra-EPRDF divisions. Although the Transitional Charter recognized Eritrea's independence following the 1993 referendum, tensions escalated over a disputed border area that had never been clearly defined since Italy's colonial rule of Eritrea (Lavers, 2024). These tensions eventually led to the Ethio-Eritrean War. The conflict between the two former allies, the TPLF and EPLF, significantly altered the political discourse within the EPRDF, resulting in divisions within the TPLF, the EPRDF, and among other Ethiopians.

First, the TPLF's existing schism was exacerbated by stark disagreements within the party regarding the war with Eritrea (Labzaé & Planel, 2021). Soft-liners, led by Meles, were less inclined to use force against Eritrea and favored a diplomatic armistice, while hardliners, led by then-Defense Minister Siyé Abraha, claimed that Tigray nationalism was under attack and planned to invade Eritrea in defense of Ethiopian sovereignty (De Waal, 2012; Plaut, 2014). While the TPLF hardliners advocated for a military invasion of Eritrea, the soft-liners preferred a more lenient approach aimed at resolving the conflict peacefully. Following the 2001 war, the TPLF's top leadership convened in Mekelle to evaluate the party's performance over ten years in office and to chart its future direction (Zekarias, 2020; Lavers, 2024). The meeting exposed deep divisions among TPLF leaders, resulting in a severe party split, with twelve members who supported the war condemned and expelled from the Cadre conventions in Mekelle (Amare, 2021). This internal dispute, intertwined with political and economic issues, eventually took on an ideological dimension (De Waal, 2012). The Meles-led soft-liners sought to eliminate the hardliners, introducing the concept of Bonapartism to combat corruption as the party increasingly merged with the state to consolidate control (Labzaé & Planel, 2021). Accusations of corruption and rent-seeking were used to imprison Siye, leading to a concentration of power around Meles and further weakening the TPLF coalition in favor of its exclusive and regressive elements (Gebrehiwot, 2024). This intra-TPLF fault line, rooted in the party's political culture and organizational leadership style, served as a critical internal transformative event in the political process.

Secondly, EPRDF members outside the TPLF who opposed the dismissal of hardline TPLF leaders—including the then FDRE President Negasso Gidada, the Chief of Defense Staff Tsadekan Gebretensae, and the Chief Executive of SEPDO and President of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples (SNNP) region Abate Kisho—were removed from their political positions (Amare, 2021). The schism within the TPLF and later the EPRDF not only highlights the TPLF's unchecked dominance over Ethiopian politics, disregarding the interests of Ethiopians and the three People's Democratic Organizations (PDOs)² it established, but also shaped the ideological character of the EPRDF system. This resulted in the missed opportunity to build a democratic system (KII#08, 2024, Adama). Although Meles secured his victory by expelling his opponents from the TPLF/EPRDF, this historic episode served as another internal transformative event, exposing the EPRDF's authoritarian repression.

² The EPRDF system has resulted in three structural party layers: the TPLF as the EPRDF's lynchpin, the three People's Democratic Organizations (PDOs), commonly referred to as the SEPDO, OPDO, and ANDM, as EPRDF-affiliated parties, and the five other regional parties as EPRDF partners.

Thirdly, the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, which resulted in over 100,000 deaths (Lavers, 2024, p. 86), was opposed by various political groups who blamed the war on the EPRDF's ethno-nationalistic rhetoric. During the war, the EPRDF sought to mobilize soldiers and resources in the interest of Ethiopian national unity. However, Ethio-nationalists accused the EPRDF of collaborating with the EPLF to undermine Ethiopia's territorial integrity by allowing Eritrea to establish its own state, thereby leaving Ethiopia landlocked (Mebratu, 2022). This situation further fueled public dissatisfaction with the lack of democratization efforts and the rising cost of living (Mercy, 2024).

Fourthly, the EPRDF's internal conflicts represented a transformative event in the post-1991 political landscape. On the one hand, the EPRDF was administered by a Council and an Executive Committee, with each member party electing nine to the Executive Committee and 45 to the Council, but the OPDO represented six times the number of constituents as the TPLF (Lyons, 2021). The five other ethno-regional parties, on the other hand, did not have representation on the EPRDF Executive Committee and were considered affiliates rather than full coalition members (Arriola & Lyons, 2016). These disagreements among the alliance's parties pushed the coalition's historically weaker members to form their own leadership and political networks. This dynamic between the EPRDF and its affiliated parties created challenges in governing Ethiopia's peripheral regions. This presented a political opportunity that led to the inevitable ideological dilution of the TPLF, and growing frustration among other ethnic groups regarding TPLF dominance and the perceived illegitimacy of their appointed regional leaders (KII#03, 2025, Adama). This intra-EPRDF fault line, rooted in its leadership style, revealed a fundamental division within the coalition and a lack of elite cohesion, posing a critical threat to the EPRDF's political survival.

The intra-EPRDF rift laid the foundation for eventual upheaval, which was further intensified by the death of Meles in 2012. For example, the controversy that emerged in OPDO and ANDM is a case in point. During the 2013 OPDO party conference, groups loyal to Junedin Sado and Abadula Gameda clashed, both of whom had previously served as president of Oromia Regional State. Abadula supporters accused the Junedin camp of being errand boys for political interests outside of the OPDO, whilst Junedin supporters accused Abadula of rent-seeking and corruption. Furthermore, the chairman of the ANDM Central Committee office stated in 2015 that the ANDM provided refuge to TPLF forces who were tactically retreating as the military Derg regime launched a massive onslaught (*see* Lyons, 2021). These events marked the beginning of the EPRDF's decline and created a political opportunity that accelerated the party's leadership crisis. The EPRDF's highly centralized leadership style resulted in the marginalization of excluded elite factions, rendering them extremely weak (Gebrehiwot, 2024). Due to rigid adherence to ideology, the EPRDF was unable to address evolving realities and expectations. Distributive crises and elite political dynamics also contributed to its collapse (Lavers, 2016; Lavers, 2024).

From 1998 onwards, divisions within the TPLF and the broader EPRDF revealed that the TPLF dominated the federal government. The three PDOs were perceived as puppet parties, while the other five affiliated regional parties were excluded from major political decision-making. This centralization of power generated resentment, serving as a pivotal event in these political

processes. Leadership failures and the resulting power vacuum provided the political opportunity that led to the EPRDF's demise in 2018.

Successive undemocratic elections: The five elections held in 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010, and 2015 did not establish a democratic society in Ethiopia. However, they played a role in the overthrow of the EPRDF as mass-scheduled transformative events that exposed the regime's repressive nature. The successive election results and the percentage of parliamentary seats the EPRDF won in each election year, which declined until it reached 100% in 2015. They asserted that the election no longer brings about regime change but remains a scheduled mass event that triggers waves of social movements, as shown below.

<i>No.</i>	<i>Election Year</i>	<i>Seats won by EPRDF and Affiliates</i>	<i>Seats won by the opposition</i>	<i>Percentage of seats won by the EPRDF</i>
1.	1995	496	50	89
2.	2000	481	66	87.9
3.	2005	367	172	66.9
4.	2010	545	2	99.6
5.	2015	547	0	100

Table 1: Results of national elections in Ethiopia under the EPRDF (1995–2015)

First, in the 1995 election, the EPRDF won 496 of 546 seats, accounting for 89% of the seats in the national parliament. The election reinforced the de facto power allocation, with EPRDF winning all seats and forming the new cabinet (Lavers, 2024). However, this election was held in a situation in which there was no total consensus on the process because four political parties - the OLF, the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Coalition (SEPDC), Western Somali Democratic Front (WSLF), and the AAPO - boycotted the election (Mercy, 2024). It showed that the EPRDF won this non-competitive election to rule. The election was a mere formality and a symbolic exercise conducted in the absence of proper public debate between contenders, and with the early withdrawal of the political opposition (Merera, 2012). However, this election provided the framework for subsequent elections and served as a transformative event for opposition political groups, with the public's overwhelming participation in the EPRDF-led polls.

In the 2000 election, although seventeen political parties contested, the EPRDF won 481 of 546 parliamentary seats, accounting for 87.9%. Despite the opposition parties' denials that the EPRDF had manipulated the results, the EPRDF reverted to authoritarian methods. This was followed by the 2005 election, in which the opposition parties won 172 of the 547 parliamentary seats, and the result was praised as the most democratic election Ethiopians had ever seen (Mercy, 2024). This election was yet another notable scheduled mass transformative event in the history of the Ethiopian political opposition, as opposing political parties secured 33.1% of parliamentary seats. In response, to retain political legitimacy, the EPRDF aggressively pursued a state-directed development policy and demonstrated its capacity to suppress opposition parties, the media, and civil society organizations during the election campaign (Asnake, 2011). This indicated that the opposition needed to unite politically to oppose the EPRDF rather than withdraw from the struggle and pursue the path of democracy in

Ethiopia. The EPRDF's loss of significant votes sent a clear message about the impending dangers to the regime's survival, signaling the need for greater collective action by the opposition. However, the EPRDF became increasingly repressive, using legal and administrative coercive political actions. First, the EPRDF violently suppressed electoral protests, detained and exiled opposition leaders (Lavers, 2024). Second, three draconian laws, Proclamations No. 652/2009, No. 590/2008, and No. 621/2009, were used to prevent opposition political parties, the media, and civil society groups from struggling for democracy (Mercy, 2024). These allowed the EPRDF to present itself as the only viable option for Ethiopia's future, using military force to crush opposition parties through politicized laws and judicial systems, and the election strengthened competitive authoritarianism rather than promoting or entrenching electoral democracy.

The EPRDF won the 2010 election, securing more than 99 percent of parliamentary seats. There were primarily two causes behind this. The 2010 election campaign was affected by three harsh mechanisms of legislative repression, which made it harder for actors of democratization to express disapproval and criticism. Second, various political parties that participated in the 2010 election were detained on charges of plotting against the state prior to the election (Mercy, 2024). The EPRDF's politics of suppression constrained political space, resulting in the division and marginalization of all opposition parties that participated in the polls (Aalen, 2014). This sent a clear message to the opposition that it would not tolerate any criticism of its administration, thereby reinforcing the need for opposition and for people to work together to organize social movements against the EPRDF's authoritarian rule. This gave rise to resistance politics, including student protests, Ethiopian Muslim protests, and the online journalistic movement that began in 2011.

Again in 2015, the EPRDF used elections as a means of repression and political control, winning 100% of the parliament seats. This election revealed two major factors that became unintended political consequences of the regime change. First, the EPRDF grew increasingly repressive, utilizing political administrative tools to suppress political dissidents, where any political problem was elevated to a national interest under the pretext of national security. Second, the election's outcome vindicated the people and opposition parties that democratic elections under the EPRDF were impossible and would only be employed as a tool for political repression. Both factors have increased the opportunity for people and opposition to consider new means of resistance to the regime, including both violent protests and armed combat. Despite heavy-handed government security forces and waves of political violence, mass protests altered the political trajectory, laying the groundwork for the dissolution of the EPRDF alliance (Mebratu, 2022). All consecutive elections have served as scheduled transformative events that expressively reflect EPRDF's electoral authoritarianism, reinforcing its hegemony over Ethiopian society and opposition parties. In the political process, these elections functioned as a watershed moment, conveying to the public that the EPRDF uses elections to exercise both political power and repression. The elections remained transformative, conveying to these excluded groups the possibility of collective action against the EPRDF.

The death of Meles and leadership vacuum: Within the framework of social movements and political processes, the death of Meles Zenawi in 2012 can be seen as a significant political opportunity, creating a leadership vacuum and accelerating the regime change of the EPRDF.

First, Meles's death, as well as his position within the EPRDF system, was critical to understanding the function of leadership in an authoritarian regime. Meles was regarded as the philosopher-king of the EPRDF political system (Assefa, 2023) and the architect of ethnic federalism and a developmental state model, overseeing both the TPLF and the EPRDF until his death (Aalen, 2014). His death created an extraordinary, transformative political opportunity that resulted in a lack of unified leadership legitimacy within the EPRDF. Second, Meles was a divisive leader, regarded as a "revolutionary, statesman, and autocrat," who successfully established EPRDF's internal and external legitimacy (Plaut, 2014, p. 646). Although an authoritarian leader, he sought to gain performance-based legitimacy by placing Ethiopia on a developmental trajectory. As the primary driving force in Ethiopian politics, his death created a political opportunity that resulted in a leadership vacuum, as the next elected chairperson could not easily attain the same stature. Following his death, the EPRDF experienced an ideological and leadership crisis. The ideologies of revolutionary democracy, democratic centralism, and the developmental state, which Meles had used to build the EPRDF's foundation, dissipated with his passing (Assefa, 2023). As the EPRDF began to sow discontent, Meles's death exacerbated the turmoil stemming from these ideological fractures (Mulgeta, 2024). The EPRDF started to lose internal cohesion amid ongoing power struggles along fault lines, particularly as the PDOs demanded their turn to lead in a context of diverging ideologies. This culminated in a realignment within the EPRDF, marked by Hailemariam's appointment as Chairperson of the EPRDF and Prime Minister of Ethiopia. Hailemariam's leadership revealed a compromise between the TPLF and PDOs, who became more assertive both before and after Meles's death, thereby exposing a political settlement characterized by extremely weak, excluded elite factions (Lavers, 2016).

Hailemariam lacked the necessary leadership legitimacy—specifically, the confidence to exercise his authority and make decisive rulings. First, he was neither one of the EPRDF's guerrilla fighters nor a founder of the organization; consequently, he did not command the same level of legitimacy as Meles, as senior TPLF members were reluctant to follow his direction. Second, he was supported by three Deputy Prime Ministers representing the TPLF, OPDO, and ANDM, reflecting a trajectory of weakening central control and increasing fragmentation, with the military emerging as Ethiopia's *de facto* political power (KII#6, 2024, Addis Ababa). This election of Hailemariam was leveraged as a political opportunity for resistance politics in two significant ways. First, the election of the EPRDF chairperson highlighted the challenge faced by PDOs in gaining internal legitimacy from the TPLF, as well as from the broader EPRDF, to lead Ethiopia. Since most PDOs were neither EPRDF guerrilla fighters nor founders of the organization, they did not receive the proper respect as EPRDF chairpersons, as senior TPLF members were reluctant to follow their direction (KII#11, 2025, Adama). The new chairperson lacked political credibility and trust in exercising authority and making decisions within the EPRDF, at least internally. This exacerbated the EPRDF leadership crisis and the regime's inability to implement changes in response to political and economic pressures.

Second, Hailemariam's election created a political opportunity that exposed internal distrust, weaknesses, and elitist rivalries within the party. Due to intra-EPRDF elite competition, Hailemariam's leadership was compelled to appoint three Deputy Prime Ministers and advisors. Subsequently, ongoing EPRDF meetings—referred to as the declaration of two states of emergency and the establishment of command posts—revealed a hybrid political system in which

individuals were tortured in both private and official prisons (KII #07, 2024, Addis Ababa). These transformative repressive events pushed Ethiopia to a breaking point where the EPRDF could no longer govern effectively. Traditionally, such moments significantly influenced the population's motivation for resistance, suggesting pathways for collective action. This political opportunity shaped the struggles for democratization, facilitated departures from entrenched systemic thinking, and enabled the rise of anti-government protests in Oromia and Amhara.

The aforementioned factors highlight the lack of strong leadership in the post-Meles period, which created a political opportunity within the EPRDF's internal dynamics, exposing both intra-party divisions and a leadership vacuum. First, Meles's passing revealed the EPRDF's inability to address emerging demands. Following his death, the risks associated with collective leadership—such as elite rivalry and inefficiency—became evident within the EPRDF, exposing the regime's vulnerabilities, including its failure to respond effectively to new challenges. The government's inadequate response to the employment demands of a growing youth population sparked unprecedented anti-government protests, undermining the EPRDF's narrative of timely crisis management. Second, Meles's death exposed divisions among EPRDF elites, notably an alliance of PDOs opposing the TPLF. This intra-party conflict increased the PDO's institutional influence, leading to the decentralization of TPLF power. The competition within the EPRDF created space for protests to emerge, with some factions supporting and promoting the demonstrations while others sought to suppress them (Lavers, 2024).

This revealed the coordinated efforts of the PDOs within the broader EPRDF as a political opportunity that enabled collective action against the TPLF. These PDOs, which had supported the TPLF in gaining and maintaining power as the central force of the EPRDF for 27 years, eventually withdrew, causing the TPLF to lose control of the federal government. The PDOs reinterpreted TPLF's historical dominance within the EPRDF system. They created space for new political options, initiating a political transformation that removed the TPLF from total control of political power by capitalizing on the wave of anti-government protests (KII#13, 2025, Adama). In this context, shifts in political alliances and intensified disputes during times of crisis encouraged reformist groups from the OPDO and ANDM—sometimes known as Team Lemma—to challenge the dominant TPLF. Furthermore, the Oromo and Amhara protests significantly contributed to the formation of OroMara solidarity, a development that Team Lemma claimed to support from the outset. This solidarity further facilitated Team Lemma's rise to prominence and pressured Hailemariam to resign. These political opportunities led to a transformative change within the EPRDF and Ethiopia, raising the political consciousness of the PDOs. The change within the EPRDF occurred unexpectedly: those who lost control did not anticipate their defeat, and those who won did not foresee their victory. This event marked a watershed moment in Ethiopian political upheaval.

