
From the Palaver Tree to the State House: A Reflection on the Tension between Dialogue and Governance in Africa

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Abstract: This paper proposes a reflective approach to exploring the complex relationship between dialogue and governance. It first recalls the different dimensions of dialogue and its centrality in governance and discusses the fundamental tension between these two practices that constantly challenges power dynamics in decision making. Through analyses of how different governance systems tend to domesticate, shape, and regulate dialogue in responding to this tension, this paper further identifies three types of dialogue that come into play in three different contexts: (1) 'open-ended' dialogue practised by the African endogenous systems of governance, (2) 'locked dialogue' imposed by the African Nation States, and (3) 'biased dialogue' promoted by international and transnational organisations. Such analyses are particularly meaningful in enabling us to draw lessons from these three cases of interaction between dialogue and governance. Ultimately, this paper seeks to reconcile the requirements for multidimensional and relational practices of dialogue with the rational processes of governance in an increasingly globalised and interdependent world.

Keywords: Governance, Endogeneity, Multidimensionality, Nation State, UN, Open-ended Dialogue, Closed Dialogue, Biased Dialogue

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Introduction

Dialogue is one of the most elusive concepts that defies attempts to define and fully comprehend it. Dialogue related to governance is even more difficult to grasp, depending on who is talking about it, from what position, and for what purpose. I therefore would not pretend to provide a comprehensive definition here, but rather I shall propose a perspective of dialogue that could help to better understand its dialectical interactions with governance.

In any discussion about dialogue, it is important to take into account the multi-dimensional character not only of human relations but also of the reality itself. We must consider the metaphysical, spiritual, and philosophical interpretations of the visible and invisible world that shape the different layers through which relationships between humans, but also with other living and non-living entities, are perceived in each society. Without this multi-dimensional perspective any debate about dialogue and governance is bound to remain superficial and therefore limited in its ability to capture the complexity of their interactions.

To illustrate the necessity of understanding the different dimensions of dialogue in applying justice, ensuring peace and social cohesion, I would like to cite an example of a conflict that was brought to my attention by elders during my research on the 'Xeer Issa', the socio-political pact or 'Customary Law' of the Somali pastoralists in the Horn of Africa. It is a difficult case that the Xeer lawyers had to deal with which concerns the social responsibility of a 'were-hyena'. The belief that there are people who can turn into hyenas, wolves, or jaguars after nightfall is very common, not only among Somali pastoralists, but also among many peoples in other regions of the world (Steiger 2011). The story goes that one night a hyena attacked a herd in a nomadic camp, but the owner fired at the wild animal and wounded it.

The next day, the were-hyena whose shape-shifting form had been killed had just enough time before dying to tell his family about the circumstances in which he had been seriously injured. His grieving family felt that his murder deserved redress and brought the case before the community law to obtain the blood price (compensation calculated in heads of cattle, usually camels, paid for the murder of a person in Somali pastoralist societies). The murderer's family replied that their member had killed a hyena that had been caught attacking his sheep, not a human being. This became a sensitive case which went through the 'twelve trees' procedure, which allows a plaintiff to appeal up to twelve times for a verdict. The elders, who considered the validity of both interpretations of the story, had to give a multi-dimensional answer. At the final meeting under the tree, the best speaker was chosen to announce the decision of the elders, using the power of the verb. He said,

‘O my people! Who lives will see! And our community have not finished seeing strange cases of justice. Up until this day, two things had no guarantors to be held responsible for their actions: the Angel of death and hyenas. When they kill, we did not know who to turn to for reparation for their crimes. Today, we have here a family claiming to be guarantor of a hyena and asking for its blood price. So be it if that is their wish! This family swears in the front of the Elders that this hyena was one of its members, let us consider their request for compensation. According to our Xeer (Law), a murder calls for condemnation and compensation. This family who lost a loved one must receive the blood price. However, the Xeer is also a fair law, which requires that members of the community fulfil their duty. Moreover, our law has always been open to change in the face of new circumstances. So, I propose to enrich our Xeer and add a new clause stipulating that from today on, this family that claims the blood price of a hyena be henceforth held responsible for all future misdeeds of hyenas. I invite them to reflect on the consequences of this provision before receiving the hundred camels of the blood price.’

After weighing up the pros and cons, the family decided to give up their claim. How could they take responsibility for the actions of thousands of hyenas that pose a constant threat to the herders? This story shows us that instead of dismissing the plaintiff’s claim for justice for killing a hyena as unrealistic, the elders took into account the existence of this layer of social reality and came up with a solution that met the interpretations of both parties.

This paper uses a reflective approach to explore the complex relationship between dialogue and governance. It begins by recalling the various aspects of dialogue and its centrality to governance. It highlights the need to understand the multi-dimensional nature of human relations in order to truly embrace dialogue in governance. It also discusses the fundamental tension between these two practices of dialogue and governance which constantly challenges power dynamics in decision making. By analysing how different governance systems tend to domesticate, shape and regulate dialogue in response to this tension, this paper further identifies three types of dialogue that come into play in three different contexts, which we refer to as: (1) ‘open dialogue’, practised by African endogenous governance systems, (2) ‘closed dialogue’, imposed by African nation states, and (3) ‘biased dialogue’ promoted by international and transnational organisations. Such analyses are particularly useful for drawing lessons from these three cases of dialogue and governance interaction.

