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Hassan, Hamdy (Editor), *Peace in Africa: Studies and Perspectives for Enhancing Stability and Development*. Muslim societies and peacebuilding in Africa (Arabic papers, Preface by Samir Boudinar). Rabat: Alhokama Center for Peace Research, 2025, pp.530. Research Projects Series, African Studies Program. ISBN: 978-614-488-378-5.

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It was a distinct privilege to deliver the keynote lecture at the official launch of *Peace in Africa: Studies and Perspectives for Enhancing Stability and Development* during the Cairo International Book Fair in January 2025. This event provided an invaluable scholarly platform to highlight our collective research on Muslim societies and peacebuilding in Africa and to engage with fellow academics and policymakers committed to advancing sustainable stability across the continent.

Over the past four decades, the study of peacebuilding has emerged within the broader social scientific discourse on peace and conflict. Johan Galtung first articulated foundational frameworks in *Three Approaches to Peace* (1969), and the field subsequently gained momentum through the influential scholarship of John Paul Lederach.[1] However, early contributions were predominantly produced by Western researchers; in Africa, peace studies developed more slowly, constrained by the legacies of colonialism and the skepticism of postcolonial governments toward research perceived as external to national priorities. [2]. The 1992 United Nations report *An Agenda for Peace*, presented by Boutros Boutros-Ghali, marked a turning point by stimulating academic interest in peacebuilding among African scholars.[3] Since then, peacebuilding research has flourished, with an increasing focus on analyzing intrastate armed conflicts and identifying strategies for sustainable peace and development. The proliferation of peace research centers, academic programs, and research institutes across Africa has encouraged greater scholarly engagement, contributing to improved strategies and frameworks at both national and regional levels. Integrating peacebuilding into the work of civil society organizations and establishing normative instruments at the regional level have further heightened academic interest, making this a widely studied field across the continent.

However, much of Africa's internationally supported peace research has long been dominated by the liberal peace model, which is rooted in Western liberal theory and practice. This model emphasizes liberal democracy and market-based economics as pathways to peace. The effectiveness of these top-down approaches has faced criticism, particularly from scholars advocating an African civilizational perspective. They question whether such models promote sustainable peace or undermine traditional institutions and cultures. These scholars argue for a paradigmatic shift in peacebuilding studies to make them more relevant to Africa. They call for a context-specific approach informed by local culture, history, and socio-economic realities, rather than the imposition of externally derived models. From this perspective, African researchers underscore the need to integrate indigenous systems and community perspectives into peacebuilding initiatives, noting that one-size-fits-all solutions often overlook local conceptions of peace and justice. A widely shared view among African scholars is that liberal peacebuilding reflects the imposition of Western interests and lacks cultural resonance and contextual relevance. In response, alternative approaches to peacebuilding have been proposed—approaches that offer valuable lessons in tolerance and reconciliation and provide a foundation for re-establishing social solidarity. Such alternatives enable a deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in African peacebuilding dynamics. In light of these critiques, there is an urgent need for an Africa-centered peacebuilding paradigm that recognizes and incorporates indigenous knowledge, traditions, and community resilience into the continent's peacebuilding efforts.

In 2002, the modern form of the Gacaca system was formally introduced in Rwanda to advance restorative justice principles. Prior to this, Rwanda's judicial system had been in deep crisis, burdened with more than 800,000 prisoners linked to the genocide, yet equipped with only twelve ordinary courts to process these cases. The destruction of the judiciary during the 1994 genocide, compounded by the flight of legal professionals, further exacerbated the challenge. Given the sheer volume of pending cases, it was estimated that the conventional justice system could take up to 200 years to process them. In this context, the Government of National Unity sought alternative solutions, drawing inspiration from Rwanda's historical practices. Rooted in precolonial traditions, Gacaca was a community-based model of justice that promoted reconciliation by bringing victims and perpetrators together to find mutually acceptable solutions, mediated by respected community leaders. Conducted symbolically while seated on the grass, this process often culminated in symbolic restitution and the reintegration of perpetrators into their communities. By adapting this traditional model to address contemporary challenges, the Rwandan government preserved its core elements while modifying them to fit the unique post-

genocide context, where large numbers of perpetrators and survivors coexisted, bound by values of tolerance and communal living.