Internet access and social media: Internet access and social media-based online activism in protest movements are often viewed through the lenses of either cyber-pessimism or cyber-optimism (Dias & Yared, 2022). This dichotomy has sparked a debate about whether internet access and social media serve as tools of digital freedom or instruments of digital repression within authoritarian regimes. The internet era has inspired aspirations for democratic change, with social media emerging as a vital platform for collective political actions, including protest movements (Urgessa & Mercy, 2024). Internet connectivity and digital activism have

transformed the operational landscape of authoritarian regimes by reducing coordination barriers and facilitating public mobilization against repressive and ineffective governments (Frantz et al., 2020).

Specifically, following the 2010 election, a series of events linked to international social movements and the advancement of digital technology began to expose the authoritarian nature of the EPRDF through online activism. Despite limited internet access, activists and protesters utilized social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs to mobilize resources, disseminate strategies, recruit members, and express dissent. The proliferation of social media technologies, combined with new demands arising from the expansion of university enrollment and rising youth unemployment, has empowered Ethiopian youth through social media activism. This activism has emerged as an alternative platform for protest discourse, thereby supporting social movements and calls for regime change in Ethiopia (KII#10, 2024, Addis Ababa). Digital technologies have been employed to challenge the EPRDF's repressive regime through both online and offline social movements. These developments have been accelerated not only by demographic shifts among the youth and the technological revolution but also by processes of agenda-setting, interest articulation, aggregation, and mobilization, which have outpaced the state's responses and increased its vulnerability to political challenges (Gebrewahd, 2019).

Under the EPRDF regime, internet access and social media have created significant political opportunities for social movements by facilitating the framing of protest agendas, connecting protest forces, supporting activism platforms, promoting trending content through hashtags, and enabling fundraising both domestically and internationally. For example, social media played a crucial role in linking protesters within the country and abroad. Internally, it fostered collective solidarity between the two major ethnic groups—Amhara and Oromo—who together constitute more than 60% of the population, uniting them against the TPLF's dominance. Despite narratives portraying these groups as historical archenemies with irreconcilable interests, the protest in Gondar challenged this perception by expressing the sentiment, “the blood of Oromo is ours too” (Dias & Yared, 2022). Oromo youths also demonstrated solidarity with the Amhara by joining the social movement to protect Lake Tana from destruction, under the slogan “*Xaanaan keenya*” (translated as “Lake Tana is our common resource”). In turn, the Amhara showed their support by attending the Oromo Irreechaa, an annual thanksgiving celebration, in 2016 at Bishoftu. These solidarity framings and other pressing political issues led to the emergence of the Oromara movement, which further strengthened its social media activism. Externally, the use of social media has facilitated direct communication between protestors and the Ethiopian diaspora opposing the EPRDF. Technological infrastructure influenced the conduct of protests, with social media playing a crucial role in fundraising, mobilizing, and organizing rallies, sit-ins, and boycotts both abroad and within the country (Elsabet et al., 2022).

In Ethiopia, social media has served as a vital platform for activism by enabling the use of protest symbols and framing issues during mass scheduled events, while also circulating the transformative power of music to reach large audiences simultaneously. For example, during the Oromo protests from 2014 to 2018, protest communications—supplemented by traditional media, resistance art, and large remembrance activities—mobilized the populace in support of the nonviolent campaign against the authoritarian state (Urgessa & Mercy, 2024; Asebe, 2025). Protest songs by Oromo activist artists, such as Etika Teferi's “*Saaqi Saanqaa*,” Caala Bultume's

"*Maastar Pilaanii*," and Haachaluu Hundessa's "*Malaan Jiraa?*" were particularly popular and memorable among protesters (Asebe, 2025). During this period, increased internet access and social media platforms, enhanced by features like autoplay and live streaming, facilitated the widespread dissemination of these activist musicians' works (Urgessa & Mercy, 2024).

In advancing the circulation of trending topics, internet and social media communications have become crucial to the emergence, organization, and mobilization of protests in Ethiopia's Oromia and Amhara regions. These platforms have created opportunities for new forms of mobilization and the dissemination of protest messages, including online petitions, email campaigns, viral images, memes, and conversations centered on trending hashtags as means of self-expression. In Ethiopia, the use of popular hashtags enables others to virtually join the movement and identify with the movement. Examples include #SayNo, #MasterPlan, #Qeerroo, #OromoProtest, #AmharaResistance, #Fanno, and #Oromara hashtags initiated and used by like-minded social mobilizers from the Oromia and Amhara regions in opposition to the EPRDF. In addition to reaching large audiences quickly via traditional mass media, social media allows for the real-time sharing of powerful images, videos, emails, and documents, as well as the incitement of spontaneous protests. For instance, during the protests, social media circulated images and videos that were broadcast by international news outlets such as Voice of America (VOA), Deutsche Welle (DW), and Al Jazeera, as well as satellite-based television channels like OMN and Ethiopian Satellite Television (ESAT) (Urgessa & Mercy, 2024). These outlets exposed the regime's authoritarianism and provided an alternative to the state-run media by offering a flexible platform that, through digital anonymity, helped mobilize protests and expand their global reach (Elsabet et al., 2022). In general, internet access and social media—which include novel ways to communicate political manifestos and calls to action through social media—have enabled protesters to actively participate in the movement both offline and online, serving as an additional external transformative event since 2010 in Ethiopia.

5. Waves of Ethiopian Protests Since 1991: *Violent and Peaceful Uprisings*

Understanding Ethiopian protest dynamics since 1991 indicates that the EPRDF faced successive waves of social movements until 2018. These tidal waves of violent and non-violent social movements may be divided into three rounds: the first wave (1991-2004), the second wave (2005-2013), and the third wave (2014-2018).

Following the exclusive transitional agreement in 1991 and the process of forging a federation, *the first wave of social movements (1991–2004)* was sparked by the following factors. The first reason for this round of resistance and protest was that the policies had been manufactured by the ruling party and imposed on the local population in the interest of the EPRDF. This lack of policy buy-in undermined the EPRDF's legitimacy to rule the country. For instance, the TGE Charter of 1991, the Regionalisation Policy of 1992, the FDRE Constitution of 1995, and various policy initiatives were all authored by the ruling party and lacked popular mandate (Merera, 2012). As a result, ethnic groups, including the Somali, Oromo, and Afar, began to demand their form of self-determination, including secession, and engaged in an armed struggle against the EPRDF regime (Aregawi, 2001). A lack of a negotiated political settlement during the exclusive transitional pact and the process of making a federation, and the EPRDF's exclusionary politics, led to violent social movements in different forms.

The second reason for the social movement was the EPRDF's elections in 1995 and 2000. During the 1995 election, most opposition parties abstained, sending a signal of political protest to the regime (Lavers, 2024). Moreover, during the 2000 election, although seventeen political parties ran in that year's contest and won 34% of HPR seats, the opposition parties disputed the results (Zekarias, 2020). Therefore, the opposition parties' boycott of the 1995 election and their claim that the ruling party had rigged the 2000 election results indicate that these elections were mere formalities and symbolic exercises, showing that the spirit of democratic transition was lacking from the beginning. Both elections exemplified contemporary competitive authoritarian survival mechanisms, and this reluctant democracy experiment was the anticipated follow-up to the previous restricted phase of democratization post-1991, which had sparked mass mobilization. The student agency protests to seek freedom of speech, and the need for respect for their voice was the third factor driving the social movement during this period. For instance, students at Addis Ababa University (AAU) protested in 2001 for greater freedom of expression and organization, and for the withdrawal of armed police officers from the campus (Rønning & Abebaw, 2020). To obtain a response from the university regarding the reestablishment of their union and newspaper, the students boycotted classes and staged protests on campus. However, these protesters seeking freedom of speech were physically intimidated; students fled to neighboring countries, while others withdrew from their studies because of the university's closure (Aregawi, 2001). The fourth factor for the social movements at the time was the 1993 Eritrean independence referendum. Referring to the Transitional Charter, Eritrea achieved independence in 1993. This sparked disputes and revealed dimensions of the political and social movements of the time. First, in 1993, AAU students marched in opposition to Eritrean independence. Second, pan-Ethiopian nationalist opposition groups argued that Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia jeopardized Ethiopia's territorial integrity and left Ethiopia landlocked. Third, other ethnic nationalists, such as the OLF and the ONLF, sought to exercise their right to self-determination, including secession, which was only permitted by the EPLF, resulting in violent social movements in the form of counterinsurgencies by the OLF and ONLF against the EPRDF. Finally, the Eritrean independence and subsequent border dispute propelled the country into a regional conflict from 1998 to 2000. Supporting violent social movements during this period led to an intra-TPLF split between TPLF hardliners led by the Siye Abraha team, who backed the war, and the Meles Zenawi team, who were mildly opposed to it. In general, a period of less organization, wider distribution, and a mixture of peaceful and violent mass movements was brought about by these repressive and transformative events. This first wave of social movements included protest, boycotts, insurgency, war, internal party conflicts, and other forms of resistance that galvanized social opposition to the EPRDF.

The second wave of the social movement (2005-2012) took place between the disputed 2005 election and Meles' death in 2012. The post-2005 election protests, the Ethiopian Muslims' protest in 2011, and the Zone Nine Bloggers' internet activism in 2012 are the most notable examples of social movements during this wave.

The 2005 election, which was widely hailed as the most democratic Ethiopian election in history, was a transformative event for social mobilization. The election fraud during this time severely challenged the legitimacy of the EPRDF (Merera, 2012). The opposition parties, particularly the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), clashed with the EPRDF over the formation of the

parliament (Asnake, 2011). This caused widespread protests, particularly in Addis Ababa and Oromia, where students from universities and secondary schools protested the election results. In Oromia, the most notable social movement was the Oromo students' uprising, known as *Fincila Diddaa Gabrummaa (FDG)*, which erupted on November 9, 2005, and engulfed the entire region (Qajeelaa, 2010). Besides, three weeks after the election date, AAU students mounted a public protest over the general election that resonated with opposition parties' complaints (Ahmed, 2006). The protest continued for more than six months but halted when 131 opposition party leaders and civil society activists were arrested (Solomon, 2018). These repressive measures by the EPRDF intensified, causing instability in Oromia. The FDG by Oromo protesters persisted until the 2010 election, which finally enabled the creation of a clandestine youth movement organization named *Qeerroo Bilisummaa Oromoo (QBO)*, translated as "Youth for Oromo Freedom" in 2011 (Elsabet et al, 2022). This QBO originated as a spontaneous grassroots social organization with no official structures, but it has since spearheaded on-the-ground protests and university strikes. Later, it developed sections dedicated to coordinating movement actions and invited people from all areas of life to join the Oromo national youth network movement for freedom and democracy, which became the cornerstone of the Qeerroo protest movement in 2014 (KII #09, 2024, Burayyu).

The 2011 Muslim uprising associated with Awalia Mission Schools was another noteworthy social movement during this period, and Ethiopia's first instance of internet activism. The "Let Our Voices Be Heard" social media campaign was the motto of these Muslim demonstrations (Eyob, 2020, p. 01), to expose the EPRDF's harsh responses to Muslim inquiries and condemn the Majlis's misconduct (Dias & Yared, 2020). From 2011 to 2015, this Islamic movement for religious freedom was maintained through social media-led demonstrations, which is an example of civil resistance against EPRDF repression. Besides, in response to the dismantling of the independent press and the reduction of space for free speech, an Ethiopian blog known as "Zone 9 Bloggers" was established in May 2012. The Zone 9 collective has raised concerns about issues, including social inequality, political persecution, and corruption, under the motto "We Blog Because We Care." With an emphasis on the right to association and assembly guaranteed by Article 30 of the FDRE Constitution, the blog sought to educate readers about their human rights and to urge the government to uphold them (KII#11, 2024, Addis Ababa). However, in April 2014, the EPRDF arrested members of these bloggers affiliated with the Zone 9 collective and charged them with terrorism. During this wave of social movements, the 2005 election served as a transformative event, highlighting the necessity of collective action by students, Ethiopian Muslims, digital activists, journalists, and the political opposition against the EPRDF, though it was unsuccessful. Although the EPRDF became more repressive by enacting a series of measures, these measures backfired, facilitating the final round of social movements against the EPRDF.

Ethiopia experienced widespread instability during the *third wave of social movements (2013–2018)*, marked by two major social movements: the Oromo protest from 2014-2018 and the Amhara resistance from 2016-18 against the EPRDF regime. The Oromo protest restarted in 2014 following the introduction of the Addis Ababa City Expansion Master Plan. The Master Plan was framed as a "Master Killer" or "the Master Genocide", characterizing it as a politically driven land grab for ethnic extinction used in intensifying the protest (Asafa, 2016). The Master Plan encroached on Oromia's territory and may have justified continuous land dispossessions of

peri-urban people, who are farmers whose livelihoods rely on access to land (Urgessa & Mercy, 2024). It was suspected from the start of evicting Oromo farmers from their farms and uprooting them around the capital city to transferring their holdings to political elites. This was envisioned as symbolic violence in the form of landscape damage and uprooting of Oromo, representing the historical and spatiality of violence, land expropriation, and displacement in Oromia (Asebe, 2025). In reaction to it, broad-based protests arose, but fueled by far bigger demands, including maladministration, corruption, and human rights abuses (Østebø & Tronvoll, 2020). The unemployed youth generation has become despondent, dismal, and unsure due to the authoritarian regime's failure to transform economic progress into fair development (Asebe, 2025).

As a result, unprecedented youth protests swept across Oromia against the EPRDF's leadership by Oromo from 2014 to 2018. These courses of the Oromo protest movements held a series of acts of disobedience against the EPRDF, using the main protest spaces such as activism, mass scheduled events, and various symbols and gestures that were adopted to communicate the protests' messages using social media. First, in terms of activism, several protest songs and music by Oromo activist artists contributed to raising the political awareness of the protestors and their collective solidarity. Asebe's (2025) seminal work *"Jirra: Oromo protest songs as weapons of resistance against domination in Ethiopia"* critically examines the transformative power and role of music in Oromo resistance struggles by explaining the music of the young Oromo activist-musician Haacaalu Hundessa. Resistance arts were used, augmented by conventional platforms and media using activism as a technology of protest spaces to mobilize people in the nonviolent campaign against the EPRDF's authoritarian rule.

Secondly, the Oromo protesters used mass-scheduled annual events such as public cultural meetings and festivals to rule the protest as a space. Among others, the Irreechaa festival (thanksgiving ritual ceremony) that is annually celebrated in October at Bishoftu as a mass scheduled event benefited the Oromo protest. Specifically, the 2016 Irreechaa celebration was effectively used as a transformative event to mobilize the protest. During this celebration, Gemedo Wariyo, a young protester, chanted "down down Woyane!" referring to TPLF, and the message circulated on social media and elevated to the status of protest symbol among protestors (Urgessa & Mercy, 2024). Another mass-scheduled event that benefited the Oromo protest was the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, when the Ethiopian marathon runner, Feyisa Lilessa, crossed his hands overhead- a popular symbol of the Oromo Protests. First, the symbol was used as a transformative activism methodology during the Olympics to show the authoritarian nature of the regime to the world. Second, the Oromo protest got international attention and popularity after he displayed the symbol after winning silver in the Olympics. Following the Irreechaa and the World Olympic in 2016, dissidents expressed their recognition of the Oromo protest by making the symbol of crossing hands their social media account's profile pictures (Urgessa & Mercy, 2024). This raised awareness about the Oromo protest of non-Oromo people all over the world, lending both internal and external legitimacy to the Oromo protest. Therefore, both the Irreechaa festival and the Rio de Janeiro Olympics served as symbolic and opportunistic mass-scheduled events in the Oromo protests to denounce the EPRDF and rally support from both local and international audiences. In all, social media emerged as a crucial platform for organizing and leading the Oromo protests when protesters from Oromia and the diaspora used digital technologies as protest venues to advance the protest message circulation to facilitate

mobilizing the protests. With these digital spaces, the Oromo protest that began in April 2014 resurfaced in November 2015 and continued in various forms and intensities until 2018. These Oromo protests persisted with extended blockages, recurrent market boycotts, and economic and social insecurity, forcing the people to doubt the government's ability to provide security and social services (Elsabet et al, 2022).

Furthermore, the Oromo protest proved its transformative power against repression in Ethiopia when the Amhara youth (known as Fano) joined it in 2016 against the regime, named the Amhara protest. The structural problem of the Amhara protest was a historic conflict between Tigray and Amhara political elites. The Amhara elites' adversarial relationship with the TPLF and sense of victimhood fueled the Amhara uprisings. This was due to EPRDF's post-1991 political federation system, in which the Amhara political elites believe their people and territory were forcibly annexed and administratively demarcated into the Tigray (Dias & Yared, 2022). For the Amhara, relocating administrative districts like Welkait to the Tigray region has instilled a sense of victimhood. These resentments erupted in Gondar and spread across other towns in the Amhara regional state. The protestors sought Welkait self-determination, acknowledgment of the identity of the Amhara people, the release of political prisoners, increased democracy, and equal distribution of rights and economic advantages (Makahamadze & Muluken, 2022). The Welkait case made clear that the EPRDF political structures failed to accommodate democratic procedures and to rule peacefully. For instance, the regime attempted to arrest a chairman of the Welkait Identity Restoration Committee, veteran Colonel Demeke Zewdu, and other members of the Committee without a court order on 12 July 2016 (Dias & Yared, 2022).