Ultimately, this paper seeks to reconcile the requirements of multi-dimensional and relational practices of dialogue with the rational processes of governance in an increasingly globalised and interdependent world.

Different Understandings of Dialogue

Dialogue is at the origin of human organisation as a society. It stems from the long process of appropriating and mastering language. Talking goes beyond the need to name or show what we see, or describe an experience. It is also about exchanging ideas and feelings, discussing decisions and choices to be made in a given situation, and about plans for the future. (Harari 2015). As reality is interpreted differently according to the conditions of existence, interests, and ambitions of the interacting individuals and groups, there is a need to constantly construct a common understanding and meaning of this reality, a need which imposes the necessity of dialogue to confront and reconcile the different interpretations in order to build intelligibility, sociability, and governability.

Dialogue is more than an exchange of rational arguments, according to some common moral norms that were freely discussed and agreed upon by all the interlocutors (Habermas 1991). Dialogue is shaped by our interpretations of the very notions of subjectivity, relationality, and reciprocity developed by the ontological system in which we live and evolve. Anthropology is perhaps the discipline that offers us the broadest view of the diversity of existing cosmovisions and helps us to become more aware of our limitations to conceive beyond our cultural horizons. This is why I have chosen to refer to anthropological works in discussing the issues of dialogue and governance that are usually treated by sociologists and political scientists.

The anthropologist Philippe Descola proposed an interesting distinction between different ontological systems, according to their identifications and classifications of existing entities and the ways they determine the relationship patterns between human beings and with other entities (Descola 2005). Beyond the usual differences between cultures or religions, he described four holistic systems of interpreting and inhabiting the universe:

- *Animism*, which endows all existing beings with a similar interiority (mind, soul, consciousness, and subjectivity) while distinguishing them by their physicality (form, physiological processes, bodies, visible and tangible expressions);
- *Naturalism*, which asserts that only human beings possess the privilege of interiority, while they are attached to the continuum of non-humans by many other material characteristics;

- *Totemism*, which believes that humans and non-humans share, within a specific class, the same interiority and physicality derived from a prototype, while being distinguished from other classes;
- *Analogism*, which considers that all the entities of the world are ontologically different from each other and have distinct interiority and physicality and therefore stable analogical correspondences need to be found between them to understand their relationship.

Each of these ontological systems has developed its own cosmogony to explain how the universe came into being and its own epistemology and ethics to understand the relationship and communication between humans and with other living and non-living entities. For instance, animist societies in Amazon or sub-Arctic America *generalise* the position of moral and epistemic subject to a multitude of beings, since all entities possess an interiority that is analogous to that of humans and enjoys equal dignity. In contrast, naturalist societies in the West confine the position of the subject to a single species and hierarchise other beings according to criteria derived from their ontological beliefs.

Although the existence of radically different cosmovisions implies that there are no absolute and scientifically founded criteria on the basis of which universally recognised values can be justified, Descola argued that, nevertheless, it is possible to define, through dialogue and by a normative act, some values that are acceptable to the majority of people and can be considered universal. He introduced what he called a 'relative universalism' which does not stem from nature and cultures but is rather based on the relationships of continuity and discontinuity, identity and difference, similarity and dissimilarity that humans establish everywhere among beings. He pointed out that this relative universalism is likely to lead to an ethic, that is, to common rules to share the world to which everyone can subscribe without doing violence to the values in which they are brought up. He considered that the construction of this ethic does not require that an equal materiality for all and contingent meanings be given beforehand: it has to be built relationship by relationship. (Descola 2006)

Within this perspective of universalism, dialogue would be possible even between peoples with different cosmovisions and can become a constructive and reflective interaction to foster our understanding of the unity (continuity) and diversity (discontinuity) of our humanity, build relationships, and transcend conflict and hostility. In this sense, dialogue is different from debate, which is characterised as combative, unreflective, and oriented towards winning an argument rather than deepening understanding (Ute Kelly 2013).

Dialogue is therefore a complex exercise that involves the risk for participants of having their thoughts and visions altered and challenged. The anthropologist Arjun Appadurai identifies three of these risks in relation to intercultural dialogue: the risk of not being understood and of exacerbating cultural misunderstandings; the risk of giving others the impression of having grasped the essence of their culture and of caricaturing it; and finally, the risk of not finding the right balance between the legitimacy to speak on behalf of one's whole group and the need to reveal the doubts, divergences, and internal disagreements of one's own culture. (Appadurai 2013)

Dialogue proposes a form of communication, which invites us to reflect on our certainties and doubts. It is an exchange of different subjectivities and rationalities that could open the possibility of new ones born of the transformation of the parties in dialogue. It leads to what Tzvetan Todorov called a 'transvaluation', that is, the return to oneself of a gaze informed by contact with the other (Todorov 1986). In this respect, dialogue becomes a learning and training process through which participants can rediscover their own identity, personality, and even autonomy by participating in dialectical exchanges that can reconfigure their initial thoughts and feelings.

