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THE IJR WEEKLY LENS

19 March 2025 Column

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PSYCHO-SOCIAL HEALTH, EMOTIONAL JUSTICE AND COLONIALISM

So much of peacebuilding has traditionally been focused on governance and ensuring the non-repartition of conflict. This, however, does not result in peace. As famously said by Martin Luther King, Jr: "Peace is not the absence of war, but the presence of justice". Increasingly it is recognised that justice needs to include emotional justice and attention to psycho-social well-being.

Colonialism has had a major effect on the mental and mental health of colonised people. Studies have shown that there is a significant and lasting impact on colonised communities and individuals. Amongst colonised societies, we see higher rates of domestic violence, alcoholism, depression, anxiety and PTSD. Undealt with, this is transmitted intergenerationally from one generation to the next.

In addition, there is the trauma of systemic violence, displacement, cultural disruption, a loss of a sense of identity, a loss of self-esteem and internalised inferiority. Together with unreformed institutions, the lack of quality education, the lack of access to care and the continuing lack of services to formerly oppressed communities, the accumulation of these things lead to ongoing systematic poverty, ill-health and the intergenerational transmission of trauma.

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What is needed is a recognition of the importance of psycho-social well-being as an essential part of peacebuilding, and processes which support Emotional Justice. Psycho-social support recognises the importance of addressing mental, emotional and the social well-being of communities affected by colonialism. It aims to promote healing, reconciliation and sustainable peace by mitigating the impact and trauma. Ignoring this aspect of peace-building can hinder the progress towards peace. Part of healing from conflict is to restore relationships destroyed by colonialism and oppression. Failing to do so will result in continuing high levels of distrust which hamper social cohesion.

Esther Armah[i], journalist and author, is attributed as coining the phrase 'Emotional Justice'. Emotional Justice focuses on acknowledging the emotional harm caused by conflict, validating the experience of the victim and then taking steps to address the harm that was done. It recognises the experiences especially of those who have been impacted by the oppression. The aim of Emotional Justice is to have healing and a more equitable society. It also recognises the need to process intergenerational trauma so that cycles of trauma are broken and not repeated in the next generation. Emotional Justice also requires being open and engaging in a process of self-reflection.

In Transitional Justice, there is a recognition of different types of justice (reparative, punitive, restorative, retributive), but it is also important to include Emotional Justice. The role of emotion has in the past been downplayed (if not discarded completely) and Emotional Justice reminds us of the importance of emotion in the pursuit of justice. It recognises the cumulative emotional toll on individuals and societies which have experienced systematic injustice over centuries, that needs to be addressed.

More than just dealing with individuals, Emotional Justice incorporates a holistic approach which includes a focus on communal suffering and seeks to dismantle harmful systems, institutions and narratives.

An essential part of Emotional Justice is the need to create safe spaces. A sense of safety is essential to any healing. In order for one to heal through the expression of emotion, it is a prerequisite that there is a sense of psychological safety. It is impossible to begin to heal unless one feels safe and there are safe spaces to share and to be vulnerable. There are often feelings of guilt, shame and distrust that is felt and, unless a safe, non-judgemental space is provided, sharing and vulnerability is impossible.

[i] <https://www.facebook.com/InstituteForJusticeandReconciliation/videos/emotional-justice-panel-discussion-with-esther-armah/956584252219821/>

Part of the process is also to recognise the importance of personal responsibility. A victim and perpetrator can reside in the same body. This brings in a level of complexity that is difficult to deal with unless there is honest self-reflection on the way in which one may be responsible for the perpetuation of oppression and oppressive systems. In such cases, it is essential to take active steps to rectify behaviour and to dismantle the systems of oppression.

In terms of the African experience there is much that needs to be done to incorporate psycho-social well-being and Emotional Justice into our peacebuilding efforts. The first step needs to be the acknowledgement that these are important and that, if unaddressed, will hamper progress to sustainable peace.

Part of the colonial experience was the way in which Western culture was prioritised and promoted, and the way in which indigenous African culture was dismissed as 'primitive' and actively destroyed. One of the paths to healing is to rediscover positive cultural practices and empowering communities to use culturally relevant traditions to address the past. The example of the Gacaca courts, which were used post-1994 after the genocide had decimated the judicial system.

It is also essential to decolonise mental health practices so that they acknowledge colonial trauma and are adapted to use traditional modes of healing. This will go a long way to destigmatising traditional ways of doing things and to restore the use of cultural practices in society. Additionally, there needs to be re-education of health care professionals, as well as society at large, that the harms done by

colonialism are unique experiences and that there are specialised needs of colonial populations.

Colonialism leaves its mark on all aspects of Africa: the scars run deep and are still felt.

Peacebuilding is complex and complicated, requiring a holistic approach recognising the uniqueness of each country, community and individual. The harms of colonialism have been exacerbated by post-independence conflicts, which have served to exacerbate the situation. Many of these conflicts arise from colonialism itself and complicate an already fraught situation.

Emotional Justice and psycho-social wellbeing are not optional extras to be added onto peacebuilding – they are a central and essential component thereof. The legacies of colonialism remain, the institutions, systems and structures of oppression have not been dismantled. But what Emotional Justice tells us is that the answers lie within the continent and it is up to us to do the hard work to find them.

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