The deep-seated resentment of the EPRDF administration, combined with the emergence of helpful political circumstances, led to a nationwide uprising of these large-scale protests in Amhara and Oromia. The two regions were either repressed or co-opted by PDOs, despite their lion's share in the economy of the country, the number of the population, and geographical coverage in the country under the EPRDF regime. Then, regardless of the long-standing political distrust between them, the Oromo and Amhara protests created a political opportunity to create a coordinated collective solidarity known as the OroMara as a tactical alliance to oppose the TPLF dominance within the EPRDF. This OroMara tactical alliance advocated for reformative movements that believed that improving one aspect of society is the key to improving all other aspects, with membership in the OroMara based on a shared goal of changing prevailing power relations or social practices. That means, the state of forcible subjugation, land-grabbing approaches, and unfair economic shares between ethnic groups in the country's corridor of power triggered the protesters into aggression and brought unprecedented anti-government squawking and rebellions across the two largest ethnic groups. Both Oromo and Amhara protests benefited from political opportunities, including the leadership vacuum, unemployed youth bulges, and coordinated solidarity of the two largest ethnic groups, support from EPRDF insiders and diasporas, and digital media proliferation. The Oromo and Amhara people's perseverance in confronting security forces' violence proved the transformative power of popular movements in Ethiopia. This was made through the OroMara coalition, which embraced the demand for change against the EPRDF. The coordinated solidarity of the two largest ethnic groups, under the banner of OroMara, under the tag of Team-Lemma, made a significant contribution to the national political changes in Ethiopia, leading to the political transition since 2018.

6. Conclusion

Studies on whether repression increases or decreases the frequency of protest are inconsistent and inconclusive. However, the experience under Ethiopia's EPRDF regime from 1991 to 2018 suggests that repression not only promotes social movements and catalyzes protests but also contributes to regime change. Since 1991, the EPRDF's inability to lead Ethiopia toward democracy has been clear and fits the definition of an authoritarian survival strategy based on repression. However, resistance, including social movements, has contested the EPRDF's authoritarian rule via both nonviolent and violent tactics. The heavy-handed, centralized authority of the EPRDF has backfired, encouraging both violent and non-violent opposition, leading to waves of social movements. The repressive tactics used by the EPRDF served as a double-edged sword, enabling monopolistic political control while simultaneously inciting resistance groups, violent opposition, and nonviolent demonstrations. As a result, both violent and nonviolent resistance movements combined in long-term political processes to overthrow the authoritarian EPRDF by taking advantage of political opportunities.

In a series of internal and external transformative events and political opportunities, from 1991 to 2018, Ethiopia saw the emergence of political processes and various contextual considerations that led to regime change. These include the exclusive transitional pact and the process of forming a federation; intra-TPLF and intra-EPRDF divisions; successive undemocratic elections, Meles' death, and leadership vacuum; and the widespread ICT access and digital activism that rendered collective action through waves of social movements that collectively enabled regime change to be effective. These waves of social movements allowed the people to promote collective claims against the authoritarian EPRDF leadership, proving the transformative power of both violent and non-violent resistance against repression in Ethiopia. These combined triggered a new democratic transition and generated prospects for political transformation that culminated in forced regime change. EPRDF's repressions backfired and caused consecutive waves of social movements that have weakened the regime, contributed to its collapse, and finally made the EPRDF's hegemonic power politics obsolete in 2018.

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Essay: The Rhetoric of Peace

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THE RHETORIC OF PEACE

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Abstract

In this paper, I will focus on Dr. King's work against militarism through the principle of peace. During his life, King's rhetoric against militarism and his pursuit of peace squarely pitted him against the goals of the U.S. government. In this paper, I will first provide some background on cultural militarism and its significance to American Society. Next, I will explain the use of narrative and how it can shape the public's understanding through a rhetor's vision. Finally, I will then briefly introduce my findings of King's rhetoric of peace during his lifetime.

Introduction

This quote examines Dr. Martin Luther King's public statement on the war in Vietnam and the concept of militarism, highlighting its impact on American society. In this paper, I will focus on Dr. King's work against militarism through the principle of peace. During his life, King's rhetoric against militarism and his pursuit of peace squarely pitted him against the goals of the U.S. government. In this paper, I will first provide some background on cultural militarism and its significance to American Society. Next, I will explain the use of narrative and how it can shape the public's understanding through a rhetor's vision. Finally, I will then briefly introduce my findings of King's rhetoric of peace during his lifetime. I will accomplish this pursuit by outlining some background on King in general and some of his words about peace. The format for this section will be the Beyond Vietnam speech, its impact, and his philosophy of peace as a means of social change.

Literature Review

This section will focus on U.S. cultural militarism as an ideology through the role of media content in shaping these ideologies. Cultural militarism has evolved over the last 50 years to not only illustrate a profound connection between war and product but also as a growing intellectual discontent between the U.S. and the rest of the world. The United States shows its unique place in the world through the development of cultural artifacts, media content that emphasizes a cultural militarism of exceptionalism through sports and news coverage of wars, some of the films produced by U.S. corporations, and the technological advancements in communication that help contribute to the establishment of U.S. interests above all other interests.

Stahl (2009) noted that cultural militarism, as an ideology, grew in prominence with the expansion of the Vietnam War as a cultural artifact in 1960s America, a product to be digested in the "culture industry" sense outlined by Adorno and Horkheimer. With the explosive growth of television, Vietnam became the first "living room war" in U.S. history. The pursuits of the U.S. military had grown from forging resistance in distant lands to the homes of everyday people as a media product. Cultural militarism evolved from something done away from family and loved ones to a product for the news media to attract potential consumers of both news and advertising, while generating revenue simultaneously. The Vietnam War allowed for cultural militarism as an ideology to develop from a national policy to a capitalist entity, a transition from battles and strategies to another show on TV. Stahl charts this progression as "militainment".

Militainment can refer to a variety of different things, depending on the milieu and the social context of cultural militarism. For example, different college basketball teams play basketball games on aircraft carriers in California and military bases in Germany and South Korea. This Bakhtinian spectacle has also extended to American football, as evidenced by the San Diego Chargers' workout on the USS Ronald Reagan in 2013 (Petchesky, 2013). This combination of military installations and cultural pursuits reflects the Der Derian (2009) concept of the Military Industrial Media Entertainment Network (MIMENET), an amalgamation of the culturally important work of sport, the power of military capabilities, and the asinine nature of modern sports media coverage, and the grease of capitalistic profit to bring all these entities together.

Since the events of 9/11, researchers have seen a greater connection between the cultural relevance of sports in the U.S. and the connection to the military apparatus of the U.S. Empire. Butterworth (2008; 2012; 2013) connected the modern sports figure to the larger cultural impact of mythmaking in American society and extended the connection between sports and the military to forge a greater synthesis between two secular forces that act as civil religions in the U.S.

Cultural militarism, as a product, also manifests in the form of news coverage of specific military conflicts and how the media industry packages that content for mass consumption. In the 1990s, the media industry initially focused on the Persian Gulf War but soon shifted its attention to Bosnia to cover the new conflict of the day. The new media consumption industries and their connections to broader culture, industries, and networks, driven by speed and structured through brief insights, failed to reveal the centuries-old dispute involving a complex inter-ethnic conflict engulfing the Bosnian state (Der Derian, 2009). The “realness” of this type of conflict presented images for the TV industry that lacked the “cleanliness” of smart bombs and the sense of Otherness associated with the Persian Gulf conflict. This media content conundrum highlighted the complex nature of producing war coverage for the broader American culture: how do you effectively sanitize the horrors of war for mass public consumption?

As indicated in the earlier part of the 1990s, TV producers and media content distributors found that type of product in their cultural production of the first Persian Gulf War. While the U.S. remained uncertain about how many Iraqis were actually deployed to Kuwait, the Military prepared for the worst. After the war, the number was actually much lower than the U.S. estimated. However, ABC News refused to use satellite images that reflected the lack of Iraqi troop buildup in the region (Kellner, 1992). The New York Times joined ABC News in disseminating figures related to Iraqi troop levels that did not accurately reflect the actual numbers. In fact, much of the information from these news reports did not undergo critical analysis by news agencies regarding the accuracy of the number of troops involved (Kellner, 1992). This specific example illustrates not only the cultural connection between the media and the military but also how the production of news can sometimes obscure the facts in the news story being consumed by the public.

This connection between narrative and its role in shaping the lens of cultural militarism can provide important opportunities for cultural pushback against the larger society. While the dominant images and media coverage from the mainstream U.S. media develop a particular narrative, the struggle over how those meanings play out in the rest of society remains open to debate (Hodkinson, 2011). In these openings, peace can provide not only alternative narratives but also perspectives that allow for a check on the cultural militarism produced by government structures and the content that defines mainstream media.

A more modern connection between media and cultural militarism existed in the buildup and coverage of the Iraq War in 2003. Some of the most significant changes that have transformed the media coverage from the First Persian Gulf War to the War in Iraq in 2003 included both media companies and media content. In relation to media companies, many news organizations, such as CNN and Fox News, joined media conglomerates in reporting directly from the region (Fuchs, 2005). The growth of media companies provides not only politically and culturally influenced content, such as Fox and conservatives, and MSNBC and liberals, but also the types

of coverage that mainstream media typically depicts. The most considerable cultural shift in media coverage, from the Persian Gulf to the Iraq War, involved the emotionalization of not only the troops connected to the U.S. military but also the superiority of U.S. forces based on their technological advantages (Fuchs, 2005). These advantages allowed the most valiant U.S. soldiers to overthrow a significant regime with the support of the exalted U.S. forces. The larger cultural product sold to the mass U.S. audience reflected this approach, while the line between the “reality” of the War in Iraq and the product presented to the U.S. public continued to blur.

These modern understandings of cultural militarism's evolution can also be seen in how military operations are quantified in terms of speed and efficiency. Stahl (2008) examines the concept of “social militarism” in relation to the role of time in shaping our assessment of the effectiveness of a tactical military operation. In the days following 9/11, the need for a precise measure of time invaded every aspect of U.S. culture. Cultural militarism adapted to this new cultural mindset, especially in terms of the “Shock and Awe” offensive that began the Iraq War.

The advancements in U.S. military power demonstrated how quickly and easily conflict could be ended through military means, keeping pace with the overall tone of the rest of society. The speed at which the media reports on war has also undergone significant changes. From the Vietnam War to the Gulf War, the turnaround on a battlefield story changed from two weeks to immediately.

The ability of war to adapt to the rapid pace of modern society revealed another aspect in the evolution of cultural militarism. The use of cultural militarism in the media exemplifies the pleasures and pains of modern life by highlighting the importance of brutal efficiency over the languid nature of cultural exchange. The evolution of cultural militarism mirrored the evolution of society, characterized by an increasing emphasis on instant gratification. Cultural militarism not only encompassed the “cultural industry” in the Adorno and Horkheimer sense of capitalism but also prioritized concepts in U.S. society, such as efficiency and speed, indicating that cultural militarism could reinforce and complement multiple ideologies.

As illustrated by Hanke (1998), ideologies rarely remain static and continue to change and evolve. These examples not only demonstrate cultural militarism's ability to adapt to permeable cultural standards but also illustrate how cultural militarism leverages technological advancements in society. One of the benefits of technological innovation is that it aims to make life easier, not only physically and mentally but also morally. To expand on the shock and awe term, not from a time perspective but from an impact on society, contemporary wars now not only allow for brutal precision but also lessen the impact on civilians. Schiller (2008) details this process that helped cultural militarism expand through the continued technological development of communication. Embryonic communication advances included military radar and radio as a way to increase the speed of communication throughout the burgeoning U.S. global military presence. These technological innovations continued to advance, alongside increased trade and commerce, which influenced foreign policy alongside U.S. military expansion. Communication acted as the conduit in this ever-expanding relationship between commerce and cultural militarism, ultimately allowing a company like AT&T to become one of the largest recipients of military contracts. One modern-day example of communication and cultural militarism is ARPANET, the rudimentary communication system that would one day evolve into the present-day Internet. The Department of Defense provided funding to universities and

research labs to make this type of communication system a reality. Without cultural militarism, one could argue, the world might not have known the Internet today. While it may seem unrelated, cultural militarism gains critical significance when examined in the context of its interconnected web of everyday practices, such as communication. Cultural militarism, in this example, created an environment that facilitated easier communication for the entire population across various countries. In this example, the ideology of cultural militarism exemplifies soft power, demonstrating how sustained military spending can lead to technological advancements that facilitate cultural engagement. All these examples of cultural militarism underscore the nuanced concept of ideology and the significant function it serves during particular time periods. As the context of the situation within a society changes, the concept of cultural militarism as an ideology evolves best to serve the interests of the dominant political class.

Method

Narrative

Charland (1987) suggested that understanding the researcher's role in relation to the text being studied provides important insight into the self-reflexivity that a discourse scholar should continually engage in during research. The person conducting the study should view themselves as part of the audience, rather than as detached from it in an objective manner. While specific identities that categorize people are not factual information, the consequences of being identified in a specific manner have historical roots that attach power and privilege to specific identities over others. This process, which involves information consequences, allows human beings to be viewed as textual information.

Charland (1987) highlighted an important consideration for qualitative content analysis researchers to acknowledge in their research process. While it is important to adhere to the principles and ideals that guide their social perspective, their identity always matters when they conduct a research study. In other words, researchers should acknowledge their own privileges and positions from the outset of a research project.

Burke (1984) recognized the significance of narrative in shaping reality. Burke uses the term “dramatism” to help clearly identify how the construction of a story impacts the construction of reality. Burke helps construct that reality by emphasizing the importance of utilizing any person as a valuable source of information. In Burke's mind, any person could be poetic. Burke extrapolates unique human experiences to a single person and uses those experiences as a common thread to unite us all. The channel through which those experiences are best relayed to the public is stories, or narratives.

In addition, in the construction of a narrative, Burke saw the use of metaphor as a means of creating a human bond, offering an opportunity not only for a learned experience but also for a shared learned experience. Those shared learned experiences connect best to humanity through dramatism, which allows for the most expressive representation of any textual construction, whether through words or actions. In this expansion, the opportunity to build a civics lesson can also arise through the new construction of information from a critical lens.

One of the most effective ways to convey the human experience is through narrative, utilizing a language that is acknowledged and accepted. Through language, Burke (1969) posits that a style of human expression emerges and develops into a narrative. This relationship between a narrative and the overall human experience suggests a shared humanity that continually evolves through the ongoing development of meaning, as deeper information is disclosed. These disclosures impact and alter the overall construction of a narrative when examining its meaning over time.

Results

In the results section, I have broken down King's work into specific sections: a brief look at his "Beyond Vietnam" speech, given one year before his death; the impact of "Beyond Vietnam" on the peace community; the roots of his commitment to peace; and who he modeled his public activism after.

Beyond Vietnam

As referenced at the beginning of the paper, precisely one year before his death, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered one of his most potent and radical speeches. In the speech, King challenged U.S. hegemony worldwide while reiterating his focus on civil rights in the U.S. Perhaps more than any other speech, he broadened his focus, emphasizing the key points of racial justice that continued to plague American society. While several key timeless themes emerged in King's important message about peace and social inequality, the idea of peace has shaped the lasting impact of this speech and still holds significant resonance in contemporary society.

Over the past two years, as I have moved to break the betrayal of my own silences and to speak from the burnings of my own heart, as I have called for radical departures from the destruction of Vietnam, many persons have questioned me about the wisdom of my path. At the heart of their concerns, this query has often loomed large and loud: "Why are you speaking about the war, Dr. King?" "Why are you joining the voices of dissent?" "Peace and civil rights do not mix," they say. "Aren't you hurting the cause of your people," they ask? Moreover, when I hear them, though I often understand the source of their concern, I am nevertheless greatly saddened, for such questions mean that the inquirers have not really known me, my commitment or my calling. Indeed, their questions suggest that they do not know the world in which they live. (King, 1967)

When King gave this speech on Vietnam in 1967, the U.S. government saw the war at a crossroads—this year marked a critical low point for the Johnson administration in terms of its relationship with the American public regarding the war (Stahl, 2009). In fact, the Johnson administration took specific steps to curtail the anti-war effort that King articulated clearly during this speech (Stahl, 2009). For this and many other reasons, King delivered this speech during a time of widespread public resentment against the war. It was also in response to a clear directive from the U.S. government to attempt to win back the American people, whose support for the war was waning. Based on this information, King's speech exemplified his belief in connecting divergent movements during a turbulent time in the U.S., aiming to create and thrive in a more just world.

The audience that King spoke to that evening included stalwarts of the civil rights movement, but also represented a clear outreach to the peace movement, which gained broad support among America's countercultural populations. The peace movement confronted U.S. imperialism in unprecedented ways in U.S. history. One of its legacies during the Vietnam War involves the discourse surrounding the war. While policymakers attempted to delegitimize the peace movement by presenting information that did not support the troops in Vietnam, peace movement participants instead created a discourse that maintained the meaning of their own message but served as an opposition to the dominant elite message about the Vietnam War (Coy et al., 2008). The discussion in the U.S. that King joined, as a veteran of the civil rights movement but a relative neophyte of the peace movement, when he gave the "Beyond Vietnam" speech, had reached a point of clashing cultures and a generational divide. This divide created a new policy legacy in the U.S. that shifted away from full-scale intervention toward proxy wars (Coy et al., 2008).

For this and many other reasons, King delivered this speech during a time of widespread public resentment against the war. It was also in response to a clear directive from the U.S. government to attempt to win back the American people, whose support for the war was waning. Based on this information, King's speech exemplified his belief in connecting divergent movements during a turbulent time in the U.S., aiming to create and thrive in a more just world. The peace movement confronted U.S. imperialism in unprecedented ways in U.S. history. One of its legacies during the Vietnam War involves the discourse surrounding the war.