This understanding of dialogue introduces a new etymology of the term, which suggests a different interpretation of the prefix 'dia-' by positing it as the equivalent of the prefix 'trans-' that implies the idea of overcoming and transformation. This transformative character of dialogue is highlighted in the operational definition of intercultural dialogue proposed in the UNESCO report *Framework for Enabling Intercultural Dialogue*. Intercultural dialogue is defined as

a process undertaken to realise transformative communication that requires space or opportunities for engagement and a diverse group of participants committed to values such as mutual respect, empathy and a willingness to consider different perspectives. (UNESCO & Institute for Economics & Peace 2020)

A fruitful and transformative dialogue happens between people who are aware of their incompleteness and the limitations imposed by their worldview, and who are looking, beyond their similarities and differences, for further personal and collective enrichment through the search for meanings in the unity and diversity of humanity. Intersubjective by nature, dialogue involves both intra-cultural, inter-cultural, and trans-cultural dimensions. It requires the development of specific personal and collective skills: the ability to listen and learn, the capacity to suspend judgement while listening, the capacity to inquire and explore assumptions in order to understand the interpretations of the interlocutors and have a 'bigger picture' about the issues discussed. Listening is here considered as an active skill that requires the capacity to hear and to digest what is being said.

Tension Between Dialogue and Governance

It is within this holistic perspective on dialogue that the tension with governance is to be addressed. The concept of governance itself needs to be understood in its broader dimension. It is more than a form of government that takes its objectives from democratic theory and from market economics and whose aim is to achieve transparent processes, a better management of power and rule of law, and greater efficiency in the production of public services (Stoker 1998). It is not reduced either to the sum of formal and informal modes of regulating social processes (Héritier 2002). Governance is to be considered as a larger system of metaphysical, spiritual, and philosophical interpretations, interactions, processes, and regulation which inform us about the 'political ontology' of each society and in particular about the relationship between humans and with divinity, the nature of authority, the mode of sharing power and resources, and the decision-making process in the management of communities' needs and aspirations.

In that perspective, dialogue is central for the legitimisation of governance as a necessary system for organising society, ensuring order, stability, and some form of justice. It is a highly political exercise that reveals the stakes, challenges, and limits of the system. Rulers need dialogue to justify their power, inscribe their legitimacy in the cultural and religious representations, and to govern society without the costly and risky use of force. Dialogue is what turns their power into authority if they acquire the capacity to listen and the ability to convince and embody in an exemplary way the ethical principles and values agreed upon.

But at the same time, rulers always attempt to hinder the possibility of a full dialogue that could lead to the transformation we have mentioned above or challenge the structural power relationships. They cannot afford to let dialogue adopt the 'discourse ethics' defined by the philosophers Jürgen Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel, according to which any serious dialogue presupposes the validation by the participants of a certain number of moral rules agreed upon, such as the free participation in the discussion without any a priori exclusion; the equal possibility for the interlocutors to assert, express, or examine any assertion; and the absence of pressure to suspend the application of the preceding rules. (Habermas and Apel 1991)

Any system of governance is bound to be contested and challenged because of its intrinsic vulnerabilities: the divergence about policies, the envy it arouses, the abuse of power and resources it encourages, the aspirations for change it provokes. The stronger the power, the greater its vulnerabilities. That is why rulers and leaders have an ambivalent attitude to dialogue. They need it to ensure the link with their constituencies, but at the same time they are wary of it because it is an unpredictable and

risky process through which their practices and their legitimacy can be assessed and challenged.

The way in which the terms of the dialogue are defined, the agenda is set, the participation of stakeholders is organised and the outcomes are processed informs us about the nature of the governance at stake. Each form of governance (direct or representative democracy, absolute or constitutional monarchy, plutocracy, or dictatorship) promotes and institutionalises a type of dialogue that limits the risks of being challenged.

Governance at all levels (state, national and local institutions, international organisations) has developed a panoply of strategies, tactics, and tools to accommodate, frame, limit, and instrumentalise dialogue and control its outcome. This includes *inter alia* criteria for the selection of interlocutors and mediators, the definition of agenda and topics, the organisation of consultations, seduction, intimidation, or bribery of participants, manipulation and communication of the outcome. We have chosen to analyse three situations reflecting the way in which the tension between governance and dialogue is addressed: Open-ended Dialogue, Closed Dialogue and Biased Dialogue.

Open-ended Dialogue: Under the Tree

Open-ended dialogue is generally the kind of dialogue that is practised in most traditional systems of governance. Embedded symbolically and practically in different rituals, and representations, it is a process commonly accepted by all communities.

The decision-making assemblies take place in open spaces where members of the community can access and follow the dialogue. The shade of specific trees usually serves as place of deliberation. The symbol of the tree is indeed very strong. It is an open space without barrier. People sit on the exposed roots of the tree and lean against its trunk. The leaves provide protection from the sun and rain and can also be used to make mats on the ground for the elders. Depending on the environment, assemblies can be also held in large pavilions that are open to the outdoors in order to allow free participation. It is worth noting here the contrast between initiation ceremonies which are usually held behind closed doors and in secret and the dialogue on the community's affairs that takes place in a transparent way and in open spaces that everyone can access.

The 'palaver under the tree' has become a metaphor for the open-ended dialogue, with no time limit, which allows relatively comprehensive, open, and free exchanges (Bidima 1997). All members of the community can speak according to a specific agreed protocol and agenda. However, such palaver is often limited to men in many

patriarchal societies, even if, in some matriarchal societies, women may participate or have their own assembly to decide on some important community matters (Sudarkasa, 1986).

Furthermore, several restrictions are imposed to avoid emotional outbursts, aggressive behaviour, and unpredictable reactions, but also to prevent radical challenges to the social order and the narratives on which it is based. A set of rituals and procedures is used to frame dialogue and ensure that individual freedom of expression does not threaten community cohesion and collective interest. However, individuals can challenge this order without facing punishment. As prison and death penalty do not exist in these societies, they may risk exclusion or ostracism if they threaten the common norms.