Another vital entry point into peacebuilding studies is the philosophy of Ubuntu, deeply rooted in traditional African belief systems. Ubuntu emphasizes human interconnectedness and the importance of relationships and community. It is grounded in the premise that individuals cannot exist in isolation but are part of a greater whole, necessitating cooperation and mutual support for the collective good. Guided by values such as compassion, kindness, respect, and honesty, Ubuntu nurtures empathy, understanding, and accountability among community members. It acknowledges that authentic human existence is intertwined with social, environmental, and spiritual dimensions, with collective identity and belonging at its core. Ubuntu underscores communal consciousness, collective responsibility, and shared existence, highlighting the interdependence of individuals within the community. As such, it is regarded as a powerful source for reconciliation, development, and peacebuilding in Africa, anchored in dialogue, respect, nonviolence, and the restoration of human dignity. This worldview challenges Western peacebuilding strategies by offering alternative perspectives and approaches to sustainable peace and conflict transformation. [4]

Nelson Mandela's definition of Ubuntu captures one of its essential aspects:

> A traveler through a country would stop at a village, and he didn't have to ask for food or water. Once he stops, the people give him food, entertain him.[5]

In the African worldview, this hospitality contrasts sharply with modern, commercialized notions of hospitality characterized by professionalized services, certificates, five-star ratings, and formal reception etiquette. Comparing the Swahili proverb "Treat your guest as a guest for two days, and on the third give him a hoe" to Abrahamic traditions in the Old and New Testaments reveals a shared human value of honoring strangers. This sentiment resonates with Ibn Qudamah's classical Islamic view: "The obligation of hosting a guest is for one day and one night, and perfection is for three days."

Against this backdrop, the primary goal of the Hakama Center for Peace Studies is to adopt an alternative epistemological approach that highlights Africa's historical and civilizational heritage, as articulated by Ali Mazrui. Ethnic and religious factors are often blamed for many of Africa's postcolonial conflicts. While these factors can be contentious, they are easily exploited in situations of societal discord. Political leaders and elites frequently mobilize ethnic or religious loyalties in pursuit of power. When religion is instrumentalized in this way, it may fuel

conflict; however, it can also foster tolerance, dialogue, and acceptance of others. Islam, in particular, wields considerable social influence in Africa and is rapidly growing in demographic strength—a dynamic that can generate religious tensions in certain contexts. Unfortunately, conflicts fought in the name of religion have not diminished; rather, they have increased. Simultaneously, religious and spiritual institutions can play a proactive role in preventing and resolving conflicts, especially in disputes with religious dimensions, where their engagement can significantly contribute to conflict resolution. Religion can inspire hope and reconciliation in the aftermath of conflict.

The question, then, is how to operationalize these alternative visions to address Africa's current peacebuilding challenges. Peacebuilding efforts in Africa face numerous obstacles due to the complexity and multiplicity of violent situations. These challenges include political transitions that require actors to reconcile differences and collaborate in shared public spaces—a task complicated by the presence of individuals hostile to coexistence and political tolerance. Security challenges are prevalent, particularly when it comes to placing armed actors under political control and persuading them to commit to peaceful coexistence. Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration often prove difficult. Additionally, fragile political structures further hinder the implementation of peacebuilding programs, especially under external pressures and competing international interests.

In addition, unresolved root causes of conflict and the failure of political authorities to address issues of social and economic justice risk a relapse into violence. Coordination among diverse stakeholders remains a challenge, as does the influence of international interests and partners. Women's participation in peace processes continues to be constrained, despite their proven effectiveness. In South Sudan, for example, political divisions among stakeholders have stalled the peace process, while the ongoing presence of armed groups complicates stabilization efforts. Similarly, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, multiple armed factions and resource-driven conflicts have undermined peacebuilding and perpetuated violence. These cases illustrate the multidimensional nature of peacebuilding challenges in Africa, highlighting the need for comprehensive solutions that integrate peace and sustainable development.

The African Union's continental peace and security architecture offers, at least in theory, a practical institutional framework for implementing a holistic concept of peace—integrating conflict prevention, peacemaking, peacekeeping, and post-conflict reconstruction. However, implementation remains hindered by resource constraints and a lack of political will among some African governments. This underscores the need for concerted efforts to overcome these challenges and realize

the transformative potential of African cultural heritage in advancing peace and sustainable prosperity.

Structure of the Book

This volume examines the complex dynamics of conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Africa, focusing on the Sahel and Sahara regions. In chapter one, Adel Mousawi provides a thorough analysis of the persistent instability in the Sahel–Sahara, highlighting how competing external interventions have compounded state fragility, porous borders, resource conflicts, and jihadist insurgencies. By distinguishing between the "Africanization" of peace efforts and genuine "African appropriation" of security agendas, the author illustrates how regional bodies like the G5 Sahel and ECOWAS have struggled amid funding shortfalls and political divisions. While the chapter excels at diagnosing structural and geopolitical challenges, it calls for more detailed, locally rooted strategies and stronger institutional capacity for sustainable, African-led conflict resolution.