King's speech could speak clearly to the recent past on the impact of drone strikes by the Obama administration in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia, proxy wars by the Obama administration in Libya and Yemen, and the continued struggle for peace after several attempts by the Obama administration to overthrow the government in Syria. Finally, King would also talk about the U.S. proxy war in Yemen, which was inflamed and emboldened by the Trump administration through the production of war machine weapons.

Based on this information, King's speech exemplified his belief in connecting divergent movements during a turbulent time in the U.S., aiming to create and thrive in a more just world. The peace movement confronted U.S. imperialism in unprecedented ways in U.S. history. One of its legacies during the Vietnam War involves the discourse surrounding the war. The Vietnam War, at that time in history and in the years to follow, had waning public support and had reached a place of clashing cultures and a generational divide.

King's stand clearly put him at odds with members of the black community who wanted him to focus on civil rights, but also with members of the military and political establishment who publicly condemn any rhetoric that differs from the banal support for our troops' ethos that accompanies public policy on military actions. This type of rhetoric has existed since the beginning of war and has become omnipresent in any discourse about modern war, especially since the Persian Gulf War in 1991 (Stahl, 2009). Militarism has changed significantly since King's speech against the war in Vietnam. However, the atrocities from war continue. Only 4 percent of drone strike victims from Pakistan were identified as Al Qaeda members, showing the imprecision of allegedly precise instruments of war (Serle, 2014). As the war in Afghanistan

continues, apparently unabated, for the last 17 years, King's words of the U.S. as the "greatest purveyor of violence" in the world continue, as does its endless connection to militarism.

Impact of Beyond Vietnam

King also had a significant impact on the peace movement during the Vietnam War era and on its legacy in America. The peace movement has embraced specific aspects of social movement theory concerning means and application. Martin Luther King spearheaded the civil rights movement in America. King focused his movement on the principles of nonviolence. King used nonviolence as a means to assume the suffering of the problem on himself and his followers, rather than directing the agencies of power to suffer. From this perspective, King expected the prevailing institutions to give into to his demands or watch people in the movement suffer. King hoped to draw attention to the problem using those tactics and organized his movement on the distinctions of love. King would treat his enemies with agape, a Greek word for love which emphasized respect for all people, while simultaneously attempting to restore community of all people.

After the death of King in 1968, the peace movement dispersed in many different directions along ideological lines. Some groups continued to embrace King's works and his tactical approach to peace. Other social movement groups examined peace on the larger geopolitical level as a way to initiate dialogue in the new and emerging political sphere. Using both of these examples, the peace movement examined problems facing communities from an in-group and out-group perspective.

Using the peace movement as a late 20th-century example illustrates how social movements can adapt to their cultural surroundings and reinforce views echoed by other actors through historical precedent. King's words against the war in Vietnam helped to energize a movement. The Vietnam War provided a platform not only for new left student movement activists but also for other activists involved with the peace movement. From this perspective, social movement activists in the U.S. faced a distinct problem with their response to the conflict. The victims of the war lived several thousand miles away and were the targets of jellied gasoline. Using this example, the movement focused on multiple fronts to address the problem. While some organizations employed traditional means of legislative action, most of the primary actors involved in this social movement worked on the periphery of the power structure, attempting to provide a voice from outside the governmental institution. While social movement activists worked within the peace movement in the United States since the 1700s, the Vietnam conflict allowed for the opportunity for the movement to grow and change, from an underground movement to one that grew within the public eye.

The peace movement has evolved and expanded since the Vietnam War, demonstrating the diverse facets that a social movement can employ. To illustrate this point, some have applied the principles of the peace movement, specifically issues of justice and community, to diverse issues such as organic agriculture, prison reform, and workers' rights.

Roots of Peace

In terms of his roots of peace, Martin Luther King embraced the doctrine of Gandhi, a social leader who emphasized nonviolence and peace over other, more violent methods for that reason, King distanced himself from his contemporary Malcolm X. King's philosophy of nonviolence came from his volumes of readings on the subject and his educated background, which differed from Malcolm X, an urban preacher from the ranks of the Black Muslim movement of the 1960s. By employing the concept of equality, both King and Malcolm X present a vision for how the U.S. should approach race relations. They focus on the similarities between races and advocate for a revolutionary perspective, which ultimately promotes a point of divergence. In his vision of equality, King focuses on the similarities by using a rhetoric that primarily spoke to middle- and upper-class blacks and to whites. Malcolm X focused his message on inner-city and working-class African Americans. Since their audiences diverged so clearly, the rhetoric used by both men changed, yet they still employed the broad constructs of equality. Based on Malcolm X's experience of growing up in a white foster home, the concept of equality, while promoted through law as applying the same to all people regardless of race, took on different forms because of the different values society placed on one race to the detriment of another.

Malcolm X then embraced a Black Muslim identity, which offered a new version of separation and equality, which valued black over White, and allowed for a subversion of the consensus social order. Malcolm X saw this as a separatist equality. This new vision of blackness, espoused by Malcolm X, challenged the ideology of white supremacy. It allowed for an alternative ideology that challenged the approach of viewing blackness as separate but equal. Malcolm X reinforced this separate but equal picture of equality by not focusing on governmental changes or public policy initiatives, but instead on the ability of the black population to understand their relevance and provide their own sustenance because a historically racist government could not provide the black population with equality. The narrative of Malcolm X, while challenging the dominant racial order, did reinforce traditional American narratives of hard work, the conservative narrative of providing for your own people without government spending, and the importance and prevalence of masculinity. The relationship between ideology and narrative, therefore, can simultaneously reinforce and challenge dominant social norms.

Martin Luther King, on the other hand, came from a middle-class background, which provided him access to opportunities such as education, instilling a very different vision of equality. King focused on the construct of the typical American picture of equality through unity and similarity to examine the difference in power between black and white. King hoped to use an ideology of transformation to eradicate racial injustice, fostering greater unity and increasing opportunities for blacks during this period. King also emphasized the Christian tradition that would not only emancipate the black population but also offer a lens for how the white racist system could go about a social change in its approach to race relations. The narrative adapted by King, based on ideological constructs, includes themes of social integration and connection with white culture, embracing the experiment called American democracy.

Both King and Malcolm X adapted these competing ideologies of equality not only from their lived experiences but also from how they shared that message. The ideological approach of each man cannot be separated from the other, so while King and Malcolm X produce different pictures

of society from the same time period. A commitment to social justice and the improvement of racial equality links these ideologies, which come from differently constructed narratives.

Both King and Malcolm X redefined the ideological construct of equality through their work for social change, employing drastically different means while addressing vastly different audiences and adapting distinctive narratives. One of the problems of emphasizing equality for both men involved the ideological construct of difference.

Since both men focused on promoting equality, the concept of difference is often omitted from the movement for social change. In this example, from cultural standpoints, blacks had to move toward a cultural whiteness to achieve equality. This reality overlooks racial differences in an attempt to achieve equality. When constructing a picture of racial equality from a contemporary perspective, both conceptions of equality are used, along with the importance of maintaining cultural identity during the ongoing transition toward social change.

Dr. King's commitment to nonviolence as a means of social change. King adapted the majority of his philosophy from the methods of Mahatma Gandhi, who helped liberate India from British colonialism. Nonviolence has continued to serve as a powerful political tool in numerous social movements since Dr. King's death, including the Solidarity movement in Poland, the end of the Pinochet regime in Chile, and the role it played in South Africa, which significantly contributed to the strength of Nelson Mandela. Secondly, Dr. King benefited greatly from the wisdom and expertise of Bayard Rustin. Rustin worked for civil rights as a black man, but also as a gay man. The queer community has often struggled hand in hand with other minority groups in the pursuit of equality and justice. Finally, King began his public life at his "office". As a preacher in the African American community, Dr. King played a pivotal leadership role in combating racial intolerance. While the systemic education of people of color needs improvement, the strength of many communities lies in the fact that they gain compassion and truth from religious voices. Painting Dr. King without his commitment to the teaching of Jesus Christ, especially Christ's Sermon on the Mount, does not truly embody the man.

Discussion

This article focused on Dr. King. Dr. King acted not only as a producer of peace content but also provided a critique of the dominant political thinking on war and militarism. In addition, Dr. King developed a straightforward narrative that promoted his interests as a peace ambassador, seeking public respect for his work against militarism. This study raises questions about how to best assess Dr. King in relation to other individuals who focus on peace to bring about social change in the world. While Dr. King gave his speech on Vietnam, he did not engage in the same types of protests that many other activists did against the Vietnam War. In addition, Dr. King also worked on issues not related to peace and militarism, such as civil rights, workers' rights, and equal pay for all. If he had limited his focus to issues directly related to peace, his legacy as a peace advocate and his role within traditional social movement groups would have looked different.

Some future studies on Dr. King and peace could focus on how right-wing organizations view Dr. King through the lens of history. While the political ideologies of both left- and right-wing

groups have evolved, they have adopted similar mechanisms to engage the public on specific issues. Right-wing groups may also exhibit a pronounced difference between Dr. King the figure and Dr. King the advocate for peace. This distinction may be because they limit their group's agenda to focus their resources on political issues. Right-wing groups may also exhibit political leanings that can influence the content of peace and how that content reflects society.

Future research could also include how social movement groups today use Dr. King's words to focus on other issues impacting the world, such as U.S. drone strikes throughout the world. Amnesty International is a human rights organization that focuses on social movements. This type of comparison could illustrate how similar ideologies are viewed through the prism of human rights versus the use of peace to create social change.

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Essay: Communicative Craft Literacy, Communicative Craft Competence and First Principles Thinking: Rethinking Newsroom Bureaucracy for Decolonial Peace in Zimbabwe

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**COMMUNICATIVE CRAFT LITERACY, COMMUNICATIVE CRAFT
COMPETENCE AND FIRST PRINCIPLES THINKING: RETHINKING NEWSROOM
BUREAUCRACY FOR DECOLONIAL PEACE IN ZIMBABWE**

James Chingono

Abstract

This article interrogates the role of newsroom bureaucracy in influencing mediated collective memory and peacebuilding in Zimbabwe. Existing scholarship has shown how postcolonial newsrooms often inherit colonial and neoliberal organisational logics that privilege elite voices, reproduce dependency and constrain journalistic autonomy. The paper builds on Jonathan Moyo's (2003) concepts of craft literacy and craft competence, as applied to journalism, in which the former is conceptualized in the paper as communicative craft literacy, which is the ability to critically understand journalistic practice and the latter communicative craft competence, which is the professional capacity to execute journalism effectively. Methodologically, the paper employs interpretive research design, qualitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis

of editorial policies, journalistic routines and media texts from *The Herald* and *NewsDay* between 2013 and 2023. Therefore, this study argues that newsroom bureaucracy must be rethought as a site of decolonial struggle. In this regard, the approach in this study is grounded in decolonial theory, thus it seeks to uncover how bureaucratic rationalities constrain creative and ethical newsroom agency, while emergent forms of communicative craft literacy reassert autonomy, contextual freedom and narrative justice in post-colonial peacebuilding. The article advances a model in which communicative craft literacy and communicative craft competence are combined with first principles thinking to create newsroom processes capable of mediating collective memory constructively. First Principles Thinking equips journalists and editors with tools to interrogate the core purposes of news production, that is, truth-telling, accountability and inclusivity, rather than reproducing inherited routines. This model has the following three implications: it enables the newsroom to function as an arena of epistemic justice, thereby resisting the coloniality of knowledge; it supports the mediation of nostalgia in ways aligned with Positive Restorative Collective Nostalgia (PRCN), a novel conceptualisation that defines fostering inclusive belonging rather than exclusionary myth making; and it embeds newsroom policy within the broader project of the decoloniality of peace, essentially transforming journalism from a partisan tool into a reconciliatory force. Through a critical analysis of newsroom practices in *The Herald* and *NewsDay*, the article demonstrates how editorial policies can either reproduce coloniality of peace or facilitate a decolonial turn. Therefore, embedding communicative craft literacy, communicative craft competence and first principles thinking into newsroom bureaucracy, Zimbabwean journalism can move beyond elite capture and partisan divides, so that it can contribute meaningfully to reconciliation, social cohesion and peacebuilding. Therefore, the analysis contributes to reimagining Zimbabwean journalism as a decolonial public craft capable of restoring relationality, epistemic dignity and peace.

Introduction

The newsroom is both an institutional site and a discursive arena where public narratives are produced, negotiated and contested especially in Zimbabwe, where newsroom practices are deeply entangled with political, economic and epistemic hierarchies. Accordingly, scholars have documented how African media systems remain shaped by donor agendas, state capture and commercial imperatives (Nyamnjoh, 2005; Mano, 2016). These pressures manifest in newsroom bureaucracies that manifest as formalised procedures, editorial routines and hierarchical decision-making that frequently prioritise efficiency, stability and elite voices over critical storytelling and grassroots perspectives. The result is a journalism that often reproduces coloniality of power (Quijano, 2000), coloniality of knowledge (Mignolo, 2009), and coloniality of being (Maldonado-Torres, 2007) or perversely coloniality of peace (Guerra, 2019) rather than challenging them.

This article intervenes by rethinking newsroom bureaucracy through the combined lenses of communicative craft literacy, communicative craft competency as appropriated from Moyo (2002, 2003) craft literacy and craft competence and morphed into communicative craft literacy and communicative craft competence, and first principles thinking. Jonathan Moyo (1992; 1993) concept of craft literacy is reconceptualized as the ability of journalists to critically engage the tools, skills and ethical demands of their profession, thus becoming communicative craft literate, while craft competence is applied as communicative craft competence, meaning, practical

mastery of the tools immanent in craft literacy. Communicative craft literacy ensures that journalists can interrogate how and why stories are produced in particular ways, rather than merely reproducing inherited routines. Consequently, when combined with first principles thinking, which refers to a method of reducing practices to their most fundamental truths and reasoning upward (Aristotle, 1991) communicative craft literacy and communicative craft competence offer a pathway for reimagining journalism beyond bureaucratic conformity.

The central argument advanced here is that newsroom bureaucracy in Zimbabwe has become a vehicle for reproducing colonial and neoliberal peacebuilding logics. Nonetheless, by embedding communicative craft literacy, communicative craft competence and first principles thinking into newsroom policy and practice, journalism can be repositioned as a force for decolonial peace. This approach aligns with the emergent framework of Positive Restorative Collective Nostalgia (PRCN), which leverages mediated collective memory for reconciliation rather than exclusion and with the broader project of the decoloniality of peace (Chingono, Unpublished).

The article asks the following questions:

1. In what ways does newsroom bureaucracy in Zimbabwe reproduce the coloniality of peace?
2. How can communicative craft literacy, communicative craft competence and first principles provide an alternative newsroom strategy aligned with decolonial peace?

Addressing these questions, allows the study to situate Zimbabwean journalism within global debates on media, peacebuilding and decoloniality, while offering concrete strategies for newsroom reform.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in decolonial theory, and it is informed by critical media scholarship. The framework brings together the following four conceptual strands:

Coloniality of Knowledge

Quijano (2000) and Mignolo (2009) show how modern knowledge systems prioritise Eurocentric epistemologies. In newsroom contexts, this manifests in reliance on Western derived news values, for instance objectivity, immediacy and conflict framing, and donor-driven editorial logics. Zimbabwean journalism often marginalises indigenous epistemologies of reconciliation and storytelling, thereby relegating local voices to secondary status (Mutsvairo and Ragnedda, 2019).

Coloniality of Being

Maldonado-Torres (2007) conceptualises coloniality of being as the ontological negation of colonised peoples, where subjectivities are silenced or delegitimised. Within Zimbabwean

newsrooms, bureaucratic routines frequently cast communities as passive objects of reporting rather than active narrators of memory and peace (Mano and Milton, 2020). This perpetuates a form of ontological violence where grassroots experiences are flattened into data points or quotations that are only useful as peripheral anchors of narratives.

From Craft Literacy and Craft Competence to Communicative Craft

Jonathan Moyo's (1992) craft literacy when applied to journalism can be conceptualized as communicative craft literacy, which is a form of meta-awareness, where journalists understand their profession as a historically, politically and ethically situated practice. In contrast, craft competence is the technical ability to execute journalism within institutional routines. Although craft competence often thrives under bureaucratic regimes, it risks producing formulaic reporting that is anti-peacebuilding. Craft literacy, however, provides journalists with the reflexivity to resist bureaucratic capture, enabling them to negotiate editorial constraints while centering truth, justice and community.

First Principles Thinking

First principles thinking, rooted in Aristotelian philosophy and revived in contemporary innovation discourse (Aristotle, 1991; Musk, 2015), involves breaking down practices into their foundational truths and reconstructing them logically. Applied to journalism, it asks: What is the primary purpose of news? What social obligations justify its existence? In essence, by rethinking journalism from its ethical first principles thinking, newsroom actors can move beyond inherited bureaucratic routines and donor scripts, thus aligning practice with epistemic justice and peacebuilding. This theoretical framework enables an analysis of newsroom bureaucracy as a site of coloniality while identifying communicative craft literacy, communicative craft competence and first principles thinking as decolonial tools. Together, these concepts reorient journalism away from bureaucratic compliance and toward decolonial peacebuilding, hence amplifying community voices, mediating memory responsibly and sustaining PRCN as a reconciliatory narrative resource.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research design informed by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and qualitative content analysis. The aim is not to measure newsroom performance quantitatively, but to interrogate how bureaucratic logics, journalistic practices and epistemic hierarchies shape the mediation of memory and peace discourses in Zimbabwe. Fundamentally, through adopting CDA (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2008), the study treats news texts and newsroom policies as discursive sites where coloniality, power and resistance intersect. Institutional ethnography (Smith, 2005) complements this by examining how newsroom bureaucracy organises knowledge production through rules, routines and policies

Case Selection

The Herald and NewsDay

Two Zimbabwean newspapers were selected for analysis, The Herald, Zimbabwe's state-controlled daily, which often reflects official narratives and policy-aligned newsroom bureaucracy and NewsDay, a privately owned newspaper, that is often positioned as oppositional, yet constrained by donor funding structures and commercial logics. This selection enables comparative analysis of how different newsroom bureaucracies mediate collective memory and peace discourses within Zimbabwe's postcolonial media ecology.