The main tension that this type of governance system has to deal with is the contestation about representation, resource sharing, legitimacy of leadership, and the dialogue agenda. If the dialogue fails to reach consensus, the proposed solution is usually to organise further dialogue sessions to attain it.

The two main procedures used to contain and orient dialogue are the designation of spokesperson and the application of the rule of consensus in decision taking. Spokespersons are designated according to their experience, integrity, and speaking skills and mandated to speak on behalf of the group they represent under the guidance and direction from other members of the group, who are tasked to ensure that their requests and messages have been properly translated and articulated. As they are also attending the meetings, they can contradict their spokespersons if the spokespersons have deviated from their mission.

Within this relational governance system, decision making requires a broad consensus. The closer it is to unanimity, the more legitimate the decision is considered. This result depends on the way in which debates have been conducted, expectations, aspirations, and interpretations taken into account, and the honour and respectability of groups involved. This is one of the reasons why open-ended dialogue is a time-consuming exercise which requires patience and humility (Teklu 2021).

However, there are circumstances where rapid decision making is necessary. Traditional systems of governance have generally defined the specific situations where dialogue can be restricted and adapted. During these emergency situations, the procedure is simplified, and decision making is entrusted to certain individuals, such as military or religious leaders.

There have been cases in Africa where emergency situations have led to a change in the decision-making process by replacing it with more expeditious and less demo-

cratic methods. Such transformations of endogenous governance systems have been brought about, for example by the upheavals of the slave trade, colonisation, and the introduction of the nation state model.

In general, because of the centrality of dialogue in decision making, traditional societies place particular emphasis on civic education to enable young people to acquire the skills to participate in community affairs at an early age. This capacity building is ensured through the initiation ceremonies organised to induct and welcome young people as full members of the community. A whole literature of tales, proverbs, legends, mythologies, but also games and reasoning exercises, are included in this education.

To provide concrete examples of the above-mentioned characteristics of open-ended dialogue, I will refer below to some aspects of the Somali 'Xeer' system of governance that I have studied (Moussa Iye, 2019).

Concerning the consensus building, the Xeer provides for the possibility of going through as many as twelve 'trees' or sessions to decide on difficult matters. Furthermore, a member of the community who disagrees with a decision is allowed to express his dissatisfaction by uttering the following words of deviance 'I refuse the decision of this *shitty assembly*'. It happened that individuals or families who strongly contested a decision they considered unjust left their community, migrated, and integrated into a neighbouring community.

In the case of an emergency situation, mainly during war or imminent threat, the Xeer bestows full authority and leadership to the *Mirix*, the Commandant, selected by the elders on the basis of his military and strategic abilities. The process of dialogue is limited in order to take decisions rapidly. The *Mirix* can decide on the movement of the community, the distribution of duties, and the collection of food and animals, side-stepping the usual process of democratic decision making.

It is useful at this stage of our discussion to question a deeply rooted presupposition about societies labelled as primitive, archaic, tribal, or segmentary by colonial anthropology. These societies are often denied the possibility of the deliberative choice or design of their socio-political and economic structures because these are supposed to be only determined by their material and environmental conditions (Evans-Pritchard and Fortes 1987). Communities that have managed to put dialogue and participatory decision making at the heart of their system of governance and developed coherent discourses to justify this choice are typically regarded as *traditional*, incapable of progressing towards more structured power and economic systems. They are generally defined negatively as societies without writing, without history,

without state, and so on. They are also designated as societies of scarcity and of subsistence, without market and surplus.

In his work of political anthropology, Pierre Clastres, who studied the Amazonian communities, the Guaraní in Brazil and the Guayaki in Paraguay in the 1970s, has deconstructed this evolutionary theory that considers 'modern' society as the culmination of social organisations and as a more evolved stage that all human societies will have to reach. He debunked two fundamental prejudices of this theory: the technical inferiority of 'primitive societies' and their absence of state to bring change and progress. He argued:

If one understands by technics the set of procedures men acquire not to ensure the absolute mastery of nature (that obtains only for our world and its insane Cartesian project, whose ecological consequences are just beginning to be measured), but to ensure a mastery of the natural environment suited and relative to their needs, then there is no longer any reason whatever to impute a technical inferiority to primitive societies: they demonstrate an ability to satisfy their needs which is at least equal to that of which industrial and technological society is so proud. (Clastres (2006), *La société contre l'Etat*, Editions Marée noire, page 10)

Other anthropologists have also highlighted that these societies have been able to satisfy their basic needs by working less than four hours a day, using the rest of their time for fighting, hunting, fishing, and enjoying social and cultural activities. Some anthropologists have even designated them as 'the first affluent societies' and the first 'leisure societies' (Lee 1965; Sahlins 1968). This debate, which divided anthropologists at the time, takes on a new dimension today with the series of dialogues engaged in the framework of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP), which recommends developing urgently a culture and an economy of *sobriety* to save our planet (UN Environment Programme, 2022).

For Clastres (2006), the so-called primitive societies are in fact egalitarian societies that have deliberately chosen their economic model and refused to let labour and production imprison them by deciding to limit the production of resources to socio-political and well-being needs and by prohibiting inequality. They have also deliberately chosen political and economic systems that could allow them to sustain their egalitarian organisation and participatory processes in decision making. Clastres argued that only external violence and specially the violence exercised by a state-centric system of governance could explain the shift from traditionally egalitarian societies towards state power, which imposed an economic system characterised by a

mode of production pursuing wealth for its own sake rather than for the community's well-being.

