

STORYTELLING AS A MEANS FOR PEACE EDUCATION: INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE IN SOUTHERN THAILAND

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Abstract

This article relates to my 2009 field research that focused on the use of peace storytelling as a medium for the transformative learning of peace education. The research was aimed at promoting social reconciliation and intercultural dialogue between youth of Thai-Buddhists and Malay-Muslims in the ongoing intra-state ethno-religious conflict in Southern Thailand. Senehi (2002) argues that storytelling is an instrument for socialisation and education. This is seen as the key to conflict transformation and peace-building by motivating people to undergo self-transformation. My study was informed by theoretical frameworks of peace education and conflict transformation that seek to promote constructive peace engagement through nonviolent approaches addressing major issues and increasing understanding, equality, and respect in relationships (Lederach, 2003). Through interviews and focus group sessions, as well as art workshops with the youth of conflicting parties, the case study demonstrates that peace education through storytelling can be utilized as a tool of narrative truth-telling, aimed at restoring inter-personal relationships, healing traumatic experiences and promoting social coexistence. This method can foster intercultural and interfaith dialogue. Further it can contribute to the development of a culture of peace, in which the practice of peace storytelling with a member from 'the other' group can be interpreted as a desire to proclaim the "unheard" voices and feelings to be shared with 'the other'. It connects with the practice of active listening to overcome prejudice, leading towards the transformative learning process. Through the use of storytelling, participants in the study were given opportunities to share their lived experiences, affirm each other, and internalize new possibilities for expressing and working through both conscious and repressed thoughts and feelings together. The process contributed to the participants' potential to transform a culture of violence into a culture of peace. Peace storytelling may, therefore, be seen as an apparatus for conflict transformation and peace education, as well as an act of art that may lead toward nonviolent social change in a society divided on ethno-religious lines.

Keywords: *peace education, conflict transformation, storytelling, intercultural dialogue, southern Thailand*

Introduction

"Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defence of peace must be constructed." (UNESCO Constitution, 1945)

Since the end of the Cold War and the tragedy of September 11th 2001, religious and ethnic conflicts, as well as conflicts now termed as 'ethno-religious' have been perceived as the greatest threats to international stability. These conflicts tend to be heightened by identity-based issues that create protracted, intractable social conflict. Such is the case in southern Thailand, where ongoing intra-state, ethno-religious conflict is experienced between Thai-Buddhists and Malay-Muslims. Historically, the Malay Muslim insurgency has essentially been nationalist based. In more recent times however, it seems that there are some significant changes in the character of the conflict as Islamist militants emphasize the ideology of 'Jihad' in their fight against the Thai state.

Biography

Erna Anjarwati is a peace researcher holding two Masters Degrees in International Peace Studies and Conflict Transformation from the University for Peace, Costa Rica and the University of Innsbruck, Austria. She is currently a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Tasmania, Australia. Her research interest areas include peace education and nonviolent alternatives, prescriptive and elective conflict transformation, and arts-based peace building, intercultural and interfaith dialogue. She can be contacted at: Erna.Anjarwati@utas.edu.au

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Lederach 1995) argues that social conflict emerges and develops on the basis of the meaning and interpretation that the people involved attach to actions and events. Following that view, conflict is thus connected to meaning, meaning to knowledge, and knowledge is rooted in culture. Culture then, is used by a group of people in order to interpret, express, and respond to social realities, and we perceive 'the other' as incompatible with our cultural/religious norms. These foundations of structural and cultural violence are strengthened by differences in religion, ethnicity, social class, language, history and lineage, contributing to feelings of prejudice towards 'the other.' These feelings may be expressed through varying forms of discrimination and violence, such as racism, ethnocentrism, chauvinism, stereotyping, terrorism, and so on. In addressing these types of issues, Dietrich and Sutzl (2006) have suggested that the response to structural and cultural violence can only be the demand of a pluralistic, differentiated and incompatible vision of peace that moves conflict away from destructive processes toward constructive ones that can reduce violence and increase justice in human relationships.

