

Blood ritual: An indigenous approach to peacemaking among the Bimoba people of northern Ghana

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Abstract

This study examined blood ritual as an indigenous peacemaking strategy among the Bimoba people of northern Ghana. Descriptive qualitative research methods were used together with in-depth face-to-face interviews with eight elders of the community. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically analyzed with NVivo 12 software. The findings reveal that the blood ritual approach is participatory, focuses on re-establishing relationships and emanates from the culture of the Bimoba people. It also involves the use of rituals and seeks the interest of the entire Bimoba community. The study concludes that the strategy shares commonalities with several indigenous peacemaking approaches in Africa and has the potential of facilitating sustainable resolutions of communal conflicts such as the Bimoba chieftaincy conflict. However, similar to other approaches, the blood ritual does not ensure gender equality in peacebuilding as the role of women is reduced to simply being observers. A major limitation of this study is its reliance on only the perspectives of the elders of the community without recourse to the voices of people who appear before the ritual processes, to appreciate how they feel about the blood ritual with respect to their hope and expectation when they appear before the process for solace and solution. Also, the voice of young

people, women and other vulnerable groups are not reflected in the blood ritual approach.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The scarcity of resources and the drive for political power have made conflict inevitable in every human society. For this discussion, conflict is defined as a “struggle over values and claims to status, power, and resources in which the opponents aim to neutralise, injure or eliminate their rivals” (Coser, 1998, p. 8). Since conflict is inevitable, diverse ethnic groups, societies, and communities all over the world and especially in Africa, have developed unique cultural-sensitive approaches to the resolution of conflicts (Brigg & Walker, 2016). Some of these approaches include the *Mato Oput* of Uganda, *Gacaca* of Rwanda, *Ubuntu* among the indigenous communities of Southern Africa, *Kanye ndu bowi* among the Buem of Ghana and Togo among others (Zartman, 2000). These mechanisms are based on the cultural values, customs and belief systems of such societies (Kemp & Fry, 2004; Walker, 2019) and are described as indigenous ways of peacemaking (Benjamin & Lundy, 2014).

The concept of indigenous peacemaking is given different interpretations depending on the context. For this discussion, indigenous peacemaking approaches are conflict resolution strategies that emanate, are defined, guided and shaped by the cultural values and norms of society (Benjamin & Lundy, 2014). In some of the literature, indigenous conflict resolution means approaches to dealing with conflicts by non-western jurisdictions or societies (Olowu, 2018). This definition thus suggests that any conflict resolution mechanism that is not from western societies is indigenous. Such a view leads to the neglect of indigenous societies that are found for instance in North America. It is in line with this view that the former definition is more apt for this discussion as it limits indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms to the cultural values and norms of society in general.

In the past few decades, there has been an increased interest in the discussion and application of indigenous peacemaking approaches in the resolution of conflicts. The United Nations for instance calls for the application of conflict resolution approaches that are culture sensitive (United Nations, 2004) while the slogan of the African Union on homegrown solutions gives credence to the high-level recognition of indigenous peacemaking approaches in peacebuilding. In addition, enormous scholarly research has emerged on indigenous peacemaking approaches with the objective of understanding their philosophies and applications (Tuso, 2016). A comparison of the findings of some of these studies suggests that despite the non-monolithic nature of these indigenous mechanisms, they do share some commonalities. For these societies, peacebuilding is about restoring harmony and building relationships. Likewise, these approaches are rooted in the cultural values and norms of society.

Notwithstanding the recognition of indigenous peacemaking approaches to peacebuilding, there remains a huge deficit in the understanding and application of indigenous processes within liberal democratic contexts. The lack of comprehensive research to profile the various forms of indigenous peacemaking processes across the 5000 or so ethnic groups of the world is partly to be blamed for this situation (Tuso, 2016). The desire then to project indigenous peacemaking approaches within modern spaces requires further research to unearth the philosophies and application of these approaches to peacebuilding (Tuso & Flaherty, 2016).

The focus of the present paper is on indigenous peacemaking processes among the Bimoba people of northern Ghana and is aimed at contributing to the general call by Tuso and Flaherty (2016). The Bimoba ethnic group speaks the Moba language, which belongs to the Mabia (previously Gur) group of languages which are spoken in most of northern Ghana. Major areas where the Bimoba live are in the mountainous escarpments of the north in areas such as Bunkpurugu, Yunyoo and Nakpanduri and in the adjoining areas below the escarpment around Garu in small towns such as Woriyanga and Denugu.