Data Sources

Three interlinked datasets inform the study, that is 80 media articles were purposively sampled between 2013 and 2023. They were stratified by event, that is 2013 Constitution, 2017 Transition, 2018 Election Violence, 2020 COVID-19 and 2023 Elections so as to ensure longitudinal coverage across key peace-related moments. Policy and organisational documents, such as editorial policies, codes of ethics and donor policy frameworks in cases where they were available were analysed in order to trace bureaucratic influences on news production. Last but not least, interviews and secondary accounts, that is, supplementary data from journalist interviews those published in academic and grey literature, and secondary accounts of Zimbabwean newsroom practices (Mano, 2016; Mutsvairo, 2021). While primary ethnographic interviews were not conducted for this paper, triangulation with existing studies ensured analytical depth.

Critical Discourse Analysis examined how peace, conflict, and collective memory were framed in selected articles. Thus, coding categories included, sources, tone, framing devices, and presence of nostalgia. In the same vein, policy analysis traced how newsroom bureaucracy, that is, editorial hierarchies, donor frameworks and state directives influenced journalistic practice. Therefore, special attention was given to how bureaucratic logics reproduce coloniality of power, knowledge and coloniality of being.

Qualitative content analysis was used to systematically interpret textual data, and it allowed for identification of explicit and underlying meaning, thus enabling the researcher to explore how newsrooms bureaucracy works. The study is guided by Mayring (2014) and Schreier (2012) interpretive model of qualitative content analysis using deductive categories that emerged from the theoretical framework. Inductive categories emerged from the data itself, that institutional rigidity, editorial gatekeeping and experiential reflexivity. Therefore, each category was coded and analysed to reveal how media texts and internal newsroom practices embody, resist or reformulate epistemic power.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data analysis followed an iterative and reflexive process consistent with grounded qualitative approaches (Charmaz, 2006). Data familiarisation enabled all documents and transcripts to be read multiple times to identify recurring moral, bureaucratic and epistemic themes. Therefore,

codes were generated inductively from the data and deductively from theoretical constructs such as craft literacy, craft competence and first principles thinking. The study also conducted axial coding and thematic clustering, meaning related codes were grouped into larger categories, for instance bureaucratic control, moral reasoning, journalistic autonomy, editorial conformity, decolonial reflexivity and affective collective memory. There was comparative analysis of *The Herald* and *NewsDay* in order to uncover institutional divergences in how bureaucracy interacts with craft. Lastly, interpretive synthesis was conducted so as to interpret the data through the integrated framework (Yin, 2018) of communicative craft literacy, communicative craft competence, first principles thinking, decoloniality of peace as well as highlight pathways toward a decolonial newsroom ecology.

Reflexivity and Researcher Positionality

The researcher acknowledges their own situatedness as a Zimbabwean scholar working within and about the media ecology being studied. This positionality entails both epistemic privilege or familiarity with cultural and political contexts, as well as ethical responsibility. Reflexive journaling was used throughout the research to critically examine interpretive biases and to ensure that decolonial inquiry did not become another form of academic extraction. Instead, the goal was to practice epistemic humility so as to learn with rather than about journalists (Smith, 2012; Chilisa, 2012). As with all critical-interpretive research, the researcher acknowledges positionality. Therefore, the analysis is shaped by a commitment to decolonial critique, which seeks to uncover epistemic hierarchies in media practice while foregrounding alternative possibilities for peace journalism. Rather than claiming neutrality, this study adopts a normative stance which is that journalism should actively resist coloniality and contribute to just and inclusive peacebuilding.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was secured in accordance with institutional and international guidelines for qualitative research. Participants were anonymised, and pseudonyms used in reporting to ensure confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained from all interviewees to enable voluntary Participation. Care was taken not to compromise journalists' employment or editorial independence thus institutional sensitivity was safeguarded. And cultural ethics guided by the African relational ethic of *hunhu/ubuntu*, that is respect, reciprocity, and care was respected, so participants were treated as co-producers of knowledge.

Findings and Discussion

Overview

The analysis of newsroom bureaucracies in *The Herald* and *NewsDay* reveals a shared tension between bureaucratic efficiency and moral craftsmanship or between the demands of institutional control and the ethical imperatives of journalism as a social craft. In this vein, both outlets exhibit forms of epistemic capture, albeit through different pathways: *The Herald* through state bureaucratisation of truth, and *NewsDay* through market bureaucratisation of objectivity. These findings illuminate how Zimbabwe's media system continues to reproduce colonial epistemic logics under different guises. However, embedded within both systems are islands of

communicative craft literacy, and communicative craft competence and journalists who reason from first principles thinking, who frame their work as moral repair and who also intuitively practise what Chingono (Unpublished) theorises as Positive Restorative Collective Nostalgia (PRCN), which is, a mode of mediated collective memory that humanises, reconnects and rebuilds rather than divides communities

Newsroom Bureaucracy as Coloniality of Knowledge

The analysis of newsroom practices in The Herald and NewsDay reveals how bureaucratic routines reinforce Eurocentric and elite-driven epistemologies. The Herald's editorial bureaucracy prioritises state narratives, prioritising official press statements, ministerial voices and government-sanctioned 'truths.' Consequently, peace is frequently framed as order, stability and obedience, thus echoing a statist conception of order that is aligned with colonial administrative logics (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). In contrast, NewsDay, while positioned as private, often mirrors donor-driven narratives, thus it emphasises 'democratic governance,' 'institutional reform,' and 'good governance', which are by and large categories that are imported from liberal peace frameworks (Chipaike and Knowledge, 2018). It is seminal to note that both outlets reveal the coloniality of knowledge (Mignolo, 2009), hence newsroom bureaucracies filter acceptable narratives through externally imposed categories, which is the case of The Herald is the state and in the case of NewsDay it is international donors. In its important to note that in both cases, grassroots epistemologies of reconciliation, such as community dialogues, oral traditions or local ritual processes of healing, remain marginalised.

Coloniality of Being in Journalistic Practice

Newsroom bureaucracy also enacts the coloniality of being (Maldonado-Torres, 2007), where communities are positioned as passive recipients of peace. In The Herald, citizens often appear as background figures that are used to validate government narratives of peace and stability without agency of their own. For example, during the 2018 election violence coverage, communities were portrayed as needing protection by state security forces, this treatment erased their lived experiences of trauma. While NewsDay is more critical of the state, it frequently reproduces a similar dynamic by presenting communities as NGO beneficiaries or simply data points or metrics. For instance, reports on COVID-19, emphasised international aid, donor projects and institutional reforms, hence they reduced citizens to dependent actors rather than co-creators of resilience. Thus it can be argued that this bureaucratic flattening of local subjectivity constitutes ontological violence, where lived experiences are subordinated to bureaucratic categories.

Craft Competence versus Craft Literacy in Zimbabwean Newsrooms

A central finding in the study is the imbalance between communicative craft competence and communicative craft literacy. Zimbabwean journalists often demonstrate high competence, that is, the ability to meet deadlines, follow editorial routines and reproduce institutional expectations, which reflects newsroom bureaucracies' emphasis on efficiency and conformity. However, the guiding question, for the study is, do journalists understand the moral and cultural purpose of their work beyond institutional compliance? Thus the expected insight revealed that

both newspapers treated journalism as civic craftsmanship or bureaucratic labour by media practitioners.

However, instances of communicative craft literacy, where journalists critically reflect on their profession as an ethically situated craft, are less common but highly significant. For example, some NewsDay features on *Gukurahundi* moved beyond event reporting to explore intergenerational trauma, drawing on oral testimonies and cultural memory. Similarly, The Herald occasionally published commemorative pieces that use metaphor, poetry or historical parallels to link current events with national struggles. These moments reveal journalists breaking through bureaucratic formality to produce work grounded in epistemic justice. All this suggests that while communicative craft competence thrives under bureaucracy, communicative craft literacy emerges when journalists resist bureaucratic capture especially at personal or professional risk.

First Principles Thinking as a Decolonial Strategy

Applying first principles thinking highlights how newsroom actors might reorient journalism away from bureaucratic capture. In essence, by asking foundational questions such as What is the purpose of news? Who is it for? What is its ethical responsibility in contexts of trauma and transition? The argument here is that journalists can dismantle inherited routines and reconstruct practice around core values. The guiding question, therefore, is what foundational moral assumptions underlie editorial routines? And the expected insight is to identify how journalists' reason from or deviate from ethical fundamentals such as truth, dignity and justice (McQuail, 2013).

In the Zimbabwean context, first principles thinking could mean prioritising truth-telling and community healing over elite narratives of stability in The Herald or donor checklists of democratic benchmarks in NewsDay. For example, instead of framing elections solely in terms of procedural integrity, first principles thinking would emphasise journalism's duty to illuminate historical injustices, give space to silenced voices and foster inclusive dialogue. Therefore, first principles thinking, when combined with craft literacy, enables journalists to move beyond being bureaucratic functionaries to become moral agents of decolonial peace.

Mediated Memory, PRCN and the Role of Newsroom Bureaucracy

This study also found that newsroom bureaucracy significantly shapes how collective memory and nostalgia are mediated. The Herald tends to instrumentalise nostalgia for state legitimacy, framing national struggles such as the liberation war as justification for ruling party continuity. This exemplifies negative restorative nostalgia, where the past is weaponised to exclude dissenters (Boym, 2001). In contrast, NewsDay has occasionally mediated reflective nostalgia, using collective memory to critique state failures or highlight unfulfilled democratic promises. However, these narratives often lack a constructive restorative dimension that could sustainably bind communities together.

In this respect, the concept of Positive Restorative Collective Nostalgia (PRCN) provides a novel intervention. When mediated responsibly, nostalgia can serve as a resource for reconciliation

rather than division. For instance, coverage of the 2013 Constitution debates occasionally invoked shared liberation ideals in ways that fostered inclusivity across political divides (Raftopoulos, 2015). Such moments align with PRCN which forwards the notion that collective memory should be framed not to entrench domination but to restore belonging and dignity. However newsroom bureaucracy frequently constrains these possibilities, thus pushes journalists toward partisan or donor-driven uses of nostalgia. This underscores the urgency of embedding craft literacy, craft competence and first principles thinking into newsroom structures hence enables PRCN to flourish as a reconciliatory narrative strategy.

Implications for Decolonial Peace

The findings demonstrate that both The Herald and NewsDay reproduce aspects of the coloniality of peace (Azarmandi and Pauls, 2024; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015), though in different ways, one through statist bureaucracy, the other through donor frameworks. However, cracks in these bureaucracies reveal possibilities for decolonial peace journalism, where communicative craft literacy, communicative craft competence, first principles thinking and PRCN intersect. Such an approach would position journalism not as a neutral conveyor of bureaucratic categories, but as a co-creator of collective memory and reconciliation. This aligns with the broader decolonial project of dismantling inherited epistemologies and grounding peace in lived experience, dignity and justice (Azarmandi and Pauls, 2024).

The Herald: Bureaucracy as the Coloniality of Truth

Institutional Ethos and Editorial Hierarchy

The Herald's editorial charter, as reviewed in its 2011 and 2020 revisions, is premised on national duty, patriotism, and developmental journalism. While these ideals appear noble, they are operationalised through vertical command structures that concentrate interpretive authority within a small circle of senior editors. Interview data suggest that this bureaucratic verticality mirrors the colonial state's paternal epistemology, where truth is sanctioned from above and dissent is treated as disorder. Journalists described editorial meetings as 'briefings,' not dialogues, echoing what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) terms epistemic authoritarianism, which is the control of what can be known, said or felt. This epistemic closure erodes craft literacy, thus replaces moral reasoning with bureaucratic compliance. Journalists cease to ask 'why', which is the foundational question of first principles thinking and instead focus on how to implement the institutional line.

Craft Illiteracy and the Loss of Moral Agency

The Herald's newsroom operates as a technocratic moral economy, in which journalists are rewarded for loyalty rather than craftsmanship. This creates what Mignolo (2009) calls colonial difference within, thus in this case journalists internalise the state's epistemic hierarchy, thereby reproducing colonial relations of power even under nationalist rhetoric. From a communicative craft literacy perspective, this represents a loss of moral agency because journalism becomes instrumental but not interpretive and performative but not reflective. Therefore, news routines

prioritise bureaucratic form over substance, meaning they are more worried about deadlines over dialogue or protocol over principle. The decolonial critique here is not that patriotism is illegitimate, but that bureaucratised patriotism denies the journalist the right to reason. In effect, The Herald reproduces coloniality by disciplining its craft into obedience rather than moral responsibility.

Seeds of Positive Restorative Collective Nostalgia

Nevertheless, it is important to note that not all journalists are passive, several interviews revealed moments of reflexive defiance, where reporters reframe national duty as cultural care or the idea that to serve the nation is to tell its truth, even when uncomfortable. These moments align with Positive Restorative Collective Nostalgia, where journalists draw upon collective memory not to glorify the past but to repair moral fractures caused by colonial and postcolonial violence. This illustrates that communicative craft literacy survives even within bureaucratic systems, manifesting as subterranean moral resistance or a quiet but persistent return to first principles of truth, dignity and communal responsibility.

NewsDay: Bureaucracy as Neoliberal Rationality

The Illusion of Editorial Freedom

In contrast, NewsDay presents itself as the liberal counterpoint that is independent, professional and critical. Yet, the study finds that its bureaucratic logic is equally constraining, the only difference is that it offers a ideological register. In cases where The Herald's bureaucracy is political, NewsDay's is sometimes political but predominantly corporate, thus journalists report editorial decisions framed by audience analytics, advertising pressures and donor-funded agendas. This reflects what Fuchs (2021) describes as digital colonialism or the subordination of journalistic judgment to market metrics and external funders. In this context, communicative craft literacy is eroded not by authoritarian command, but by instrumental rationality or the neoliberal reduction of journalism to 'content production.'

Bureaucratic Neutrality as Epistemic Violence

Although NewsDay promotes balance and objectivity, its editorial bureaucracy enforces what Santos (2014) calls abyssal thinking or the exclusion of indigenous, emotional and spiritual ways of knowing from journalistic legitimacy. This 'neutrality bureaucracy' sustains the coloniality of peace by depoliticising suffering, so coverage of post-election violence, for instance, privileges procedural balance or the practice that 'both sides were heard' over restorative empathy. From a first principles thinking perspective, this is a moral failure as this is peace without justice and truth without compassion. Thus, NewsDay reproduces the colonial condition of 'knowing without feeling', which is an epistemic detachment that inhibits the emergence of decolonial peace journalism (Shaw, Lynch and Hackett, 2011).

Communicative Craft Competence and the Seeds of Renewal

Despite these constraints, NewsDay journalists demonstrate communicative craft competence in their insistence on verification, fairness, and accountability. Unlike The Herald, where the moral constraint is political, here it is structural and cognitive, so journalists believe in ethics, but their newsroom ecology fragments ethical reasoning into metrics and deadlines. However, some journalists, resist this logic through narrative features that rehumanise victims, foreground local memory and draw on ubuntu ethics. These journalists embody communicative craft literacy under neoliberal constraint, demonstrating that moral craftsmanship can survive even in marketised conditions.

The comparative synthesis of bureaucracy, communicative craft and decolonial peace in the analysis of both publications established that the dominant bureaucratic logic is mainly political and administrative, thus for the Herald and for NewsDay its Market–managerial thus both reproduce coloniality through control of meaning. The epistemic constraint for The Herald is state-sanctioned truth, whilst for NewsDay it is algorithmic objectivity and the decolonial implication that in both publications truth is outsourced to authority or market. For communicative craft literacy in The Herald, it is suppressed, but present as moral resistance and in NewsDay, it is fragmented, but evident in narrative and empathy, thus in both publications communicative craft persists as a site of decolonial renewal. As for first principles thinking in The Herald it is subordinated to patriotism and in NewsDay it is subordinated to professional neutrality, therefore in both publications journalists must recover the ‘why’ question of their work. Fundamentally, the peace orientation of The Herald is restorative but exclusive and for NewsDay it is liberal but affectively hollow.

The comparative analysis shows that newsroom bureaucracy in both ideological extremes, narrows journalism’s moral imagination. Intrinsically, decolonial peacebuilding requires recovering communicative craft literacy as the capacity to think, feel and act from first principles thinking of justice and human dignity. Thus, both The Herald and NewsDay exemplify partial decolonial movements, each illuminating what the other lacks. The Herald reminds its readers of community and belonging but risks paternalism, whilst NewsDay reminds its readers of autonomy and accountability but risks alienation. Therefore, communicative craft literacy, communicative craft competence and first principles thinking reconcile these polarities by positioning journalism as careful reasoning in the service of humanity.