Closed Dialogue: Under the Seal of Nation States

Statehood and nationhood are two concepts that have evolved separately but converged at a certain point of history and in a certain part of the world to form what it is now called the 'nation state' (Markakis, Schlee and Young 2021). States come in different forms in various regions of the globe, from the tiny city states along coastal settlements to vast empires across continents. A *state* emerged as a political institution to exercise sovereign control over a given territory but without necessarily a close identification with the populace. It was long after the emergence of *state* that the concept of *nation* was attached to it. Nation is a more complex notion that had different and divergent interpretations of its core principles, such as shared memory and heritage, common aspirations and destiny, mutual feeling of togetherness. In fact, it was in Europe that the notion of nation acquired its present meaning and prominence in modern times. It is a product of Western history and modernity that introduced the problematic criteria of ethnic and cultural homogeneity as the foundational definition of nationhood and the related criteria of belonging and loyalty (Deutsch and Foltz 1966).

Nation state is therefore a model of governance that, far from being universal, is marked by the particular trajectories of European societies. Its birth is generally dated back to the signing, in 1648, of the Peace Treaty of Westphalia that ended the Thirty- and Eighty-Years' Wars and created the framework for modern international relations (Wilson 2009). The concepts of state sovereignty over demarcated territory, hierarchical authority, mediation between nation states, and diplomacy all find their origins in the context of this treaty.

However, this peace treaty that enshrined the concept of sovereignty did not end conflicts: it opened a new cycle of confrontations, wars, and destructions between emerging and competing European nation states. This system of governance left a disastrous legacy of expansion and conquest that marked Europe's bloody histories until the middle of the twentieth century with the so-called 'World Wars.'

The collective work achieved through the UNESCO General and Regional Histories Collections (1980–2010), which offer a multi-perspective approach to world history has shown that this model of state was not the only way to develop large functional socio-political entities (Jakobson and Dandamaev 1996). For instance, in Africa and Asia, other forms of large multi-ethnic and multi-cultural political groupings emerged that did not use the concept of nation as a vehicle of unification and legitimacy. The great African empires, such as Ghana, Mali, Songhai, to name but a

few, had developed other criteria of belonging and affiliation to the imperial authority without using the identity-based concept of nationhood and the criteria of ethnic homogeneity. For instance, the concept of 'Mansa', a Mandinka word, was the title given to the Sovereign of the Empire of Mali, founded by Sundiata Keita in the thirteenth century, which reached its apogee in the sixteenth century. It is wrongly translated as 'Emperor or King of kings' according to the European conception of imperial power. In effect, the 'Mansaya' ruled by the 'Mansa', was a highly decentralised power, whose system of administration could be compared to that of a confederation of states or provincial structures with great autonomy in many aspects of decision making. In Africa, in addition to these widely dispersed empires, there were also centralised kingdoms and empires ruling large territories which did not use the ideology of the nation state (Niane and Ogot 1985 1999).

The Abyssinian empire built by Emperors Menelik and later Haile Selassie in Ethiopia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively is an example of the African power systems that tried to adopt the concept of nation state. The imposition of a model of empire based on a homogenous ethno-religious group in a country with an astonishing cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity has led to terrible atrocities which are still being documented (Bulcha 2005).

When the African elites who were educated in the Western conception of governance came to power in their countries after independence, granted either by negotiation, or acquired through armed liberation struggles, it was this toxic concept of the nation state that was transposed to Africa. By adopting this colonial legacy, they found themselves confronted very quickly with a great challenge: how to reconcile the search for unity based on homogeneity in countries with artificial borders (drawn by the ambitions of colonial empires) with the extraordinary diversity of their peoples, cultures, and beliefs produced by a long history.

To transcend this contradiction, the new rulers began to replace the founding myths of their people with new narratives and representations about the existential unity of their nation states before even ensuring effective control over their territory, securing their borders, imposing the monopoly over the use of force, and maintaining order and enforcing law.

Frantz Fanon, who was a psychiatrist before becoming a political thinker, has perfectly analysed the psychology and behaviour of these post-colonial elites who, despite their discourse about emancipation and national liberation, had internalised colonial alienation (Fanon 1963). In their effort to catch up with the progress and modernity considered the only possible path for human development, the new rulers adopted Western ideologies such socialism, communism, or liberalism, thus overlooking their cultural specificity and abandoning their autonomy of thought. By

doing so, these rulers put themselves at the service of a development that could only perpetrate external domination and reproduce the colonial prejudices against their own populations. The Egyptian economist Samir Amin has spent decades studying the disastrous effects of this dependency syndrome (Amin 1976), while the Guyanese historian and political activist Walter Rodney analysed the very processes that led to the development of underdevelopment in post-colonial societies (Rodney 1972).

What interests us here is how this model of exogenous governance has marginalised and instrumentalised the dialogue that African societies used to practise before the colonial penetration. The endogenous conceptions and processes of consensus building through dialogue used by most African communities were the first 'traditions' to be targeted in the effort to build nation states. They were replaced with different forms of consultation controlled by state institutions such as political parties, administration, and other affiliated bodies. Under the pretext of preserving unity and national cohesion, and fulfilling their commitment to economic development, African rulers established in an authoritarian manner new terms and agendas for dialogue.