As witnessed by the "UN Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence (COPNV) for the Children of the World (2001-2010)", education plays an important role in the construction of identity and in the development of a 'culture' (United Nations, 2000). The COPNV initiative aimed to change those mechanisms of cultures that legitimize the use of violence at every level of the society, including the inter-personal and inter-communal relationships (United Nations, 2000). To respond to the forms of contemporary violence, there is a need to promote peace through education. By deconstructing identities that fuel cultures of violence, as well as reconstructing its capabilities and competences, we as human beings can contribute to the development of a culture of peace, and thus transform conflicts through nonviolent means.

The case study described in this article focused on the utilization of storytelling as a medium for narrative and dialogical truth, reflecting a transformative conception of peace education. The study examined the creation of mutual understanding and changing attitudes, behaviors and perceptions of 'the other,' to cultivate a culture of peace. This article describes the conceptual framework adopted for the research, with a brief overview of the methodology and a discussion of the relevant literature before considering some of the findings of the study followed by a reflection.

Conflict Dynamics in Southern Thailand

It can be argued that the unrest in southern Thailand arises from historical and socio-political grievances, fanned by the separatist Malay-Muslim movements from Pattani against the Thai state.

In the context of the Malay-Muslim worldview, primacy is given to ethnicity and religion. These attitudes, perceptions and behaviors have been strengthened as a result of internal repression and external influences, including the increase of militant Islam in the region and the return of the young people who have studied in the Arab countries and in Afghanistan, who ignite demands over local grievances. Further, the Malay Muslim population perceives the Thai government as denying their basic human needs and identity through its implementation of politics, economic, socio-cultural and military policies (Anjarwati, 2008).

Azar (2006) presents a framework of protracted social conflict, which highlights the satisfaction of basic human needs, identity groups, governance and international linkages. Using that conceptual framework, three elements may be seen as having contributed to the apparent intractable conflict in southern Thailand:

The first element relates to ideas around the glorious past and historical grievances of the Pattani Darussalam Kingdom that was incorporated into Siam (the former name for Thailand), in 1906. With political power subsequently held by the Thai state, native Malay Muslims were increasingly oppressed and discriminated against. The implementation of a policy to assimilate them into the dominant Thai culture, through language, religion and the formal education system, where Thai is the only official language, has been perceived by the native people as action reflecting cultural violence, as well as the government's oppression and discrimination against Muslim minority of Thailand. Thus, cultivation of an identity in line with Malay nationalism has proven to be a powerful weapon used to motivate young people into joining the insurgent groups to fight against the Thai state to achieve socio-cultural recognition and political aims (Anjarwati, 2008).

The second element concerns the politicizing of a conception of 'Jihad.' The separatist group leaders have been able to manipulate the ethnicity issue and transform it into a religious one by employing an extremist interpretation of the concept of jihad. These practices are highly volatile in the context of Islam

and are being used to fuel hatred towards the Thai-Buddhists and the Thai state.

The third element involves social jealousy on the part of Malay Muslims towards the Thai state and Thai Buddhists living in the south, due to the inequality of economic development between regions. There have been massive development strategies developed by the Thai government towards states dominated by Thai-Buddhist majorities, whereas the Malay-Muslims in the south face poverty, unemployment, lack of educational opportunities, substandard infrastructure, and low living standards (Anjarwati, 2008). In light of these historical and contemporary factors, it can be argued that the duality, the concepts of 'we and 'them,' are playing a critical role in contributing toward the conflict's intractability. Indeed, one of the most devastating legacies of the ongoing ethno-religious conflict in southern Thailand is the polarized social relationships between the conflicting parties, especially at the grassroots level (Anjarwati, 2008).

Research Aim

The overarching objective of my study was to examine how narrative storytelling can be utilized as a medium for transformative learning with regard to peace education, contributing to intercultural dialogue and social reconciliation among of Thai-Buddhist and Malay-Muslim youth in southern Thailand. The study adopted community-level mechanisms to address a culture of violence. The conflict transformation process reflected peace education values, raising awareness about the system of government oppression, and promoting intercultural dialogue and reconciliation for the development of a culture of peace in southern Thailand.