Towards a Decolonial Newsroom Ecology

From the findings, the following three critical pathways emerge: rehumanising bureaucracy through communicative craft literacy and communicative craft competence, so bureaucracy must not be dismantled but re-enchanted or redesigned to facilitate moral craftsmanship rather than compliance. This should be done in editorial meetings because they should function as ethical workshops, where journalists collectively reason from first principles thinking rather than receive instructions. Embedding first principles thinking in editorial decision-making should also be prioritised, as such journalism education and newsroom policy should explicitly train reporters to ask: Why does this story matter for justice, memory, and peace? This reconnects communicative craft with moral purpose and transforms procedural ethics into living ethics.

The findings demonstrate that newsroom bureaucracy in Zimbabwe is not merely organisational but it is epistemological, ontological and axiological. This is so because it shapes how journalists exist as moral beings and how societies remember, reconcile, and rebuild. The Herald and NewsDay both reveal that the decolonial transformation of journalism cannot be achieved through policy reform alone. It demands a deeper epistemic shift, that is, from institutional efficiency to moral craftsmanship and from compliance to conscience. In reclaiming craft literacy, craft competency and first principles thinking, journalism can evolve from a colonial administrative practice into a decolonial craft of peace, one that mediates memory, nostalgia and justice in ways that heal rather than divide.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study has examined newsroom bureaucracy in Zimbabwe as both an institutional and epistemic terrain where journalism's relationship to truth, memory and peace is continuously negotiated. Through a comparative analysis of The Herald and NewsDay, it has shown that bureaucratic structures, whether state or market-driven, reproduce colonial hierarchies of knowledge by prioritising procedural control over moral reasoning. In this sense, bureaucracy functions as an instrument of the coloniality of peace (Azarmandi and Pauls, 2024; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015) or a system that organises information and collective memory while masking historical injustice and silencing subaltern voices.

However, the findings also reveal that within these structures lie seeds of transformation. Journalists in both institutions demonstrate what Jonathan Moyo (1991) calls craft literacy, which is a moral and intellectual capacity to reason beyond technical routines, to interpret rather than merely report, and to situate their work within the ethical horizon of humanity. When coupled with first principles thinking, as communicative craft literacy, it becomes a decolonial practice, it dismantles epistemic hierarchies by returning to the foundational 'why' of journalism that prioritises truth, dignity and collective wellbeing.

This synthesis of communicative craft literacy, communicative craft competence first principles thinking, and PRCN thus represents a new epistemology of decolonial journalism, one that transcends both the controlling and neoliberal logics that constrain Zimbabwe's media ecology. It proposes a journalism that is at once critical, restorative and peace-oriented, which means a journalism that understands truth not as control or neutrality, but as a moral relationship between people, memory and justice.

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several key contributions to media theory and decolonial scholarship:

1. Reconceptualising bureaucracy as an epistemic category, so it redefines newsroom bureaucracy beyond organisational management, hence identifying it as a site of

coloniality where hierarchies of knowing, feeling and speaking are reproduced or contested (Mignolo, 2009; Santos, 2014).

2. It Integrates craft literacy and first principles into decolonial media theory, thus It extends Jonathan Moyo's (1991) concept of craft literacy from a professional to an epistemological register, demonstrating how first principles thinking reanimates journalism's moral core and resists epistemic domination.
3. Bridging decoloniality of peace and media practice thus the study operationalises the decoloniality of peace (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Maldonado-Torres, 2007) within newsroom practice, showing how media institutions can either perpetuate or disrupt the colonial infrastructures of peacebuilding.
4. It also develops a framework for decolonial newsroom ecology as it advances a normative framework for rehumanising newsroom bureaucracy, that is one grounded in moral reasoning, participatory decision-making, and epistemic plurality.

Practical Recommendations

Rehumanising Bureaucracy

Newsroom bureaucracy should be reconceived as a moral infrastructure rather than a control mechanism. Editorial meetings must evolve into ethical deliberation spaces, where journalists collectively reason from first principles about the implications of their stories for justice, peace, and public memory. The recommendation is to integrate 'ethical reflection sessions' into weekly editorial routines, guided by decolonial and ubuntu-informed frameworks.

Institutionalising Communicative Craft Literacy

Media houses and journalism schools should embed craft literacy into training curricula and newsroom policy. This means teaching journalism not as content production but as moral craftsmanship rooted in interpretive judgment, historical consciousness and emotional intelligence. Thus, there is need to develop Communicative Craft Literacy Modules in partnership with universities and press unions that focus on decolonial ethics, narrative empathy and historical repair.

Applying First Principles Thinking

First principles thinking should be institutionalised as a decision-making framework that encourages journalists to interrogate the fundamental assumptions behind editorial choices. This epistemic discipline helps resist both state propaganda and market-driven conformity, thus there is need for each editorial justification to include a written 'first principles reflection,' asking: Why does this story matter for truth, justice, or peace?

Policy Alignment and Institutional Reform

Press councils, regulatory bodies and journalism associations should incorporate decolonial peace journalism principles into media ethics codes. This would align newsroom policy with broader peacebuilding frameworks and provide institutional legitimacy. Accordingly, there is

need for a ‘Decolonial Peace and Media Ethics Charter’ endorsed by professional associations, foregrounding epistemic justice, emotional integrity and ecological responsibility.

Concluding Reflection

Ultimately, the decolonial newsroom is not a structure but a conscience so bureaucracy, nostalgia, and professionalism are not the enemies of peace, however their unexamined forms are. When journalists are trained to think from first principles thinking and practise communicative craft literacy, bureaucracy becomes ethical, nostalgia becomes restorative, and journalism becomes a craft of peace. As Zimbabwe navigates the complex terrain of postcolonial reconstruction, the media’s most revolutionary act may not be opposition or advocacy, but craftsmanship or the quiet, disciplined work of telling the truth , collective memory as healing and peace as justice lived in language.

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Essay: An Alienating Institution: Navigating Social Reintegration After Long-Term Incarceration

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An Alienating Institution: Navigating Social Reintegration After Long-Term Incarceration

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Abstract

Life after incarceration is challenged by the realities of trying to (re)establish resources and supports needed to regain one’s life, especially after being incarcerated for a long period of time. Though we reasonably give much attention to the importance of securing housing, employment, and treatment if needed, the difficulties of social life, such as finding social support and navigating relationships with children and spouses, often do not get equivalent attention. This study shares the experiences of one returning citizen within the first five months of release who,

despite successes, struggles with reentry—particularly in navigating social relationships and support systems—and illustrates how these challenges manifest in daily life.

Introduction

Reese, a 39-year-old Afro-Latino man who lives in the northeastern United States, was released on January 24, 2025, after spending three and a half years in county jail for first-degree racketeering, a disputed charge that motivated his broader advocacy for justice system reform. He spent the entire term of his incarceration trying to prove his innocence. His first charge, 1st Degree Aggravated Manslaughter, led to him spending approximately 15 years in prison, a crime for which he admitted complete involvement. He was arrested for this felony shortly after graduating high school at age 19. After serving his sentence, he was released at 33. However, he was arrested again at age 35 for racketeering and released at 39. This work focuses mostly on the time following this second release. Reese joined the Latin Kings at age 12 because “I was trying to fill a hole, I guess. Commandery. Family type shit,” and rose in rank and notoriety. Upon his release, he returned to the same neighborhood where he grew up, tasked with navigating this new reality after spending his entire adult life behind bars. Within four months of his second release, he had obtained his license, a car, stable housing, a full-time security job, and another contractor role with a non-profit organization. He is also currently working on getting his commercial drivers license.

Despite what he views as successes in the first few months, he faced many challenges on his reentry journey including with family relationships and finding a support system. He has children, and though he has a very good relationship with his youngest son (5 years old), his relationships with his two daughters, especially his youngest daughter (15 years old), are less than ideal. He is also now divorced from his ex-wife, which is another challenging relationship he has to navigate. So too is the relationship with his mother, which provides some support, yet it is complicated by additional challenges.

In many ways, Reese’s story is not unique. Prisons are alienating institutions (Nagel, 2024), separating people from their social world, resulting in a disequilibrium that Nagel (2024) refers to as postcarceral affective disorder. His search for community support and his effort to reconnect with family are processes many returning citizens have to navigate upon release. What Reese’s story adds is a narrative that helps us understand how these reentry challenges unfold and their impact on the lives of the individuals involved.

The Rise of Incarceration

Between 1973 and 2000, there was an over 300% increase in incarceration (Visher & Travis, 2003). Estimates from 2018 suggest that 2.2 million people were locked up on an average day in

the US (Carson, 2018), a statistic that leaves the US infamously towering over other wealthy countries (Kaeble & Cowhig, 2018). The impacts of the incarceration boom have been concentrated among young men of color who live in poorer communities. Young people are more likely to be involved in criminal activity (Clear, 2007; Tuttle, 2026), with involvement rising in the teenage years, followed by a sharp decline as cognitive development progresses (Casey et al., 2022). Men are often more likely to be incarcerated for a variety of crimes (Motivans, 2022). Regarding race, Black individuals are more likely to face stops, searches, and arrests compared to other racial groups (Eith & Durose, 2011; Glaser, 2014; Jones-Brown et al., 2010; The Sentencing Project, 2017), an experience rooted in criminalization (Alexander, 2020; Hinton et al., 2018). People who are financially disadvantaged from areas with a higher rate of undereducated, underemployed, and under-skilled individuals are also more likely to have large swaths of their population who have served or are serving a term of imprisonment (Western, 2006). Reese fits the population most affected by incarceration with almost laser-like precision. He was a young Black-Hispanic man from a relatively impoverished urban city when he was first arrested. In urban communities like Reese's, the criminal legal system is among the most pervasive and enduring systems in people's lives (Morenoff & Harding, 2014).

Life After Incarceration

Most individuals who were incarcerated eventually return home to their families and communities (Visser & Travis, 2003). They describe issues of job scarcity amid mounting court debts and returning to areas where community and family members are also struggling with criminal legal system involvement and substance use (Visser, Yahner, & Vigne, 2010). Returning citizens report needing education, career training, jobs, health services and treatment for substance use, transportation, help reconnecting with families, and a plethora of other services (Faulkner et al., 2026; Lattimore, 2009; Visser & Travis, 2011). The loss of critical rights and access to support systems for individuals with criminal records creates significant barriers to successful reentry. Depending on the crime and their state, individuals can lose access to education loans, driving licenses, termination of parental rights, and public assistance (Faulkner et al., 2026; Travis, 2005). Travis (2002) calls these laws, which operate on the periphery of society's recognition and impose punishing penalties on individuals after they are released, invisible punishments. Many of these challenges complicate an individual's ability to readjust to life on the outside (Visser & Travis, 2003) and make it difficult to break the stigma of incarceration (Keene, Smoyer, & Blankenship, 2018).

This study

In this project, the first five months of one returning citizen's post-release experience are examined to identify areas of success and continued struggle. Despite successes, he faces significant challenges in other areas of reentry, particularly in his social relationships and

supports. This study hopes to highlight the nuances of reentry and the ways that individuals struggle even amid their progress.

Methods

The first author observed Reese in person approximately twice per week for 2 hours per day and his online activities for approximately 4 months between March and July of 2025. During this time, they also conducted one 74-minute interview and other shorter phone conversations to document life as a formerly incarcerated person reentering society. Thorough notes were taken on these interactions and observation notes, and interview transcripts were coded using thematic analysis for this study. The second author, the case study for this paper, ensured the findings presented here are accurate based on his experiences, thereby improving the rigor of this work. This study is authorized by the Rutgers University Institutional Review Board.

Results

Employment and Housing Success

Having employment and stable housing are some of the most important successes returning citizens need after release (La Vigne, Brooks, and Shollenberger, 2007). Unfortunately, Black men are less likely to get called back for a job compared to white men, especially if they have a criminal record (Pager 2003, 2007). Fortunately for Reese, he found jobs within 60 days of his second release. Even though he found employment, his earning power is likely still lower than it would have been had he not been incarcerated. First, he lost over 17 years while he was locked away across both charges. Additionally, having a criminal record is likely to reduce a person's wages, even for those who are fortunate enough to obtain jobs (Lageson & Uggen, 2013; Loeffler, 2013; Mueller-Smith, 2014; Ramakers et al., 2014). Reese notes this challenge when he stated, "reentry hasn't been a straight line. There have been periods of stability and setbacks including job loss and financial strain. Housing is seen as one of the first hurdles for returning citizens (LeBel, 2017). The financial challenge, as well as stigma, means that returning citizens are more likely to struggle finding somewhere to live compared to those who were never incarcerated (Roman & Travis, 2004; Equal Rights Center, 2016; LeBel, 2012). Initially, after release, Reese was able to stay with his mother for one week, which is a typical solution for returning citizens before he secured a place of his own (Clark, 2015). These small early wins provide a somewhat stable foundation, but other challenges remain.

Marital Relationship

People who have been incarcerated are more likely to be divorced and less likely to marry in the future, even if they remain in a long-term cohabiting relationship (Western et al., 2004). Longer terms of incarceration, like the one Reese served, are associated with a higher risk of getting divorced (Massoglia, Remster, King, 2011; Apel et al., 2010). Apel theorizes the relationship

between divorce and incarceration as being impacted by negative stigma associated with a criminal record and the incapacitation linked with arrest, causing an abrupt “time out” that disrupts the quality of the relationship that might lead the spouse on the outside seeking support elsewhere (Apel et al., 2010; Lopoo & Western, 2005).

These findings align with one of the reasons Reese’s marriage fell apart. Incarceration made the relationship challenging, and during that time, his wife began an affair with another man. He also reports that the marriage was a rushed endeavor that, had they given it more time, would likely not have happened. When asked if he regrets getting married, he said: “I should’ve waited, but I don’t regret it at all.” In response to a question about whether he would ever get married again, he said, “To be honest, I hope so. I loved it. Or at least aspects of it. I feel like I would spot [the right relationship] way more now.” The end of a marriage is noteworthy because marriages tend to be prosocial engagements that help returning citizens along their recovery journey. Having a committed marriage, especially for those who have passed their early twenties, is associated with a lower chance of reoffending (Visser, Knight & Roman, 2009). Functioning marriages are social ties that make it more costly (and less likely) for an individual to commit future crimes (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Ironically, given these benefits of a positive marriage, incarceration separates spouses from each other and makes it difficult for those not married to find suitable partners if they desire to do so.

Parental-Child Relationship

One of the first author’s earliest observations of Reese and his daughter occurred one morning before school, as Reese waited with McDonald’s hashbrowns in hand. Spotting a young girl he mistook for his daughter, he called out, but the girl did not respond. It was not her. Because of the prolonged time away from his children that ended two months before and a terminated marriage that resulted in his inability to live with them, spotting his daughter among a group of other girls her age in the busy morning crowd proved difficult. When he finally spotted her, he admitted feeling nervous because he “didn’t know how it [was] going to go.” He caught up with her, and the interaction went off without a hitch. Watching her walk into school, he started cheering when she took a bite of the hashbrown. This interaction proved to be one of Reese’s few successes in trying to connect with his daughter. Other attempts over the past few months have gone poorly, leaving him at a loss for how to proceed. One morning, he arrived late to work after driving to her home to give her a ride so she would not have to walk to school in the rain. He left after she refused to talk to him or meet him outside. In fact, since the end of our research observation, Reese’s relationship with his step daughter has eroded entirely. At times, he wonders if he will ever get another chance at fatherhood to build the kind of connection he struggles to create now, “not to replace what was lost, but to heal what is still broken.” The strong relationship with his son benefits from the fact that his son was sixteen months old when his father went away for the second time, and only four when he returned. Unfortunately, his oldest son was only two when he was arrested the first time, and his daughter was born 30 days after his arrest, “so she

spent my entire incarceration growing up with me behind bars.” Fortunately, Reese was able to rebuild a strong relationship with his sons, but the relationship with his daughter and step-daughter continue to be a challenge, exacerbated by parental disagreements between him and his ex-wife. Relationships with children are important, as they can serve as a protective factor against future offending (Visher, Bakken, & Gunter, 2013). Parent-child connections suffer when a parent is locked away (Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010), and rebuilding a relationship after being alienated from one’s children through incarceration, as it is in Reese’s case, is not as simple as picking up where you left off.

Not only do relationships between parents and children suffer, but the children themselves also suffer. Reese worried about his step-daughter’s emotional well-being, which he thinks is affecting her academic performance, and feels his past absence deeply impacts her struggles. His step-daughter told him that she is overwhelmed by the many changes in her life and felt isolated, as though she has no one to turn to for support. Unfortunately, these reports are unsurprising as previous research finds that young people whose parents have been incarcerated are more likely to have poor academic performance, behavioral problems such as truancy, and poorer mental health prospects such as increased rates of depression and anxiety symptoms (Clear, 2007; Geller et al., 2012; Haskins, 2015; Haskins, 2016; Turney & Haskins, 2014). With Reese being incarcerated for most of her life, the absence of a parent presents a strain, limits parental socialization, and adds labeling stigma that can result in emotional and behavioral issues (Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999).

Social Support

Reese says he feels that he does not have a support system that looks out for him and that, after spending so much time behind bars, individuals in his life turn to him for help with little regard to his capacity. He ended his first post-release relationship after feeling that, despite asking for her support, his needs were consistently overlooked. He also recounted a moment shortly after his release when his mom would tell people who needed help that, now that Reese is home, they could “*use* him.” He recounts that experience with feelings of frustration at being seen as someone others can use when they are in need, yet no one was there for him when he needed support. These feelings of strain that Reese described, coupled with a lack of social support, are part of incarceration’s isolating power and are key issues to address if he is to be successful in reentry.