Endogenous mechanisms for building mutual trust, preparing minds, and establishing common norms for the exchanges, such as the spiritual and magical rituals to prepare the ground for dialogue and reinforce the spirit of harmony and peace, were rejected as impractical and archaic. Exogenous conceptions of dialogue such as the models of political meetings with their modes of agenda-setting and floor-taking, and reporting were adopted at every level and imposed as new paradigms of dialogue. Endogenous rituals and representations were replaced by other ceremonies such as national anthems, military marching bands, and religious preaching to encourage. The 'palaces' of governments, the headquarters of the ruling parties, the offices of the ministers, the halls of parliaments, the centres of authorised civil society associations became the new places for dialogue.

The 'palaver of the elders' as they were designated with contempt by the new technocrats were replaced by public consultations under the control of the state institutions from which independent elders, critical civil society activists, and scholars are generally excluded.

In such conditions, dialogue is often reduced to a series of impoverished and standardised discourses dismissing the norms of a true exchange such as freedom of expression, identification of the sources of problems, analysis of the shortcomings, and so on. A dialogue of the deaf came to take place between the rulers and the grassroots communities, encouraged by the use of concepts and notions borrowed from the colonial languages used as official language in state administration.

Despite all the efforts of the state to impose these new terms, the endogenous systems of dialogue have continued to enjoy great legitimacy and respect among communities. Challenged by this resilience, the new elites undertook various actions to discredit these traditions in the eyes of the population, by manipulating the process of leadership designation, corrupting the authority of the elders, enrolling traditional kings, sultans, and other powers in their campaign for unity and development. They could not tolerate the existence of parallel decentralised systems of governance which put in perspective the centralised decision-making process imposed by nation states. Thus, indigenous governance systems were listed among the 'retrograde' and 'anti-progress' cultural traditions that should be combatted and erased in order to modernise the society and pull people out of backwardness and underdevelopment. Even the acclaimed cultural diversity and richness is reduced to folkloric representations, such as speeches, songs, and dances performed during official ceremonies and in front of foreign visitors.

Moreover, post-colonial states imposed further restrictions to disqualify and criminalise dissident voices. New offences were introduced including crimes of treason, infringement of national unity, insubordination to state authority. The control of political dialogue has led some nation states to use the monopoly of force and violence by imposing coercive measures such as banning, imprisonment, deportation, or even disappearance. This may explain why, very early after independence, citizens who did not accept this locked dialogue chose to take up arms and form liberation movements under the banner of imported ideologies in which the endogenous traditions of dialogue were not often better used and respected.

Beyond cultural and political alienation, African rulers were also confronted with the predatory, exploitative, and repressive nature of the colonial state structures they inherited. Those who tried to challenge this order and regain autonomy and control over their resources for the benefit of their people during moments of revolutionary or nationalist ferment were confronted, very quickly, with the reality of the imperialist hegemonies. They have been the object of coups, assassinations, terrorist attacks, or unrest under the banner of democracy, human rights, or humanitarian emergency. The so-called 'curse' of the wealth in the African soil and subsoil is the consequence of this unfinished decolonisation.

The nostalgia for open-ended dialogue remains alive among African populations, who regularly express their frustration during movements of protest through which they claim all-inclusive national dialogue based on endogenous experiences to build a decolonised and democratic future.

Biased Dialogue: Under the Umbrella of International Organisations

International organisations, whether intergovernmental or non-governmental, have become the great advocates of dialogue. Most of them have set up programmes on different types of dialogue: intercultural, interreligious, intergenerational, inclusive dialogue, and so forth. Dialogue becomes a magical keyword in their institutional discourse and communication. Taking advantage of the neutrality afforded by their international status, these international organisations urge social and political actors in various countries to engage in dialogue and offer their expertise and experience to serve as brokers. Some of these organisations have even proposed methodologies and guidelines to help interested parties organise a constructive dialogue around issues of justice, development, or power and resources sharing.

However, international organisations are themselves governed by structures that do not favour dialogue and equality among their members. The example of the United Nations is instructive in that respect. Its General Assembly, which brings together all the member states, is supposed to be the supreme body that makes decisions on major issues of the world, according to the egalitarian principle of one country, one vote. It is informed by the dialogue within the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) which is 'the central platform for fostering debate and innovative thinking, forging consensus on ways forward, and coordinating efforts to achieve internationally agreed goals on the three dimensions of sustainable development – economic, social and environmental' (UN ECOSOC).

Every year, the UN General Assembly is held in New York to discuss pressing global issues and adopt by consensus or vote specific resolutions through lengthy debates and laborious negotiations. However, despite the time and energy put into their drafting and adopting, these resolutions are non-binding except those concerning UN budgetary and organisational matters. They are considered as formal expressions of the will of the United Nations but are not legally binding upon member states.

On the other hand, resolutions adopted by the UN Security Council are generally considered binding in accordance with Article 25 of the Charter. How can a Council composed of only fifteen members be allowed to adopt binding resolutions while the General Assembly of 193 members cannot? More surprisingly, five of the Council's members have the right of Veto, which means that they can oppose a decision taken by all the other members of the Council if so, they wish, without providing any logical justification. Are these Security Council members wiser, more credible, and more ethical than others to be given this privilege? Or is it because they acquired nuclear power before the others did? In that case, would there be a 'bomb

dividend'? None of the countries holding the Veto right have demonstrated exemplary ethical behaviour in exercising that privilege that has been used around 300 times since 1946 (Von Freiesleben 2008).

