

## **Cultural Heritage as a Factor in Social Reconciliation: A Case Study of Kariobangi, Nairobi**

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On the night between February 28 and March 1, 2002, a member of a *vigilantes* group known as the *Talebans* was killed while on patrol on the roads of Kariobangi, Nairobi. His colleagues, once they realised what had happened, set themselves on a revenge mission. They apprehended three suspects and killed them that very night. These three young men happened to belong to a sect known as *Mungiki*, which in retaliation swept the roads of Kariobangi on the evening of Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> March, killing 25 people and maiming and injuring scores of others. All this would have become known as the Kariobangi massacre.

I participated in the long journey of healing and reconciliation that involved the survivors and the community of Kariobangi. In particular, an interfaith committee was formed bringing together various different religious communities; among other initiatives, such a committee invited the Community Peace Museums of Kenya to contribute to the process of social reconstruction. The situation was so tensed, volatile and shocking that nobody actually knew exactly how to redress it. Everybody was affected in one way or another. Much more so the victims themselves and their closest relatives, who were clearly suffering a deep loss and brokenness because of their dear ones killed and the deprivation of their livelihoods and physical capacities. They were living in fear of further revenge and violence, and of a future that appeared largely compromised and not promising anything good. Moreover, they were finding themselves in a situation of isolation, feeling deserted, with a disturbing sense of social and economic vulnerability.

I would like to bear witness to three specific moments along the journey of healing in which the heritage of peace displayed an impressive power of regeneration.

The first encounter between the survivors of the massacre and the Peace Museums occurred on Madaraka Day, June 1, 2002. Elders and field assistants from various museums came to Kariobangi and brought peace trees and staves. They started with sharing their own experiences of violence and healing, showing how they went about reconstructing their lives and the community after very serious divisions and suffering, such as at the time of the colonial occupation and the Mau Mau struggle for independence. They shared about the role of peace traditions and symbols in reconciling the community and gave illustrations of how they personally experienced them. The people of Kariobangi, sitting in a circle, listened very attentively to the elders. Then came their turn to respond by opening up, telling their stories, their experiences of the night of violence, of the aftermath, and their feelings. Some of them were just holding a peace tree, looking at it intently as they talked.

My observation was that a safe place was created for people to take the risk to open up and share their feelings, sorrows, and experiences. Moreover, the sharing on peace traditions and symbols offered a sort of road map on how possibly to express and redress feelings, experiences, and relationships. It was like giving a starting point and a sense of direction to transform the negative events. I was impressed by the level of depth that peace symbols can reach in the heart of people, reconnecting them to the living and to the dead. For example, mama Agneta, who had lost her husband and her first born on March 3<sup>rd</sup> 2002, took her small peace tree, borrowed money and travelled back to the village, where she planted the tree on the tomb of her husband. Since then, we saw her transformed, she was at peace and took up a sort of new mission in life to promote peace and reconciliation in the community.

It was at the end of that first encounter that unanimously the decision was taken to go and visit Agikuyu Peace Museum in Nyeri. This was no light decision, since in the perception of the survivors Nyeri was something like the centre of *Mungiki*. But once again, the presence of the

Peace Museum and of friends gave them courage to take the risk and go. Interestingly enough, on June 20<sup>th</sup> we had on the same bus both the people hit by the violence perpetrated by the *Mungiki*, and the parents of the three *Mungiki* boys who had been killed on the night between February 28<sup>th</sup> and March 1<sup>st</sup>.

Once in Nyeri, local community members warmly receive the group and some of the elders started playing music and singing old *Mau Mau* songs. Interestingly enough, these are not hymns to war, but rather peace songs. The lyrics are explained, since most of the guest did not know *kikuyu*. Spontaneously the ladies among the group of visitors stood up and started dancing, and then all joined in the celebration. So we realised how powerful celebrations can be in learning, understanding, making sense of life and healing. The message goes down deep to the heart. The elders made use of narratives, proverbs and traditional wisdom, and reached out to the soul of their guests. Slowly the participants started to open up. Some, who were participating for the first time, managed to drop their anger and move on. Others, who had already passed that stage, were prompted to contribute to the sharing with enthusiasm. The bottom line was that this celebration of life within terrible, violent events still fresh in the minds of *Kariobangians* re-awakened people's sense of identity and worth, the sense of being alive. Also, fears disappeared as we came in touch with communities' traditions of peace building and the realization of how different communities and peoples have much in common. Moreover, the reconnection with their roots helped people to overcome their sense of isolation and loss, giving them a healthy sense of pride and purpose. Then the group visited the peace trees garden at Othaya, where a ceremony was conducted to reconcile the community still affected by feuds dating back to the emergency time. Four Agikuyu peace trees (underscoring four different dimensions of peace) were blessed in a religious service at the Catholic Church and planted on the mass grave. People understood this well, as the Cleansing and Healing of Earth. And a different atmosphere is today hovering on Othaya; people say they perceive it.

Inspired by that story of healing, a proposal was readily accepted: namely, to think of a Peace Trees Park in Kariobangi as a memorial and a "peacemaker", hence taking up the responsibility (coming from the healing process) of educating the community about peace and reconciliation.

At the end of the day, the most striking event happens. *Mzee* Thuku, formerly a *Mau Mau* oath giver, who was holding a high status in the freedom fighters movement, officially announces that the *Agikuyu* elders of Nyeri have set up a fund for the victims of the *Mungiki* violence in Kariobangi. Such an initiative of solidarity is underscored by the gift of the *Agikuyu* women who presented produce from their *shamba* to their guests. All this created bonding and a sense of communion, which reduced the sense of vulnerability in the survivors from Kariobangi and created new relationships.

The third event is about the initiation of a peace trees garden at Kariobangi, on September 14<sup>th</sup>, 2002, in an open celebration various peace trees were presented, embodying the ancient African tradition of good governance, justice, reconciliation and peace. It was explained that almost every ethnic community in Kenya has a sacred Peace Tree. Their roots spread and unite all people. Various trees were presented together with narratives showing their meaning, use and role in the traditional societies. Elders from the Jaluo and Agikuyu communities planted a *murembe* tree in the presence of the survivors, the larger community and dignitaries. Thus the Kariobangi Peace Trees garden was initiated. This garden is a sign of reconciliation and peace building in an environment where for a variety of reasons there are long lasting tensions between the two communities. *Murembe* is the peace tree in the Luhya community and it is from this tree that the word peace *mirembe* comes. Since then, the garden is always taken care of, and in many occasions the parish priest noticed that people meet in this small garden to talk and sort out their differences. In other words, this small garden is still a respected and effective community asset.