In chapter two, Mohamed Ashour incisively deconstructs religious extremism in Muslim Africa by moving beyond simplistic "moderate vs. extremist" binaries to expose a rich, four-dimensional spectrum—political, theological, ritualistic, and social—that shapes how faith groups form alliances, fracture, and, at times, resort to violence. By distinguishing extremism's doctrinal rigor from its ritual strictness and social exclusivity, and contrasting these with more flexible, inclusive interpretations, the chapter illuminates why some movements embrace armed jihad while others pursue spiritual revival within existing political systems. This multidimensional framework clarifies the varied identities and behaviors of African religious actors—from jihadist insurgents to tolerant Sufi orders—and offers scholars and policymakers a nuanced tool for understanding and addressing the complex links between belief, practice, and instability across the continent.

Chapter three, by Adam Youssef, offers a concise yet insightful exploration of how deeply ingrained cultural norms in Central and West African societies shape—and often undermine—democratic practices and state institutions. Through comparative case studies of Chad, Mali, Guinea, and Sudan (2000–2021), the author demonstrates how early socialization, folkloric traditions, and schooling systems that valorize strength over critical inquiry foster a predisposition toward coercion rather than participatory governance. Youssef persuasively links these cultural patterns to the emergence of armed movements and recurrent power seizures, arguing that without deliberately cultivating a culture of legal rights from childhood and embedding democratic mechanisms into everyday life, formal institutions will remain hollow. His analysis balances theoretical framing with real-world examples, offering both diagnosis and a roadmap for culturally attuned democratic reform.

Chapter Four, authored by Dr. Sodafa Mahmoud, challenges conventional Western paradigms of peacekeeping by emphasizing the indispensability of Africa's rich cultural heritage in crafting durable conflict-resolution strategies. Instead of imposing standardized, externally designed frameworks, Dr. Mahmoud advocates for an approach that draws upon indigenous conflict-management traditions—such as consensus councils, ritualized reconciliation ceremonies, and lineage-based mediation—to restore social cohesion and legitimacy. By examining examples from Cameroon, Ethiopia, and northern Ghana, he demonstrates how integrating customary authorities and customary law with formal peace processes can enhance local buy-in and neutralize spoilers who thrive on the disconnect between state institutions and grassroots realities. His chapter lays the theoretical groundwork for the "cultural anchoring" of peace initiatives, emphasizing that sustainable reconciliation in African contexts requires more than technical fixes; it demands deep respect for and incorporation of the symbolic practices that underpin communal identity and moral order.

Building on this culturally attuned framework, Chapters Five through Ten explore the spectrum of institutional and non-state actors shaping security dynamics across the Sahel and Horn. In Chapter Five, Lamia Gheith meticulously documents Mali's post-2012 experiments in state-led conflict management—charting the successes and shortcomings of joint security commissions, disarmament programs, and decentralization reforms—while underscoring the persistent gap between policy design and implementation. Al-Bashir Al-Kout's Chapter Six shifts focus to Libya, where he explores the rise of Islamic political movements and traces how their oscillation between moderation and militancy has influenced Libya's fragile transition and reverberated across neighboring states. Rahal Boubriq's Chapter Seven examines the Sahel's jihadist networks, analyzing how groups like AQIM, MUJAO, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara exploit ethnic grievances and fluid alliances to sustain their campaigns. In Somalia, Chapter Eight by Mostafa Zahran uncovers a less-examined phenomenon: armed Sufi orders that, contrary to prevailing stereotypes, have mobilized both spiritual authority and social services to resist extremist incursions and fill governance voids. Chapter Nine, penned by Abd al-Rahman Sibi, highlights the critical yet often overlooked contributions of Malian ulama—drawing on fatwas, community preaching, and scholarship—to delegitimize violent extremism and foster intercommunal dialogue. Finally, Chapter Ten evaluates the G5 Sahel Joint Force, weighing its operational achievements against ongoing challenges related to coordination, funding, and political will. Together, these chapters paint a complex portrait of Africa's peacebuilding landscape, where formal institutions, local traditions, religious authorities, and armed movements intersect in ways that both undermine and enable pathways toward sustainable peace.

Achieving peace in Africa involves more than the mere absence of violence in the Western liberal sense; it requires proactive efforts toward reconciliation and coexistence, grounded in human rights, social justice, economic equality, and political fairness. African traditions provide valuable insights into peacebuilding, emphasizing reconciliation, the restoration of social solidarity, and shared humanity. Learning from African approaches and traditional institutions can enrich and enhance ongoing peacebuilding processes. To fully harness Africa's cultural potential in post-conflict reconstruction, educational and training programs targeting government officials, civil society actors, and citizens are essential.

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