This discrimination among member states constitutes a fundamental weakness of the UN, which may explain why an increasing number of people, countries, and organisations across the world are questioning its legitimacy and credibility in promoting good governance and meaningful dialogue processes. More and more people are calling for reform to challenge the power given to the five permanent members to unilaterally obstruct the UN dialogue process and render the international organisation irrelevant (Gordon 1995). Another problem faced by the UN system is the inability of its member states to transcend their national egoism and self-interest and to address global issues with the necessary sense of responsibility, solidarity, and equity.

Since their inception, the UN and its specialised agencies, followed by other international organisations, have focused their actions and interventions on the so-called 'Underdeveloped', 'Least developed' and now 'Developing' countries as they were defined following a questionable evolutionary and Eurocentric perspective on societal development. Regional and national offices have been created in these countries to implement development programmes on the ground, provide support, and engage governments and social actors in dialogue.

Thousands of international civil servants and consultants are sent to these countries to organise consultations, advise governments, mediate between national stakeholders, and implement the methodologies and guidelines they have developed on dialogue and good governance. The uneven results of their interventions have shown that the international experts are not necessarily the best prepared and equipped to facilitate dialogue and encourage good governance in different cultural contexts, firstly, because they themselves have not acquired a culture of dialogue within their own organisations, where power relations and bureaucratic hierarchy and career competition exhaust their attention. Secondly, they are not sufficiently trained to understand the complex and multi-dimensional realities of the societies they are supposed to serve. Thirdly, they often perpetuate themselves some of the prejudices and paternalistic behaviours inherited from the colonial 'civilising mission' (Césaire 1950).

Although the UN has played a crucial role in the decolonisation process and in the fight against colonialism, racism, and segregation, it has not succeeded in challenging the 'racial order' that has been constructed since the sixteenth century European conquests to justify slavery and then colonial exploitation (Emirbayer and Desmond 2015). This racial order is at the basis of capitalism which has shaped the

global system today (Go 2020). Western staff and consultants are sent to developing countries to share their experience and expertise. They can go and work anywhere in the world and manage regional and country offices outside their region of origin, while African, Asian, and Latin American staff are generally assigned to their region of origin. This gives the impression that some staff are granted the privilege of universalism while others are confined to their particularism (Lynch 2020).

Thanks to the efforts of dedicated international staff to combat this bias, some UN and affiliated organisations are beginning to develop ethical codes of conduct and organise awareness raising and training to help their staff challenge this legacy. Aware of the suspicion that programmes imposed from outside may create, they are putting in place mechanisms for consultation with their constituencies with a view to adapting these programmes to local contexts. The concept of 'Participatory Development' (PD) has been introduced to engage in dialogue with local populations about development projects (Milabyo Kyamusugulwa 2013). This is where the UN staff are confronted with the closed dialogue that nation states promote in their countries. The choice of this model of dialogue and participation to be established with the populations has become a bone of contention between the United Nations, international organisations, and the governments which have shown more resistance to defending this aspect of their national sovereignty, whereas they are more flexible when it comes to introducing liberal economic doctrines imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Williams, 2003).

From this negotiation between nation states, the UN, and civil society, organisations have developed the different perspectives of PD to challenge the dominant top-down approaches (Mohan 2014).

The social movement perspective defines participation as an open dialogue within communities for the mobilisation of people to eliminate unjust hierarchies of knowledge, power, and economic distribution, and to identify the objective of participation as an empowering process for people to confront challenges together and to influence the direction of their own lives. The institutional perspective considers participation as an oriented dialogue with the communities for the reach and inclusion of inputs by relevant groups in the design and implementation of development projects (Tufte & Thomas 2009). The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is guided by this perspective as it attempts to engage civil society sectors and other relevant stakeholders to play a constructive role in supporting its implementation (<http://unsdg.un.org>).

The conversation about PD raises the question of participation as an end in itself with no necessary impact on the decisions taken on behalf of the community or as 'process of empowerment' of people to reinforce their self-determination and their

ability to play a real role in their development (Mohan 2007). One of the main problems of the dialogue promoted by international organisations is that the driving cultural, ideological, political, and economic reasons behind the notion of development itself are rarely questioned and discussed. The ways the UN and other international organisations conceptualise participation and empowerment are based on politically and economically blind perceptions of power relations at national and international levels. It implies that the empowerment of the powerless could be achieved within the existing social order without any significant negative effects upon the power relationships within societies. It does not take into account critical analysis from researchers and civil society activists on the shortcomings of most development agendas undertaken by international organisations, such as the Millennium Development Goals adopted in 2000. These organisations seem to overlook that any true ‘bottom-up’ process of participation constitutes a challenge to the hegemonic interests of the state and the market because empowering marginalised and exploited groups calls for a structural transformation of power relations between economic and political forces at local, national, and transnational levels. The focus on ‘localism’ and the discourse on local participation also leads to underplaying the inequalities and the stakes of power relations between economic and political forces at these different levels (Mohan and Stokke 2000).

Notwithstanding the good will of international organisations to improve their approach and learn from their mistakes, the conception of dialogue they promote suffers from a Eurocentric perspective. Dialogue is often confused with consultations and quick-fix and result-oriented conferences, which are subject to the rationality of the ‘cost-effective’ approach. The various constraints faced by international organisations (budget and time constraints, language barriers, and governments’ interference) do not facilitate in-depth dialogue addressing all the dimensions of people’s concerns. All these constraints and shortcomings in the analysis lead international organisations towards a biased dialogue, which overlooks the different dimensions of dialogue and of people’s aspirations (Sahnoun, 1994).