Returning citizens often rely heavily on support from family, friends, and other community members to assist with reintegration into society (Clear, 2007). They meet important needs such as financial and housing support (La Vigne, Visher, & Castro, 2004; McMurray, 1993), and the lack of these and other forms of familial support can negatively impact returning citizens and their mental health (Wallace et al., 2016). Even though Reese was able to briefly stay at his mom’s home just after his release, he finds that he lacks other forms of support, such as having

individuals to check in on his progress and be part of his social network. Instead, he finds himself in a one-way relationship in which he is expected to provide support to others.

Conclusion

The tentacles of incarceration are far-reaching after an individual completes their sentence, affecting both the individual and their loved ones. Reese realized that his actions as a teen resulted in being separated from his family the first time. He admits that, “I own my past because it helps shape who I am, but it doesn’t define who I am today.” Despite serving his sentence, he and others in his life continue to experience the punishment of incarceration even after his release. We need to achieve greater success in supporting individuals through the reentry process. Returning citizens, especially those who served a lengthy sentence, need assistance with rebuilding personal relationships, especially with partners, co-parents, parents, and children, and navigating the changes within relationships such as divorce. There also needs to be continued investments in peer support and mentoring, as this could help individuals with feelings of isolation. Additionally, building community social networks through organizations such as churches and community centers might help individuals re-enter everyday life.

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Book Review: *Emotional Choices: How the Logic of Affect Shapes Coercive Diplomacy*, by Robin Markwica (Oxford University Press, 2018)

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***EMOTIONAL CHOICES: HOW THE LOGIC OF AFFECT SHAPES COERCIVE
DIPLOMACY BY ROBIN MARKWICA, (OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2018)***

David Lempert

Too much of what is touted as “new” in Political Science is neither “new” nor “science” but is a renaming of failed historical approaches without apparent recognition of past work, and without meeting standards for predictive validity on important questions of public importance. This is particularly true today in works on war and peace, with progressives today, particularly in “left” leaning political parties like the U.S. Democratic Party, largely now backing or afraid to challenge the military establishment in its global war policies. Markwica’s book, within the larger field of interdisciplinary applications of psychology to political science, is a striking example of this failure. He offers what seems to be a new approach with modern buzz words of “affect”, “identities”, and “emotional choice theory” (p.257) in what he calls a “socioemotional constructionist” and “process analysis” approach (p.28) to “homo emotionalis” (p.111) as a response to the inadequacy of rational choice theory. Instead of moving forward based on scientific advances in cognitive psychology and other social sciences, however, he returns political science to the subjective (and immeasurable) study of personalities of leaders on specific policy decisions (what he calls a “renaissance” (p.5)) in which their actual constraints,

powers, and beliefs are, as he himself admits, unknowable and in which these “new” techniques formerly affiliated with progressives are now used in ways that actually promote militarism.

For those of us who hope that New Political Science, the once progressive voice in the American Political Science Association, will not only be scientific but will promote objectives of international law (including peace, sovereignty, sustainability, and equity), this book and the way it is viewed, demonstrates that those hopes are being dashed. New Political Science commissioned me to do a review of this book for their journal and then rejected the review when I pointed out that the approach actually promoted war rather than peace and contradicted the goals and methods that were the core of new political science. I thank this journal for the chance to present this review and to add this commentary on what is happening in peace studies in that subfield, as well.

Markwica’s choice to focus on “coercive diplomacy” with a goal of improving the ability of aggressive, hegemonic powers to psychologically coerce weaker parties, asking, “Why do states frequently reject coercive threats from more powerful opponents?” (p.1), is in fact itself suspect. The goal of the author appears to be to protect the funds and lives of the aggressors in order to more efficiently enforce capitulation and control (to improve the “strategy’s success rate” of coercion from its current level of “only 17 to 36 percent” (p.2)) and to use weapons for a zero sum game, rather than to build consensus on common concerns of humanity and to protect human dignity, and this seems to be the goal of New Political Science today as well.

Markwica seeks to explain his approach in Chapter 2 (“The Logic of Affect”) and Chapter 3 (“Inferring Actors’ Emotions”) but fails to offer any objective data independent of the observer for assuring appropriate measures of emotions. He notes that emotions are “evanescent and elusive” and can only be “inferred” through “qualitative sentiment analysis” using “textual sources” (all in English publications on behaviors of foreign actors that are subjective (p.97)) using a “taxonomy of emotion signs that include four classes: explicit, implicit, cognitive and behavioral emotion signs” (p.100) while recognizing “the dynamic interplay between actors’ norms, identities and emotions” (p.109). He chooses what he calls “the five key emotions”, “fear, anger, hope, pride and humiliation” (p.257), believing that they are identifiable in political actors (who often are, in fact, *actors*, hiding and falsifying emotion) and distinct (which many psychologists doubt), and suggests future work on five other equally indistinct and culturally dependent emotional states (“joy, guilt, shame, contempt, or hatred” (p.276). “Love” and “empathy” do not appear to be in his emotional vocabulary as part of cross-cultural relationships.

Chapters 4 and 5 offer case studies, focusing on the behavior of Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 and Iraqi President Saddam Hussein during the first Gulf War in 1990-91. Markwica assumes that both were obstinate in refusing to be coerced by U.S. military power, exercised by Presidents John F. Kennedy and George H.W. Bush, whose emotions are not considered relevant for analysis. The case studies, themselves, not only include these subjective assumptions about the players but also about the larger contexts (actual goals and decision-making authority not only of the leaders but their institutions and cultures). Conveniently missing are the history of U.S. relations and promises to Saddam Hussein that led him into Kuwait, the context of U.S. missiles in Turkey prior to the responsive placement of Soviet missiles in Cuba, and the precarious positions of both Kennedy and Khrushchev in

relation to their own national security states. These are taboo subjects in many histories but may offer better explanations and predictions than Markwica's convoluted approach to history through revelation of emotions. These two chapters alone contain some 750 footnotes and the book has nearly twice that, highlighting how wieldy Markwica's approach is.

I wish the world of emotions and actions were even half as simple as Markwica believes and that people could better understand the emotions of their children, parents and spouses whom they see every day in order to achieve better outcomes in these basic human relations, let alone have the wisdom to understand the emotional and cultural sensitivities driving the decision-making of foreign cultures or unusual personalities like those of U.S. Presidents in their unusual sub-cultures. Perhaps Markwica should start with family relations and with the simple advice that is missing from this book: Listen to and respect others (including your adversaries) instead of just seeking coercion and manipulation using psychological tools (which seems to be the plain English translation of Markwica's title: "How to be a Better Bully by Manipulating Your Victim's Emotions").

Markwica, himself, recognizes the two main failures of his approach, though he doesn't note the dangerous implications that his approach brings. For one, use of his methods requires "confidential" material (p.30), meaning that it requires more wiretapping, more spying and invasions of privacy and more psychologists working for the National Security States of the aggressors. Nor will Markwica's invasive data collection stop there. It will also require a *Brave New World* arsenal of bio-markers of "gender, hormones and genes" to reveal "emotional experience and expression" (p.277). What we have here is a return to Kremlinology combined with modern police state surveillance. Second, his method only works with dictators ("individual actors" (p. 275)) wielding "supreme power" and "domestic authority" (p.32), meaning that it works best when aggressors have client states of chosen dictators to bully.

Perhaps the most questionable assumption of all, however, is the one at the heart of the study; that hegemonic powers actually want to coerce behavior in ways that avoid war. Data suggests that the real goal of aggressors is to continually demonstrate power, to promote military expenditure and exhibitions of their weaponry's impacts, and to engage in spectacles of death, "heroism" and suffering.

Almost everything at the core of this book has been seen before over a century, in historical biographies of the psyches or psychopathology of leaders, including in political psychology (Lasswell, 1930) and in the failed psychological and ideological theories seeking to explain the behavior of Kremlin adversaries (Bell, 1958).

There was plenty of interest in early efforts of psychologists to explain the "irrational" behaviors in politics at the level of individuals, organizations and groups. Some of it is taught today. (One of the best syllabi on line is Paul Kowert's "Political Psychology of International Relations" at the University of Massachusetts in Boston (https://www.academia.edu/1741618/INR_6606_Political_Psychology_of_International_Relations)).

In my view, one of the best of these approaches, that can be advanced by current work in cognitive psychology on neurobiology and also on artificial intelligence, is the work on “cognitive mapping”, starting with basic empirical measures of perceptions of foreign groups (Cottam, 1986).

Other recent work in political psychology starts with predictions of international behaviors at the level of cultures/societies/nation-states (Lempert, 2016, 2017) and then looks for the linkages of behaviors at this mass level to actions at the individual level (Lempert, 2018). This is a “level of analysis” problem in social science; observing behaviors at different levels (collectives versus individuals) and then trying to link the levels. This new political science using interdisciplinary models linking psychology and political phenomenon appears to be a more fruitful one for prediction than Markwica’s attempts to revive failed psychological profiling of leaders using more invasive measures and questionable goals.

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Book Review: *A Lie Too Big to Fail: The Real History of the Assassination of Robert F. Kennedy*, by Lisa Pease (Feral House, 2019); *The American Deep State: Wall Street, Big Oil, and the Attack on U.S. Democracy*, by Peter Dale Scott (Roman & Littlefield, 2014)

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**A LIE TOO BIG TO FAIL: THE REAL HISTORY OF THE ASSASSINATION OF
ROBERT F. KENNEDY, BY LISA PEASE WITH INTRODUCTION BY JAMES
DIEUGENIO (FERAL HOUSE, 2019)**

**THE AMERICAN DEEP STATE: WALL STREET, BIG OIL, AND THE ATTACK ON
U.S. DEMOCRACY, BY PETER DALE SCOTT (ROMAN & LITTLEFIELD, 2014)**

David Lempert

Long awaited in U.S. and foreign universities are American Government and Comparative Government and international relations texts that start with the realpolitik of power and political culture, showing how government decision-making through a set of interlocking mechanisms and institutions – the “deep structure” – actually works underneath or behind the formal, visible system that administrates the decisions. Such texts would help students to understand and analyze how this actual underlying (“deep”) structure of political power, institutions and interactions is correlated with specific measurable variables (population size, geography, technology and type of economy, and outside dependency and interdependency relations within

an international context), how it changes over time, and how it could be used to predict international events of war and peace as well as domestic policies.

What we have today, instead, in most textbooks and teachings is backwards even though there is classic work in social science that shows us how to start with power analyses and “who governs” (Dahl, 1961). The failure of traditional political science texts is that they start with an administrative manual of the so-called “three branches” serving underlying power with a focus on the mechanisms of public endorsement and manipulation (elections) and legislative printing that are only a façade that is presented as “democracy”. It is only then that we add in and discuss the variables that are part of the missing model (conflicts of cultures/ethnicities within a system including geographic variables that underlie them; economic variables like industrialization/population, corporate organization and class; geographic variables influencing the larger system; specific types of power that imply control including national security, military, and police power; as well as the international context and influences of foreign wealth/resources and the impact of a country’s position as that of a colony, independent state, or part of a corporatist globalist order) (Sly, 2018).

This need to restart a “new political science” and its key subjects, including international relations/ war and peace studies, with actual fundamentals in a way that is based on reality (and is predictive) has long been suggested in neighboring disciplines like social anthropology, modeling politics and power at the level of towns (e.g., “Democracy in Jonesville”, (Warner, 1949)) and sociology, in early studies of power, elites and institutions (“The Power Elite”, Mills, 1956; Domhoff, 2017; Baltzell, 1964) and convergence theory (Galbraith, 1967). Some of my own recent work has also looked to create some basics of these models showing the impact of different variables and using different frameworks (Predicting Political Systems, Lempert, 2017b; Classifying Cultures, Lempert 2016; modeling empires, Lempert, 2012; and describing “Deep Structure”, Lempert, 2017a).

Two recent books are part of this trend. Peter Dale Scott’s book reveals some of the links and mechanisms of the political deep structure (focusing on specific aspects of what he calls the “deep state” as part of “deep politics” and “deep political events”) of the U.S. in a global context in an analysis of multiple cases of war and peace in recent U.S. history. Lisa Pease offers a similar picture by focusing on one such “deep political event” that Scott doesn’t address in his work; the assassination of Senator Robert F. Kennedy in 1968 when he was certain to win the Democratic Party’s Presidential nomination, and the continuing cover-up of what happened; a book of importance today as his son, RFK Jr., takes up his father’s mantle in a peace candidacy and is speaking out forcefully on his father’s assassination, with references to the book under review here. Though both books fall short of offering a social science model and would be more useful if they were better framed in a context of political and legal systems, they offer well-researched case studies of actual workings of specific U.S. institutions on pivotal historical events from an informed and critical perspective that challenges the existing political mythology; the “official story”. They fit well into a genre of such work that can be used as supplementary readings (e.g., Douglass, 2008), in helping to develop skills and frameworks for understanding and challenging misdirection and distraction in traditional political science and in corporate media.

Scott, a former Canadian diplomat and Ph.D. Political Scientist who spent most of his academic career as an English professor at the University of California, Berkeley, has dedicated the last 30 years to researching and publishing investigations into major political events in the U.S. and of U.S. involvement internationally since the end of World War II, with his books continually building on the previous ones to go deeper into the workings of the U.S. political system. In “The American Deep State”, he focuses on the growth of a parallel system of political power in the U.S. and internationally that include not only the “military industrial complex” (the military and its related companies) and the “national security state” (previously the C.I.A. and F.B.I., now also the N.S.A., military intelligence, the Department of Homeland Security and other security departments and their corporate contractors) with interwoven interests, but also international corporations (originally oil but others operating globally), banks (originally Wall Street but now global), organized crime including the global trade in illegal drugs that has become a source of its financing, and the role of specific countries, particularly Saudi Arabia. The growth of this parallel system he documents in specific framework plans to run an emergency martial law government outside of popular control “under the guise of emergency planning for disasters” and now, increasingly, in full opposition to popular control, labeled the “Doomsday project” (p. 8).

Among the many claims Scott presents are that this “deep state” has not only overridden every attempt by elected government to control it, (“many of the post-Watergate reforms, such as the FISA Act and the National Emergencies Act, are dead. Programs briefly suspended, such as the maintenance of lists for wide-scale detention, have been restored on a level far, far wider than before” (p. 160)) but that the U.S. Intelligence Oversight Act of 1980 that led to the establishment of permanent committees in both the Senate and the House for oversight of the CIA and FBI, has been “effectively reversed, making the committees into constituencies for the intelligence agencies, rather than custodians of them.”(p. 160). Scott demonstrates not only the workings of this system in the shadows, with its own financial networks and authority straightjacketing specific “elected” governments that try to control or defund it, but details active and successful attempts to subvert and eliminate elected leadership that has opposed this deep state. Scott offers evidence that when “three presidents—Kennedy, Nixon, and Carter—took steps to challenge the growing power of the CIA; ... in diverse ways all three saw their political careers terminated in deep events: assassination, Watergate, and the October Surprise. (Less dramatically, the careers of Johnson and Ford were also ended.)” (p. 100).

In describing the authority of this deep state “war machine”, Scott notes that, “Since 1959, virtually all of America’s major foreign wars have been wars 1) induced preemptively by the U.S. war machine and/or 2) disguised as responses to unprovoked enemy aggression, with disguises repeatedly engineered by deception deep events, involving in some way elements of the global drug connection” (p. 103). He describes the “terror war” as “falsified” and conducted not to protect the U.S. or to oppose “terrorism” but instead to serve as “the latest stage of the age-long secular spread of transurban civilization into areas of mostly rural resistance—areas where conventional forms of warfare, for either geographic or cultural reasons, prove inconclusive” (p. 98). He also notes that “this “war on terror” has been fought in alliance with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Pakistan—precisely the principal political and financial backers of the al-Qaeda networks the United States has supposedly been fighting” (p. 95). Not just war but most major events in U.S. history, in Scott’s view, can be linked to this deep structure (p. 103).

Scott's book is mind-bogglingly hard to read, requiring outside knowledge and reading a larger volume of material in order to weigh many of the conclusions from specific cases. One third of the book (and often some of the most interesting comments) are actually in footnotes that point to the outside sources. The book also seems to read like an ongoing investigation through history, chronically and repetitively, with chapters alternating between historical summary and specific incomplete investigations in place of an overall argument and political science model. For educational and discussion purposes, my recommendation would be to highlight Chapter 2 ("The Deep State, the Wall Street Overworld and Big Oil"), which presents the early post World War II history, Chapter 5 ("The Falsified War on Terror"), Chapter 8 ("Deep Power") which presents the history from 1961 to 1980; and Chapter 12 ("America's Unchecked Security State and Lawlessness") on the present.

While the book does not offer much formal political science, in placing this work within the context of political models, Scott notes how he goes beyond C. Wright Mills by looking at the U.S. in a global context. He links former President Trump's view of the "deep state" (the National Security state) with a "progressive left critique of corporate power" (p. 8). I would also place his work within that of studies of the U.S. empire in which he sees the rise of this deep structure as not a "natural" development of modern industrial empires (Galbraith, 1967) or as part of American culture and imperialism (Beard, 1913) but as a set of failed choices, similar to the views of Chalmers Johnson and Andrew Bacevich (see Lempert, 2012).