Themes in the Literature

The related literature reveals three principal themes: an elicitive approach for conflict transformation, critical peace education, and peace storytelling as a medium for intercultural dialogue and reconciliation.

An Elicitive Approach for Conflict Transformation

One of the approaches that can be utilized for the constructive transformation of ethno-religious conflict is the elicitive approach. This approach involves the fostering of culturally sensitive peace

education that respects local cultures. It highlights the importance of a facilitation process to help explore and create new options for the transformation of the conflict. Further, it seeks to produce constructive change focusing on the relational and cultural dimensions of conflict: (i) The cultural dimension relates to how culture influences the problem-solving mechanisms that are put in place to address conflict, (ii) whereas relational dimension refers to the patterns of communication and interaction that affect relationships to increase mutual understanding between conflicting parties and transform the conflict through nonviolent means (Lederach, 2003).

As storytelling is a part of the conflicting parties' narratives, its use was appropriate as a community-level mechanism to help deconstruct identities that were fuelling the conflict, restore social relationships and raise awareness about the system of government oppression, as well as to promote intercultural dialogue among the youth of conflicting parties.

The cultural conception of storytelling played a critical role in promoting peace through education in this study. It was utilized as a medium for transformative learning that fostered collective awareness. It encouraged people to practice values of a culture of peace in daily life, as an antidote to a culture of violence that has existed in the mind of every human being. Thus, within the elicitive approach the greatest resource for building a culture of peace is recognized as the people themselves. Educating young people to become agents of social change is central to the task of peace education.

Critical Peace Education

The point is made throughout the literature on critical peace education that a cultural and context sensitive approach is crucial to create a culture of peace (Ardizzone, 2001, Burns and Aspeslagh, 1996, Carson and Lange, 1997, Reardon, 1999). Bajaj (2008) distinguished 'critical peace education' from the wider notion of 'peace education' by observing that the former emphasizes, "issues of structural inequality and research aimed towards local understanding of how participants can cultivate a sense of transformative agency." Cranton (1994), regards it as "a process of being freed from the oppression of being illiterate, a means of gaining knowledge and skills, a way to satisfy learner needs, and a process of critical self-reflection to take constructive action leading towards social transformation." Rather, the main goal of critical peace education appears to involve the development of critical awareness that enables

people to become agents of social change (Bajaj, 2008).

According to Salomon (2002a), in regions of intractable conflict, as is the case in southern Thailand, the purpose of peace education is to change the mindset of people through peaceful means, thereby promoting understanding, respect and tolerance. Indeed, the philosophy of peace education itself teaches nonviolence, love, compassion and reverence for all life, and indirectly confronts the forms of violence that dominate society by teaching about their causes and providing knowledge of alternatives (Harris and Morrison, 2003). Peace education involves skills, including active listening, reflection, problem-solving, cooperation and conflict resolution, aiming to empower people with skills, attitudes, and knowledge to create a safe world and build a sustainable environment (Harris and Morrison, 2003).

Critical peace education represents an aspect of conflict transformation which relies on transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991). The emphasis of the critical approach is on changing the learner's perspective, rather than attempting to resolve the conflict (Fetherson and Kelly, 2007). In order for peace education to become more effective in terms of transformative learning, Von Glaserfeld (Matiru et al., 1995) highlights the importance of creating a 'space' for encounter, exchange and critical discussion that constitutes 'rule governed interaction' that contains an element of dialogue, reflection and evaluation or reflective practice to encourage reflection on how we understand ourselves and how we perceive our relationship with 'the other' (Mezirow, 1991). Cultural activity, including storytelling, has been one of the principal means through which people can engage with peace education (Kester, 2008) as it offers participants the opportunity to bridge the gap between experience and understanding. Through its participatory and dialogical processes, participants not only learn about the necessity and intrinsic value of peace; they are also offered support in guided practice. Thus, as Tibbits (2002) has pointed out, it is more likely that peace principles will be adopted, enacted, and sustained if participants are taught with pedagogical approaches utilizing dialogical and participatory activities.