The case of the Somali Peace process is a concrete example of the differences between community-led dialogue and the UN-led one. In Somaliland, the northern region of Somalia, an endogenous peace and reconciliation process was engaged in 1991 by concerned communities, which followed its own pace and succeeded in ending hostilities in the region, addressing the grievances between the communities, who were often on opposing sides during the civil war, and establishing stability and a kind of ‘pastoral democracy’.

In comparison, the process launched at the same time and led or supported by the UN, regional organisations, and neighbouring countries failed to bring peace and

security in Somalia despite the organisation of around twenty peace conferences/dialogues over the last 25 years in different parts of the world that has cost millions of dollars.

The model of product-oriented dialogue and quick fix appeared in the end to be more costly and time consuming than the community-led process. In his analysis, Pat Johnson, an observer of the Somali crisis enumerated some of the critical features of community-led dialogue processes that were lacking in the internationally sponsored initiatives in the Somali context:

- Thorough consultation before beginning the process, including agreement on the agenda
- Respected and authoritative leadership and mediation
- Representation from a range of stakeholders to ensure inclusiveness, legitimacy of the process, and credibility of its outcome
- Committees with expertise to assist in the multiple levels of a peace process
- Financial and in-kind contributions provided by stakeholder communities themselves
- Prioritisation of public safety and a consensus-based approach to security management
- An incremental approach
- Process- rather than product-oriented methodology
- Agreement on ways to address reparation and oversee implementation of accords and sanctions against 'spoilers'
- Public outreach before, during and after the process and dissemination of accords to ensure transparency, public understanding, acceptance and ratification of the outcomes.

(Johnson 2009 'The Search for peace: Lessons from Somali-led peace processes 1991–2007' in *Making the Difference*, p.275)

Certainly, the UN needs a profound overhaul in order to adjust its actions and practices to its fundamental mission as a world forum for dialogue, a mission which remains more essential than ever for humanity. But beyond the reform of the structure and functioning, what the UN needs the most for its renaissance in this worrying

twenty-first century is a paradigm shift enabling emancipation from the linear evolutionary perspective of human history and the Eurocentric conception of human development and relations so as to build a more universal and pluralistic vision of human destiny.

Conclusions

We have shown in this paper that dialogue is not only a concept but also a practice that has a history with governance systems. We have recalled the different understandings and dimensions of dialogue according to the political ontology of various societies. We have highlighted the potential of dialogue under the tree, the instrumentalisation of dialogue by African nation states, and the shortcomings of dialogue promoted by international organisations. We have underlined that dialogue is an endless process and exercise that requires specific knowledge, knowhow, and skills to manage the multidimensional and dialectical tension with governance. In an increasingly urbanised, connected, and crowded world, where this tension has become even more complex, what chance is there to reconcile the requirements of a multi-dimensional dialogue with the rationalities of governance?

From the three cases of interactions between dialogue and governance that we have briefly analysed, we can draw some lessons that can help us respond partly to this question. Their articulation would facilitate the identification and exchange of practices and experiences of building shared universal values as dreamed of by the great poet Aimé Césaire: 'There are two ways of losing oneself: by segregation walled in the particular or by dilution in the universal. I have a different idea of a universal. It is of universal rich with all that is particular, rich with all the particulars there are, the deepening and coexistence of them all'.

The multi-dimensional perspective of the open-ended dialogue is an important element that can be integrated into the PD theory promoted by governments and international organisations. Further research should be undertaken to better understand how different societies across the world define this multi-dimensionality. Training and capacity-building sessions should be organised for all the staff in charge of governance and development programmes to deepen their understanding of the requirements of dialogue. National and international experts should take into account the latest anthropological findings regarding the ontological systems and cultural specificities of communities they are engaged with to be able to identify endogenous knowledge and expertise for the development and implementation of their programmes at national level. Exchanges of expertise and experience between regions of the world should be organised on an equal footing to draw out communalities and understand differences.

The open-ended dialogue principles, values, and methodology should be preserved and revalorised where it has been marginalised or perverted. Endogenous processes of dialogue should be opened to women who have been often excluded in these exchanges so that they can contribute to the problem analysis and consensus building of their communities. Women and youth are demanding space in the traditional governance system and their potential should be recognised and accommodated. Younger generations and civil-society activists should be educated in the knowledge of their endogenous systems of governance and learn more of the related methodologies of dialogue.

At national level, exchanges of experiences between the different endogenous experiences in dialogue and governance should be organised to identify communalities that will help build comprehensive methodologies. Multimedia and ICT should be used for public outreach to publicise in local languages these methodologies and root them in the national socio-political landscape. Some of these methodologies could be used as models for national political dialogue at parliaments, governmental councils, and so on.

International organisations should work out innovative solutions to revise their product-oriented methodologies and transcend the cost-effective accounting approach for responding to the requirements of dialogue processes that need to follow their own pace to reach their purpose. It indeed requires time, humility, listening, and patience to achieve an inclusive dialogue and participation in the sense that the Chinese philosopher Lao Tsu has so clearly described: ‘Go and meet with the people, live with them, learn from them. Love them. Start with what they have, develop from what they know, and in the end, when the work is over, they will say, “We did it ourselves.”’

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