The paper takes a critical look at a blood burial, which is used as a peacemaking strategy among the Bimoba in the resolution of communal conflicts including chieftaincy, land and interpersonal conflicts. While the overarching aim of the paper is to provide a detailed description of this indigenous peacemaking architecture—the processes, objectives, and, principles—among the people, the consequence will be the generation of a body of knowledge that creates awareness and enlightens the debate on indigenous peacemaking models. This will complement previous studies on indigenous processes of peacemaking in Ghana so as to facilitate the development of a national indigenous strategy to peacemaking.

2 | THE THEORETICAL FRAME OF REFERENCE

Indigenous peacemaking mechanisms are becoming an established area of research in peace and conflict studies and as such many scholars and institutions recognize the capacities of indigenous peacemaking approaches to contributing to sustainable peace and conflict transformation, especially in the Global South (Genger, 2020a; United Nations, 2004). In this regard, there is a clarion call for peacemaking to reflect the cultural values, resources, technologies, traditions and practices of the context (Brettle, 2012; Kemp & Fry, 2004; Mac Ginty, 2011; Tuso & Flaherty, 2016).

In view of the fact that there are many and different indigenous peacemaking approaches across the varying cultures of the world, one has to be careful not to over-generalize such indigenous peacemaking approaches (Mac Ginty, 2010b) irrespective of apparently shared features. More precisely, indigenous approaches are based on cultural resources that are relevant to the cultural context and which apply to the peacemaking processes (LeBaron & Pillay, 2006; Walker, 2019). Indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms among the Alefa people of Ethiopia, for instance, are developed based on the cultural concepts, values and principles that are easily understood and accepted by the community (Alemie & Mandefro, 2018). What is more, the selection of a mediator is based on the virtue of the position occupied by the individual while the outcome rests on the moral authority of the respected community figure and elders and judgments are adhered to by the parties and the entire community (Rioux & Redekop, 2013; Tuso, 2016). Among the people of Nepal, the process of indigenous peacemaking is led by locally trusted elderly people who hold social status and authority (Alemie & Mandefro, 2018) while the *Mato Oput* peacemaking approach among the Acholi people of Uganda gives prominence to building relationships, social harmony, and reconciliation (Genger, 2020b).

Culling from the foregoing, therefore, one can surmise that the aim of indigenous peacemaking is tailored toward restoring broken relationships, reconciliation and social harmony in the group (Huysse, 2008b; Ingelaere, 2008; Latigo, 2008; Murithi, 2006; Walker, 2004). Moreover, the major methods used in indigenous mediation include rituals, stories, prayers, and ceremonies that educate participants on how to proceed in harmony (Brigg & Walker, 2016; Mac Ginty, 2011; Rioux & Redekop, 2013). Rituals in indigenous peacemaking processes frame

behavior, raise the level of certainty of an action and lead to what is socially more acceptable (Faure, 2000; Gellman & Vuinovich, 2008). The Haudenosaunee diplomacy among many indigenous groups of North America makes use of rituals to establish obligation among participants (Walker, 2019).

Furthermore, stories involving traditional wisdom, metaphors, myths, folktales and memory are told to re-enact a long-term relationship that existed between the parties to the conflict and also to create the opportunity for the parties to develop a positive attitude toward each other. Besides, the use of storytelling allows the parties in the conflict to properly express their grievances as in the case of many indigenous peacemaking approaches in East-Timor (Close, 2017; Deng, 2000; Mac Ginty, 2010a).

In terms of its strengths, indigenous peacemaking processes are context-specific and as such the community members are familiar with the usage and application of these approaches. As a result, outcomes from indigenous peacemaking approaches are more likely to be accepted by the entire community and the parties engaged in the conflict. For instance, *Tarabandu*, the indigenous peacemaking approach among the people of East-Timor is conducted within the cultural precepts of the people (Close, 2017; Huyse, 2008a; Murithi, 2008).

Also important is the fact that indigenous peacemaking processes are conducted in the open and therefore are inclusive and participatory such that resolutions that are arrived at are consensually accepted by all parties. This allows for community members to observe and understand the processes which engenders transparency in the processes (Murithi, 2006). This strategy is exemplified in the Cherokee talking circle, which is conducted in an open space where different people are allowed to participate and observe. As such, the verdict that is finally passed by the elders is accepted by all parties (Walker, 2019).