Peace Storytelling as A Medium for Intercultural Dialogue and Reconciliation

The argument is made by Senehi (2002) that narratives are the rationale behind community thinking.

Since cultural narratives encompass the knowledge that is shared by a group, they can be adapted and employed as a tool to support critical thinking and persuade people about aspects of social life. Stories therefore may function as vehicles for both socialization and education. This notion of the instrumental value of narrative underlies Fisher's (2004) process of truth recovery which is based on narrative truth: storytelling between victims and perpetrators, where personal truths and diverging experiences are communicated to a wider public and dialogical truth: arising from the interaction and discussion among the conflicting parties to encourage social reconciliation by raising awareness of the people.

Storytelling can also be understood as a mechanism for the transformation of a culture of violence into a culture of peace, through a process of 'conscientization' (Freire, 1970). This occurs when a community "voices" its concerns, and discovers solutions to problems that empower people to break free from a culture of silence. It transforms people from being the object to being the subject of development (Freire, 1970), which enables them to become active citizens. Accordingly, the practice of peace storytelling may be utilized as a technique for eliciting transformative action and envisioning peaceful futures. It can be through the vehicle of storytelling that the value of a dialogical process is realized. The process rests on a basis beyond oral exchange when stories are used as a form of truth-telling, reflecting peace education; they can help raise problems, identify solutions, and potentially heal traumas (Anjarwati, 2010). Such participatory dialogue represents a powerful catalyst for bringing about reconciliation without judgment of other cultures and religions.

Methodology

The theoretical framework underpinning the study was elicitive conflict transformation (Lederach, 1997) conducted through participatory action research (Cherry, 1999). Storytelling, an important cultural practice for the conflicting parties, was used as a medium of transformative learning.

The study was conducted in collaboration with the Institute of Asian Studies (IAS), Chulalongkorn University, Thailand, and Nong Chik Hospital, Pattani Province, Southern Thailand, in 2009. "I" was in contact and communication with representatives of the Nong-Chik Hospital since 2008, when she began fieldwork in southern Thailand. At the time, the hospital was conducting a collaborative peace-building program involving youth from Yala and Pattani Provinces, whose fathers had been killed

as a result of the ongoing conflict. One of the programs held in the hospital was based on participants sharing legend stories from their communities; however, this folklore had already been taken up for the purposes of the conflict and so acted to reinforce the culture of violence for participants. In my role as a peace researcher, "I" proposed an alternative, participative dialogue program to the hospital representatives, which they approved. "I" then acted as the facilitator, using peace-storytelling as a medium for transformative learning of peace education. The purpose of this program was to promote intercultural dialogue and raise awareness of 'the other.' "I" worked with young people of both genders, from both the Thai Buddhist and Malay Muslim communities, and conducted a series of three storytelling sessions, over a six month period.

Prior to the beginning of the storytelling activity, "I" started with a drawing session to let the participants use the power of imagination for projecting positive images of peace in their society taken from their interpretations of peace. It is argued that the subjects of the visual and other arts forms can stimulate a whole range of emotions and perceptions of people about peace, which are clearly important for conflict transformation and peace building (Galtung, 2008) ii.

Arts and storytelling activities were conducted by the main author at Nong-Chik hospital in Pattani province, southern Thailand; six young people, between ages of 7-12 years old participated in the study. Children in this age range were selected to participate as this phase in their development is critical in the shaping of identity and perceptions of 'the other.' Three forms of data collection were undertaken; firstly, field notes made by me while "I" acted as a facilitator during the storytelling sessions and documented the events; secondly, the outcomes of a semi-structured in-depth group interview that was audio-recorded, and thirdly, the results of a focus group session. Data were collected during interviews with the participants in order to investigate their perceptions of changes within themselves which occurred during the process, as well as how that process helped them change their understandings of 'the other.'

Findings and Discussion: Peace Education Through Storytelling in Southern Thailand

A young Malay-Muslim girl shared her story that focused on her social and political experiences during the conflict. Through her story, she 'voiced'

the reality of her experience living in a conflict zone and as a victim of intra-state ethno-religious conflict. Her narrative and responses present compelling reasons for, and benefits of, peace storytelling.