If one were looking to test Scott's implicit model using current events, a good test would be the fate of the 2020 Presidential campaign of Senator Bernie Sanders. Given that surveys showed Sanders' proposed policies are overwhelmingly those supported by the public and would include oversight of corporate power, militarism, banks, big oil and the national security state, the fate of the Sanders campaign may have been a test of power between popular mechanisms and a parallel "deep state". Given that Scott implies that there are essentially three political taboos imposed by the "deep state" on political actors and that violation of these taboos is punishable by expulsion from power, paralysis of political activity or death, the establishment's opposition to the Sanders campaign may have been a test of their ability to deter challenges. The three taboos that Sanders' policies represented were: 1) attempts to limit and politically oversee the national security state organs; 2) attempts to limit and politically oversee corporate power; and 3) attempts to protect cultural identity and continuity against urbanization, globalization and assimilation. Note that Scott implies that racial, gender, and other individual identity politics concerns are not in opposition to the "deep state" and are only markers for the ruling political administrators working with as representatives of the "deep state".

What made the Sanders campaign and other challenges (those of other "New Deal" or "Great Society" progressives including the Green Party and opposition candidates today in 2023) test cases of this "deep state" (and what made Donald Trump a partial threat to certain components of it in his promotion of his own economic interests rather than other specific corporate and military interests in places like Russia and Ukraine, now coming to fruition in the proxy war against Russia in Ukraine) was their attempt to circumvent and to institutionally replace the usual political control mechanisms that assure conformity to the "deep state" in the electoral and political action process. Much in the way that President Kennedy, Martin Luther King and

Senator Robert Kennedy circumvented some of these control mechanisms, Bernie Sanders has bypassed corporate funding and corporate media as a base of support (the Kennedys were independently wealthy and King mobilized a popular movement starting with Black churches). For another, while the educational system has been designed as a form of political socializing control, its defunding and the rising student debt with weakening economic opportunity along with falling teacher salaries has weakened this form of socialization (with students and teachers unions uniting behind Sanders). Third, while a corporate financed Congress, corporate lawyer and prosecutor stacked judiciary and an entrenched bureaucracy are other parts of the control system, spending cuts have eliminated much of this administrative bureaucracy and its power to thwart implementation of popular policies. Attempts to use a grass roots movement to pressure Congress and calls by progressive and anti-war populists to rely on extensive Presidential powers would also allow them to legislatively override or evade judicial interference and the controls that they create. Mobilization would also work to override electoral system controls (rigging). Notably, Scott's implied model does not address whether the "deep state" can recognize that the system it represents is itself collapsing (through climate change, environmental toxicity and a level of inequality that is undermining labor and markets) and whether it would agree to compromise with reformists, though it appears that they would rather promote national and system suicide before agreeing to reforms (Lempert, 2018). He seems to suggest that it exists entirely for its own short-term power and is oblivious to long-term survival.

Without mentioning "deep structure" or "deep politics", Pease's book is mostly a case study that points its finger at components of this shadow government and how it works to control both national and local activities (in this case the workings of the Los Angeles Police Department and courts) in the "deep event" of the assassination of Senator Robert Kennedy. "A Lie Too Big to Fail" is presented in the form of a mystery novel, starting with the RFK assassination and then working through the past 50+ years of investigative work in a way that unravels the "official story". Pease documents various levels of governmental and media deception and distortion in a way that uncovers the failures of the American legal system, media, and government oversight at various levels and ultimately points the finger for subversion of citizen democracy and oversight at the national security state and its contracting actors in the 1960s.

Pease is a journalist and one with a strong ideological view. She provides enough information to convince readers that her final conclusions to be plausible, including those on how the supposed assassin of RFK, Sirhan Sirhan, a traumatized Palestinian refugee, was probably under the influence of drugs and/or some kind of hypnosis, firing blanks in a way that distracted attention from at least two professional gunmen. It appears that he was also used by those planning the assassination to create a pretext for revenge on Palestinians. While this specific kind of diversion using drugs and hypnosis seems like a strange choice of method for a high profile operation, Pease reminds us that it has always been and continues to be standard practice for militaries to use forms of violent hazing and brain washing to induce people to murder. Indeed, the use of drugs was not only common in the U.S. military in the 1960s but has been a staple of military attacks throughout human history (and is the origin of the word "assassin", from "hashish"). While the book leaves the reader with a plausible answer to the "how" and "why", the specific cast of characters and chain of command is still more speculative than I would like, particularly in comparison with the JFK assassination that is largely solved (Douglass, 2008). Indeed, the facts here, while confirming a conspiracy, suggest a more

peripheral operation rather than one coordinated at many levels and with so many professional actors of the “deep state” as that of the JFK assassination. Apparently the “deep state” is also a pluralistic polyarchy of interests.

I would urge Pease to invite both a lawyer and a like-minded political scientist to vet her book to make the evidence presentation more objective. I would also advise her to frame the story in a way that presents clearer lessons and recommendations today in the context of the U.S. and other political and legal systems, how they work and what specific public oversight and civic education is necessary.

What this book really needs is a reverse presentation that is analogous to what a prosecutor offering a case presents, starting with the likely perpetrators and explaining all of the steps they took, why, when and how, in carrying out the crime. In the table, below, I present one way of organizing the facts in Pease’s book, contrasting different possible suspects and participants in the murder (the left hand column) on the basis of their motives, means and modus operandi, and means and opportunity for the cover-up. This approach is a way to analyze “deep state” events in a way that reveals the players and exposes the falsity of the distractive and manipulative cover stories.

Overall, the mapping and presentation of actual political power in order to reveal its “deep structure” behind its administrative mechanisms should be a growth area for new political science and new courses on international relations/ war and peace studies. These two books show how this study can unite investigation, theory, and modeling, along with public awareness and activism. There is much to do and it can be exciting work.

Table. Standard Prosecutorial Legal Test of Guilt of Different Suspects in 1968 Assassination of Senator Robert Kennedy (Missing Chart and Analysis from Pease's Book)

	<i>Motive</i>		<i>Means</i>			<i>Means and Opportunity for Cover Up (If Not Sirhan Sirhan Acting Alone)</i>	
<i>Suspect</i>	<i>Personal Gain</i>	<i>Political or Cultural Benefit</i>	<i>Ambassador Hotel Pantry Access and Position</i>	<i>Weapon and Firing Shots (Additional Gunmen, lookouts, accomplices)</i>	<i>Previous Modus Operandi (Misdirection/ Trance/ Use of a patsy with a "political motive")</i>	<i>Manipulation of Crime Scene Evidence or Witnesses</i>	<i>Continuing Government Motive to Cover Up Information on this Suspect</i>
<i>Sirhan Sirhan acting alone</i>	None established	Palestinian rights, but he isn't linked to a group and doesn't really claim this and he is a Christian Arab not Muslim	By chance	Subject to debate among experts	Not of any successful killing	Not Applicable	Not Applicable
<i>President Johnson (possibly also tacitly but not a principal)</i>	Personal animosity to Kennedys, Fear of Prosecutions in an RFK Administration?	Lower class Southern white hatred of wealthy Irish Catholics and Kennedy permissive morality	Not directly	If he still had a group of political operatives like Mack Wallace.	No. Speculation on killings in Texas to boost political career but not like this	Not directly.	No, today it could be released if it were true

<i>Richard Nixon</i>	Personal ambition and “revenge”	Eliminate Kennedy family dynasty on political positions; Promote “law and order” corporatist government.	Maybe through California contacts	In coordination with business associates	No	Not directly	No, today it could be released if it were true
<i>CIA Upper Eschelon (Director Helms)</i>	Revenge for Bay of Pigs failure and demotions; Cover up of JFK Assassination to protect CIA itself	Upper class WASP hatred of wealthy Irish Catholics and Kennedy permissive morality; Provocation of Middle East wars against Arabs	Probably	Possible given trained military for Cuba Bay of Pigs operation and others	Some similarities to assassinations of leaders of small countries in the 1950s and to JFK assassination but no clear evidence of use of hypnosis or drugging of a decoy assassin. Similar use of “Latin Americans”.	Yes, apparent links to people in LAPD.	Possibly, since they were investigated and “cleaned up” in the 1970s and lost some power to military intelligence.
<i>CIA Rogue Group under Allan Dulles, Bay of Pigs group</i>	Cover up of JFK Assassination in which they may have been responsible	Upper class WASP hatred of wealthy Irish Catholics and Kennedy permissive morality;	Probably.	Probably, though the group seems to be new.	Some similarities to assassinations of leaders of small countries in the 1950s and to JFK assassination but no clear evidence of use of	Yes, apparent links to people in LAPD.	If they were acting alone, the CIA would benefit by demonstrating an interest in controlling operations.

					hypnosis or drugging of a decoy assassin. Similar use of “Latin Americans”.		
<i>CIA Rogue Group “Cutouts” under Howard Hughes/ Robert Maheu</i>	Boosting CIA funding and careers	Upper class WASP hatred of wealthy Irish Catholics and Kennedy permissive morality; Provocation of Middle East wars	Probably, though business contacts. Hughes once lived in the hotel.	Apparent link to the key guard, Thane Cesar and probably to Latin Americans in the network of Castro assassination attempts..	Some similarities to assassinations of leaders of small countries in the 1950s and to JFK assassination but no clear evidence of use of hypnosis or drugging of a decoy assassin or use of this group.	Yes, apparent links to people in LAPD.	No. If they were acting alone, there is no one to protect. Maheu and Hughes are deceased.
<i>California Governor Ronald Reagan/ Los Angeles Police/ Mayor Sam Yorty</i>	Possibly long-term career interests.	Yes, goal of “law and order” corporatist government.	Yes	Possibly, police informants and operatives but none have been spotted since and they seem to be from outside the area.	Possibly, though not clearly documented.	Yes.	No, today it could be released if it were true, to cleanup local police forces.
<i>U.S. Military</i>	Cover up of JFK	Lower middle class white	Yes	Yes	Some similarities to assassinations	Yes, through	Yes, because they create an

	Assassination in which they may have been responsible	hatred of wealthy Irish Catholics and permissive morality; Provocation of Middle East wars against Arabs			of leaders of small countries in the 1950s and to JFK assassination but no clear evidence of use of hypnosis or drugging of a decoy assassin.	linkages in the police.	illusion of morality and necessity to maintain enormous funding and authority.
<i>Mafia/ Organized Crime</i>	Possible “Double Cross” of Mafia	End prosecutions of organized crime by Attorney General Robert Kennedy	Depends on infiltration of police and local businesses	Yes	Murder is their business but the cast of characters (“woman in polka dot dress”) is not usual.	Possibly	No, today it could be released if it were true to demonstrate “clean up” of organized crime.
<i>FBI (Under J. Edgar Hoover)</i>	Yes, to promote Republicans and white racism and the power of the FBI.	Hatred of rich Irish Catholics and Kennedy permissive morality.	Possibly.	Yes.	Possibly.	Yes.	Possibly. FBI and National Security State have grown rapidly, but Hoover’s abuses have been revealed.
<i>Sectarian Violence</i>	No.	Attempt to stop desegregation policy. Lower class white hatred of rich Irish Catholics	Not identified	Not identified	Not identified and the use of women and “Latin Americans” doesn’t fit the profile.	Yes, LAPD is known to have a history of racism.	No

<i>Crime of Passion/ Betrayed Husband or Lover</i>	Possible	Possible moral issue with permissiveness	By chance	If hired professionals or a professional	Not identified	No	No
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Opinion: Hormuz Dilemma & Regional Geopolitics

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HORMUZ DILEMMA & REGIONAL GEOPOLITICS

Shoaib Baloch ¹

The Strait of Hormuz is a critical maritime chokepoint and an important channel for international trade and energy supply. It is estimated that roughly **20 per cent of the world's oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG)** passes through this narrow waterway. Similarly, approximately one-third of global fertilizer trade also transits this strait, which has now become a dangerous flashpoint of geopolitical contest between the US and Iran.

After the US-Israeli joint strikes against Iran on 28th February, the Iranian regime has effectively closed this critical waterway. It has significantly threatened freedom of navigation and disrupted global oil supply, setting a dangerous precedent for other strategic waterways across the world. Iran continues to assert control over the Strait of Hormuz, thereby denying global oil shipments and consequently throttling the global economy.

However, after intense diplomatic and mediation efforts by Pakistan and other regional countries, the US and Iran reached a **14-point agreement**. They digitally signed the Islamabad Memorandum

¹The writer is a strategic affairs and foreign policy analyst.

of Understanding (MoU) on 15 June. Both countries agreed to a ceasefire and opening of the Strait of Hormuz.

Initially, the **war objectives of the US** were to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon, pursue regime change, apply strategic coercion, and reduce Iran's regional influence. The renewed conflict, however, now largely centres on controlling the key waterway: the Strait of Hormuz.

For obvious reasons, the Strait of Hormuz has become a **tool of strategic leverage** for Iran, as it can effectively throttle the global economy by disrupting oil shipments from this narrow waterway to bring the global superpower to strategic terms. The closure of the strait by the Iranian regime has significantly disrupted global energy supplies and sent shockwaves through the world economy. This disruption has brought global commerce to a breaking point. After a temporary ceasefire, the renewed conflict is largely seen as a competition to control the strait and use regional maritime security as leverage.

The importance of controlling strategic waterways can be traced in the writings of Alfred Mahan. His book, *"The Influence of Sea Power upon History"*, suggests that 'those who control the sea command the world'. Despite being a historical assessment of erstwhile empires' naval ambitions, this theory offers an appealing analysis of current geopolitical developments. It gained renewed currency when Iran continues to assert influence and shape the movement of goods through the arteries of global commerce.

In the age of great-power competition, strategically important maritime chokepoints, besides the Strait of Hormuz, are likely to become flashpoints for geopolitical rivalry and conflict. China, as a rising power, has already launched its ambitious **Belt and Road Initiative**, which encompasses both critical corridors and key maritime trade routes and chokepoints. Under this ambitious initiative, China has been developing major ports across the Indian and Pacific Oceans to secure sea lines of communication and expand its strategic footprint.

Due to its proximity to the Strait of Hormuz, Gwadar port is strategically important for China as it has started investing in the development of Gwadar seaport and launched the flagship project of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. It gives China direct access to the Arabian Sea and a potential **alternative route to bypass the Strait of Malacca**, which could be used against China in future conflicts and great-power rivalry. The Strait of Malacca is a **strategic vulnerability** for China because of Beijing's heavy reliance on it for imported oil and maritime trade.

In 2003, Chinese leader Hu Jintao coined the term "Malacca dilemma", predicting a blockade of the Strait by rival countries like the US in future, and expressing Beijing's fear that being strategically coerced due to this vulnerability. It would gravely affect China's economy and its global standing in case of a blockade whenever a great-power confrontation starts over geo-economic issues.

Besides Gwadar port, China has also started developing other important ports in the region, including Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, Kyaukphyu port in Myanmar, Chattogram port in Bangladesh, and has invested in Chabahar port in Iran. Many critics call these projects "**String of**

Pearls” — a network of commercial and security facilities aimed at protecting trade routes and projecting influence in the region. By controlling or gaining access to these chokepoints and hubs, China seeks to reduce its maritime vulnerabilities, assert soft power, and compete with the US for dominance in the Indo-Pacific region.

In response, the United States has also crafted its **Indo-Pacific strategy** to counter Chinese ambitions and maintain its influence across both the Indian Ocean and Pacific regions, with particular focus on the South China Sea and Taiwan. The US has built a network of strategic partnerships and alliances. It has created multilateral groupings like Quad alliance with Australia, India and Japan on maritime security and technological cooperation; AUKUS with Australia and the UK on defense and nuclear-powered submarines; the **Squad alliance** with Australia, Japan and Philippines for joint naval patrols in the Pacific Ocean; IP4 alignment with Australia, Japan and South Korea through NATO; IPEF for trade, supply chains and digital economy; and the Blue Dot Network with Australia and Japan to promote transparent, high-quality infrastructure as an alternative to Beijing’s BRI. Through these initiatives, Washington vies to balance China’s growing strategic clout in the region.

Today, the Iran war has underscored the importance of maritime security and control over sea lines of communication. In future, Washington and Beijing are likely to intensify their contest for influence in the region by **competing for control of the vital trade routes and strategic chokepoints**. The fallout of the Iran war is expected to accelerate great-power competition in the Indian Ocean, with different countries in the region emerging as strategic pivots in this rivalry.

Despite its delicate balancing act, Pakistan will find itself at the centre of a geopolitical storm. **Washington and Beijing** will seek to assert influence in the Indian Ocean and secure access to the regional maritime trade network. In fact, this competition will place insurgency-ridden Balochistan at the heart of great power rivalry. As **Gwadar Sea Port** provides access to regional trade routes and energy corridors and maritime security in the Arabian Sea, it will become one of the most contested land strips in the emerging Sino-US competition for influence in the Indian Ocean region.

Balochistan province sits astride the Strait of Hormuz that provides access to oil tankers bound for China, Japan and European countries. It is in every country’s strategic calculus to ensure the shipping lines of the Persian Gulf remain open because closure of vital maritime routes can result in horrendous economic ramifications. The geographical proximity of Balochistan to the oil and gas deposits of the Middle Asia and Central Asian regions as well as critical maritime trade routes can make it a proxy battleground for regional and global powers.

Therefore, it is paramount for Pakistan to mitigate the future implications of an emerging great-power contest in its western periphery. There is a need for a pragmatic policy approach to address the root causes of instability in Balochistan. Persistent grievances stemming from political under-representation, weak service delivery and human rights concerns need a holistic review. A durable response would require inclusive and serious dialogue with political stakeholders, public engagement, protection of fundamental rights and a decade-long development program for the province. Externally, Pakistan must pursue careful strategic alignment and security policy to avert geopolitical fallout of great-power rivalry.