Moreover, there is ownership in indigenous peacemaking processes following from the fact that these processes are based on cultural assumptions, norms, and values of the societies in which they are practiced. As a community-based approach, it enhances local ownership of the peacemaking processes and promotes accountability and the healing processes of the community (Olowu, 2018). The process of indigenous peacemaking among the Alefa people of North West Ethiopia creates the space for high-level involvement and participation of people in the decision making process. Through these processes, there is increased satisfaction and ownership of the outcomes of the decisions made (Alemie & Mandefro, 2018).

Nonetheless, scrutiny must be brought to bear in the advocacy for the application of indigenous peacemaking approaches. Most indigenous peacemaking approaches are practiced in societies that are patriarchal and exclusive to males and therefore cannot be assumed to be representative of the entire society and always having legitimate outcomes (Fred-Mensah, 2000; Gohar, 2019; Huyse, 2008a). Equally important is the fact that because indigenous peacemaking approaches are context-specific and best suited only for the resolution of conflict between people living in the same community who share the same culture, this limits its sphere of applicability and transferability (Alemie & Mandefro, 2018; Boege, 2011).

In addition, elders, chiefs, and kingmakers have often relied on these indigenous structures to legitimize their interests and to promote violence (Mac Ginty, 2008). This phenomenon is more prominent in situations where traditional systems have become part of modern political structures which creates perfect conditions for corruption and nepotism (Genger, 2020a; Osaghae, 2000). In concluding, however, a major caveat is to avoid over-romanticizing indigenous peacemaking approaches owing to the fact that such approaches often tend to become the spaces for discrimination against women and other marginalized groups in society (Mac Ginty, 2008).

3 | CONTEXT: CONFLICT AMONG THE BIMOBA

The Bimoba ethnic group, much like any other human social organization, is not immune from internal conflicts within themselves or external conflicts with their neighbors. An example of external conflicts with their neighbors is the conflict of 1984 against the Konkomba people when they battled each other over large tracts of land. Equally common are internal conflicts between individuals over parcels of land, animals or other property; between families over land and between royal clans or families over succession rights to the office of chieftaincy.

Following from the broad nature of conflict types, the present study will focus on internal conflicts among the Bimoba and how these are resolved using indigenous approaches. Intra-conflicts among the Bimoba can be traced to two major factors: the quest for political power and land control. The institution of chieftaincy is the embodiment of the political and spiritual realms of the Bimoba people with the chief as the central locus in the community. Chiefs oversee the settlement of disputes between people and families in consultation with their elders. Although there is usually a spiritual leader, the chief also leads in most spiritual events of the Bimoba people and wields a lot of power and authority in the community.

Underpinning most chieftaincy disputes is the quest for supremacy between contending parties or royal gates (Mahama & Longi, 2013). This factor explains virtually all the chieftaincy conflicts in Ghana (Kendie et al., 2014) and as such, the processes leading to the selection and enskinment of a chief are competitive and sometimes volatile. Moreover, the non-availability of documented procedures for the selection of chiefs and the rightful occupancy of skins has opened the selection procedures to manipulation by the elite. For instance, the chieftaincy dispute between the Jamong and Jafuck families has persisted because of the non-availability of documented procedures for the selection and enskinment of chiefs.

Moreover, skirmishes over the control, access to and ownership of land also account for conflicts among the Bimoba as well as between them and their neighbors. The main economic activity of the Bimoba is farming which is dependent on the availability of and access to land. Land defines the identity of the people and is the source of security not only for present generations but as well as for future generations of families. Land is owned by families and is held in custody by the family head. In this regard, people, families, clans and communities protect their land with all the resources they have.

A major factor that militates against land ownership among the people, however, is documentation. As a result of this gap, ownership is usually based on oral accounts while land boundaries are determined by natural landmarks such as trees, riverbanks, stones and rocks. The non-documentation of land titles and rights culminates in contestations between individuals, families, and clans over land ownership resulting in conflict. The overreliance on oral histories and small trees and crops to indicate the boundaries and ownership of land has been a source of conflict among the Bimoba (Meij et al., 2007).