The storyteller's father had been associated with militants killed by State forces in the Krue Se Mosque incident in 2004. While this Malay Muslim girl shared negative inner feelings, the Thai-Buddhist children undertook active listening of her narrative truth as a means for the transforma-



The art session was taken on January 23rd, 2010 at Nong Chik Hospital of Pattani Province and was attended by seven participants of the Malay-Muslim children who were 8 to 12 years old.

The result of this process was that members had a deeper understanding and respect for the other - they became more empathetic, caring and less consumed by their own pain and suffering from their traumatic experiences.

Picture was taken on January 23rd, 2010 by the researcher.

tive learning that encouraged an intercultural dialogue for mutual understanding. Her testimony provides an example of how peace storytelling works within the traditional culture of both communities.

The storyteller's father was one of a large group of Malay Muslim men who had been accused of terrorism. Unlike many others, her father was not killed in the Mosque incident, but his activi-



ties after that were always watched by the military until he was eventually shot at home, in front of his family, including his daughter, in 2008.

After telling that story and sharing her grief, she also expressed feelings of guilt and depression because she felt she had done nothing to protect her father's life. Nevertheless, she made the following statement during a research session:

"I want to help people because after the humanitarian disaster in 2004, about 2000 people died. Presently, I want to help the women and children who have the same horrible experiences as I do. As a young person, I truly want to learn about the cultural differences between us and



She draws her dream to see both the Thai-Buddhists and the Malay-Muslim communities can go hand in hand in peace with no prejudice from one to another. She said that: "Although we differ in terms of respect and beliefs, we are inseparable because we are Thai people and we were born in the same place, so we would have to be together, to be united as a harmonious community." (Interview with AA was taken on January 23rd, 2010)

All Pictures were taken on January 23rd, 2010 by the researcher.

the Thai-Buddhists. So, I really hope that we can be united again like before, because when everyone is united, hopefully we can find a solution to stop the conflict."

This 12-year-old girl who had witnessed her

father being killed was withdrawn and depressed when she first joined the workshop group for healing facilitated by Nong Chick hospital. She was experiencing worries, regrets and repressed feelings linked to accumulated unfinished business with her father when she was unable to protect him.

During the focus group, this young participant discussed the different components of that healing process. She explained how liberated she felt when working with art combined with storytelling, and that art enabled her to focus on healing her negative feelings, such as anger, guilt and disappointment. She stated:

"To me, it was such a new experience and it was hard but helped me forget about my problems. When I was drawing the picture, it helped me create some distance between my physical and emotional aspects. Then the relief came from the fact that I had to work through the pain and express it to feel more alive."

The narrative truth practice helped her through the complex process of remembering and forgetting. It was a very confronting process for her, but she was able to finish her storytelling session and she said that after the suffering and sorrow, she felt good.

"Peace and tranquility is produced by the purity of our mind. Every human being has love, unity, charity and understanding for each other. Human(s) live together though diverse nationality, religion, country or various language backgrounds, so they should appreciate each other's differences to live in harmony, in happiness and in a peaceful way. This picture as you can see is my hope for peace in my land. When people have love for and understand each other, then the feelings of prejudice, jealousy and hatred will never exist anymore in our society."

Drawing allowed this child, who had witnessed such traumatic violence, to move beyond her negative feelings and the transformative process produced positive results: she reported feeling more alive, hopeful, encouraged, and tougher. She spoke of having moved away from feeling pity for herself.

"My story tells that I am a victim of the ongoing conflict in my own land, but a victim not being sorry for myself. I am a victim who is now fighting for my rights and I will never give up! I can see my bright future after all of this; my anger, my frustration and the feeling of my regret (sic). I want to forget it because I feel proud of myself now. I feel more confident since I was able to express my negative inner feelings in a right way and I feel transformed to become a better human."



The storytelling experience helped this participant to recognize the reality of what had happened and to let go of her negative feelings of guilt. The activities proved to be a powerful way of helping her to cope with violent loss. In the workshop, when a group member related an experience, almost everyone present felt it as well. As a result, the storytellers experienced acceptance, understanding, and support, which transformed the experience they carried into the future.

