

AFRICAN CONVERSATIONS

“In the end our purpose is social and communal harmony and wellbeing. Ubuntu does not say ‘I think therefore I am.’ It says rather ‘I am human because I belong. I participate. I share.’”

– Desmond Tutu

In embarking on this research, we were acutely aware that it is in some ways absurd to import dialogue methods from the West into Africa, where conversation is so deeply engrained in the indigenous culture. Given that Africa is the “cradle of humankind”, this may well be the place where people first sat down in circle to communicate. Before we move into looking at more recent dialogue methods, we therefore wanted to explore and recognise this tradition.

We started our inquiry into African dialogue intending to clarify and rectify the meaning of terms such as “lekgotla”, “imbizo”, and “indaba”. These words which signify traditional African gatherings have today become popularised, and some would say co-opted, in South Africa as a label for myriad conferences and workshops. The intention with using these labels so broadly may be to somehow honour Africa, but what gets overlooked is that these words have meanings that are very different from a modern conference complete with panel discussions, event management companies, and hotel buffets. We naively thought that we would be able to define these indigenous approaches to clarify the difference, and include them in our “tools”.

It’s important to emphasise that what became apparent to us quickly is that this exploration is a universe beyond the scope of this initial report. Firstly, it is impossible to characterise African processes sweepingly because Africa is a continent with 2000 tribal groupings each with their own particularities in terms of governance, decision-making, and community life. Secondly, the meeting forms are inseparable from the wider culture in which they are used. Thirdly, if we really want to engage with these processes in their entirety, they challenge fundamental assumptions and preconceptions about our world.

Still, we feel it is relevant for us to attempt to document briefly here what we have learned to date. This section is inspired by two interviews with Dr. Magomme Masoga and Nomvula Dlamini, as well as our own experience and a few readings. It should be read as a general description and is not intended to be cited as factual evidence that has been thoroughly researched.

Living Conversations

With the above-mentioned caveats about the diversity of Africa, the easiest approach to this section seems yet to be to try to imagine a “typical” traditional African village. In this village, conversation is constantly alive as an ongoing process from the family level to the communal level. Women are meeting by the river during the day, young men and boys talk while herding cows, families gather around the fire. Conversations weave together. Through oral history, story-telling, and proverbs, the principles and rules for the community are shared and alive.

These ongoing conversations are not goal-oriented, but rather a way of life. The men of the village do gather in specifically convened meetings (lekgotlas or imbizos) as necessary, where they come to an overview of what is going on in the village and take decisions. But this is only a small part of the village conversation. The women, youth and families converse outside and influence the conversation that takes place at the lekgotla.

When conversations happen, it is always with an engrained awareness that these are not just individuals communicating. Each person is connected to a family, a community, and a group of ancestors. They represent a larger whole. They do not just speak for themselves and interact on their own behalf.

Communication is not only direct and verbal. Art, drama, drumming, and song are used as ways to communicate, especially about things that may be difficult to confront. Women in particular may compose a new song to communicate what is going on for them. The community is in some ways even architecturally designed for conversation and meeting. The houses are circular, the fireplace is circular, the houses in relation to each other make up a circle. The conversation is embedded in the physical space.

The Lekgotla

The Lekgotla process of Botswana is likely to be the most well-documented African council process of Southern Africa. It is often criticised these days because it has to be convened by the Chief and only includes the men of the village, but many argue that there are other ways for the women and youth to get their issues across to the Lekgotla. (In Venda culture, apparently the final decisions must still pass by the matriarch of the village.) For our purposes, we feel it is useful to draw lessons from this process even for dialogues across genders, though it may be inappropriate to label such dialogues “Lekgotla”.

In the village, the decision to convene the Lekgotla is not necessarily transparent. The chief's councillors play a role of listening in the community and paying attention to issues as they arise. When something is building up they bring it to the Lekgotla to make sure that conversation happens as early as possible before a conflict escalates.

A Lekgotla is always held in the open air, because the outdoors belongs to no one. This provides a sense of freedom, openness and invitation to people to attend and speak honestly. There is also no time limit on the process. It may go on for days or even weeks until the issues being addressed have reached resolution. According to Nomvula Dlamini, *“People's lives unfolded into time. Time wasn't imposed on people's lives.”* This is a whole different conception of time to that of the modern world, and it is a fundamental frame of mind. Nomvula points out that this freedom from time restrictions enables participants to suspend judgment and be willing to listen to someone's point of view and story *in context* without rushing them.