Reflection and Concluding Thoughts

The prolonged conflict between Thai Buddhists and Malay Muslims in southern Thailand has been maintained, in large part, by the stereotypes of 'the other,' drawn from the religious and cultural perspectives of both groups, as well as the limited knowledge of 'the other' held by the communities. Such stereotyping and prejudice are two critical elements that contribute to the intractability of the situation and block its transformation. Religious and cultural identities are fundamentally and inextricably entwined in the Thai conflict.

Interestingly, Adler (1982) has suggested that identity does not belong to a single culture, but rather to a multicultural society, which necessitates social awareness about 'the other.' In this perspective, the identity begins to lose its distinctiveness and rigidity and the emergent identity shows an increasing 'inter-culturalness' in terms of interaction and communication across cultures.

The power of storytelling in terms of peace education and conflict transformation therefore lies with the active listening on the part of the other participants. The understanding of both communities initiated by their young people may open a window for individuals and groups to restore interpersonal and inter-communal relationships that have been damaged due to conflict, as well as for future reconciliation. Another important and quite unique dimension of doing this transformative activity was the collective dynamic that developed between the young people. The participants supported each other during the focus group and art workshop; they suggested that this bonding gave them hope and courage to fight for their rights and to stand up for their dignity. In the longer term, activities like the one described may also assist victims and communities to understand the root causes of conflict in new ways, and to develop new strategies for living together in harmony in a more peaceful environment.

My observations about the use of storytelling as a form of critical peace education in southern Thailand suggest that the process can reconnect the individual

and community which have been separated by dimensions of violence, allowing the process of forgiveness and reconciliation to unfold overtime. The skill of active listening is fundamental to this process, because it enables the audience to hear not only the words of the narrator's story and his or her 'truth,' but also to feel the pain necessary for self-transformation. The intercultural dialogue provided by storytelling can give individuals and communities a sense of hope beyond the violence they have just experienced. Such a participative dialogue and reflection process constitute a transformative learning component of peace education allowing 'the other' to listen deeply and show respect, as well as to increase feelings of empathy and solidarity.

I would argue that the practice of peace education through storytelling can create a 'space' for reflective dialogue in which inter-personal relationships can be restored, and social coexistence promoted. Through the use of storytelling, participants can be given an opportunity to share their lived experiences, affirm each other, and internalize new possibilities to create a culture of peace. The creation of a 'safe' space therefore, not only in a physical but, more importantly, in an emotional sense, is vital for conflict transformation to occur. The activity also allows the young people involved to be, simultaneously, both participant and observer enabling them to watch, reflect and evaluate the experience as they undergo self-transformation and empowerment. Through this narrative and dialogical truth, young people feel that they can bridge the issue of ethnocentrism and feel connected to 'the other' as valued human beings and recognize them as contributing members of society. If this occurs, through the process of unity and togetherness shaped by mutual understanding as practiced in dialogical storytelling, then the resulting empathy can rest on an authentic foundation to respect diversity in contemporary multicultural society in southern Thailand.

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Endnotes

Burns and Aspeslagh define structural violence as "where a group of people are systematically prevented from meeting their basic needs and/or developing their full potential or more explicitly as social injustice."

BURNS, R. J. & ASPESLAGH, R. 1996. *Peace Education and the Comparative Study of Education, Three Decades of Peace Education Around the World: An Anthology*., New York and London, Garland Publishing, Inc.

Moreover, Galtung defines cultural violence as "any aspect of culture such as language, religion, ideology, arts, or cosmology that is used to legitimize direct or structural violence."
GALTUNG, J. 1996b. *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization*, London, Sage Publications.

A Culture of Peace defined by the United Nations in 1998 as a set of values, attitudes, modes of behavior, and way of life that reject violence and prevent further conflict by tackling the root causes of violence, solving problems through dialogue and promoting negotiation amongst individuals and groups.
A/RES/52/13, U. N. R. 1998. *Culture of Peace*. Paris: UNESCO.