The Lekgotla meets in a circle. The circle represents unity, and the participants are aware that it is only if they are whole and united that they can address their problems. The circle also ensures that they face each other and speak honestly to one another. As they gather, they greet each person around the circle. They make sure that those who really matter to the process are present. Though they may be seated by rank and speak in order of a hierarchy, the emphasis is on every voice being heard equally.

The conversation is opened up. Each person in turn talks about how the issue affects their lives directly. Nothing is seen as an isolated event. All the stories are heard in context, respectfully, and taking the time it needs to take. The different orientation to time allows for a deeper quality of listening, and every voice is listened to and given equal weight. The same person won't speak twice or respond until they've heard the views of others. Silence is also an integral part of the conversation as in between each voice the words are allowed to sink in. Emotion is expressed freely but constructively. The process enables each participant to reflect on and assess his own behaviour in relation to the community.

The Lekgotla is partly a court, passing judgment on conflicts, but can also be a more general gathering for conversations around the main issues facing the village. When resolving injustices, the focus is less on determining right and wrong or on punishment, and more on healing, restoration of relationships, and finding ways of moving on. The accused is always heard, first in the process of clarifying what happened, but he is also given a chance to assess at the end whether he thinks the group's decision is fair and whether the rehabilitation and restoration he is being requested to undertake is within his means. He is never silenced.

The group takes collective responsibility for the issues. The solutions are explored meaningfully together, rather than imposed from one side, and the orientation is towards consensus and compromise. The community's collective need is at the center, above any individual's needs, and the concern is always what is best for the community. To the Western mind, this may sound oppressive, but in this culture it is not seen as sacrifice, because what is good for the collective is completely intertwined with what is good for the individual. The concept of freedom is that you should have the maximum degree of freedom as long as it is not at the expense of the freedom of others.

Through the community's ongoing conversation there is a level of shared clarity around the principles and sense of right and wrong. These principles are then applied through the deliberation at the Lekgotla to determine what should be done in the particular context. There is no law outlining the standard punishment or regulations for each situation.

Drawing Lessons

Some of the deeply held worldviews behind the integral nature of conversation in a traditional African community may seem incompatible with modern life. The idea that we are not first and foremost individuals but members of a community, and that we don't need to be slaves to the clock are difficult to practice in their entirety. But exploring African culture can challenge our mindsets and it's certainly possible to draw inspiration and to see how the nature of our conversations changes if we try to shift our worldview.

Many of the tools and processes in this collection have taken part of their inspiration from similar underlying views and cultural practices as those we know from the traditional African village described above. Some have found their inspiration directly from the soil of Africa, others from Native American traditions that share similar beliefs. Many of them share a return to circular time, to the people and the purpose for coming together being more important than timing and structure. Most of them make use of the circle as a way of coming together in an unbroken whole.

Many of the processes also recognise and work explicitly with story telling as a way of sharing inspired knowledge and building on memories of the best of what is and was. Dialogue is in many ways about creating a culture of coming together as a whole – letting each voice be heard, but in service of the community and the whole. Many of the methods that we are presenting seem to be coming back to much of what we already know from our own culture and history in Africa. And so while at first it may look inappropriate to be bringing in western methods to a place from which dialogue and conversation may have originated, there is something affirming in the way many of these methods are coming back to some of our very own roots.

One of the most important lessons is to appreciate the value of African rural culture, rather than seeing it as backward and in need of development. There is life and community available to us here, and these are among the most essential components of any meaningful and lasting positive change. Those of us who come from here, and who might even have grown up in a traditional rural setting, would do well to allow our memories of being together in community, in conversation – in all their different shapes and forms – to inspire us as we continue on our journey of facilitating groups, communities, organisations, or even nations in coming together in conversation.

As we continue into the description of a variety of dialogue methods, we invite you to hold these two perspectives from the last two sections: the foundations for dialogue, as we have experienced them through our work and experience, and our sense of what the African approach might be. We hope you will let both of these challenge you as you imagine what is possible in bringing people together in bold and possibly unusual ways for meaningful dialogue and discovery.