The two factors—contestations over chieftaincy titles and ownership of land—as major sources of conflict among the Bimoba people are found to be present in most of the conflicts in northern Ghana. This has largely been attributed to the non-existence of formal documentation on succession procedures in the selection of chiefs as well as the ownership of land. In view of the foregoing, are indigenous processes of peacemaking relevant? What lessons can be derived from indigenous peacemaking processes? These questions define the interest of this paper.

4 | METHODOLOGY

To address the research questions, the study adopted a qualitative research approach. The way of life of a community based on its material, social, and spiritual dimensions is difficult to measure and can only be fully understood and appreciated when expressed and explained in words (Flick, 2009) and couched within the framework of qualitative research.

To achieve the objective of the paper, the interpretive constructivist paradigm was selected with a case study as the specific research method. The approach—blood ritual—represents a unique case of indigenous peacemaking that has been applied to resolve a well-known conflict in Ghana. The present study seeks to explore the unique features of this approach with the goal, not to approve or disapprove of any theory, but rather to generate information that can help explain the blood ritual (phenomenon) as an indigenous peacemaking strategy that is grounded in culture and traditional practice (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The study relies on both primary and secondary data sources. Data from primary sources was collected through semi-structured interviews, with a semi-structured interview guide as the main instrument for the collection of the data. Participants of the semi-structured interviews comprised eight elders of the community who lead and facilitate the blood ritual processes. The participants were selected on purpose, based on their in-depth knowledge of the history of the Bimoba ethnic group, the culture and traditions of the Bimoba, and their understanding of the blood ritual processes.

The semi-structured interviews were between 70 and 90 min and the issues covered included the blood ritual processes and procedures, the items used and the objectives of the blood ritual. The discussions were recorded on a tape recorder after permission was sought from the respondents. The researchers deployed probing in the course of the interviews to elicit in-depth discussions, bring clarity to some of the issues raised, and generate detailed information.

In addition to the primary data, secondary data was obtained through document analyses. This involved perusing the content of textual documents to identify units that would be relevant to answering the research questions (Guest et al., 2013). The analyzed documents included newspaper articles, court transcripts, and historical archives, which were purposively sampled with a view to reducing information overload as well as selecting only documents that are relevant to the research goals.

Using the NVivo 12 software, the data was analyzed using the inductive-deductive thematic method. The recorded interviews and the notes taken were thus transcribed, edited and proof-read to attain consistency and minimize errors. These transcripts were repeatedly read through to identify and code inductive (from the data) and deductive (from the literature) generated themes, which will form the basis for the interpretation of the data.

Following from the coded themes (objectives, items used, procedures and principles), which were derived from the data and the literature, an analysis was carried out to understand the perspectives of respondents on the blood ritual as an indigenous peacemaking approach. The responses by respondents set the grounds for a holistic discussion of the findings in line with the objective and research questions of the study (Yin, 2014). The relevant interpretations were then generated, and the meanings arising from such interpretations were juxtaposed with the theoretical frames of reference (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The researchers place priority on confidentiality as an ethical issue and consequently, the names of the participants are not used in the presentation of the results. Likewise, consent was obtained from the participants before the commencement of the interviews using a clearly formulated consent form. This was read out to them (and translated into Bimoba in a few cases)

and it sufficed to obtain consent through verbal expression. The researchers also clearly explained the objectives of the study to the participants, together with an explanation of their expected roles and that of the researchers.

A critical challenge to the present study is the issue of over and under-specification on the part of participants. In view of the objective of the research, to provide an in-depth description of the indigenous peacemaking architecture of the Bimoba people, the study must necessarily rely on the narratives of those who practice and have authority on the subject matter; in this case, the elders. In this respect, there is the possibility that the participants either over-embellished or under-specified the narratives so as to keep critical and/or sensitive information within the group. This challenge was skirted, by our best efforts, by using different approaches including meeting the elders individually and in groups.

5 | RESULTS

5.1 | Objectives of the blood ritual

Some participants indicated that the blood burial is an age-long customary rite of the Bimoba which is performed to bring a conflict between two parties to an end and for violence to stop. One participant noted that:

In this community, we know the dangers of conflict. It does not only affect the people involved, but it destroys the entire community and our gods as well. For us, we must bring every conflict to an end before it becomes violent. If we do not do that, there will be no peace in the community and our gods will not be happy with us. We use the blood rituals to prevent the occurrence of violence in the community.

Following from the above, we note that the objective of the blood ritual is to prevent conflict and avoid violence and is the responsibility of the elders. In addition to this key function, some participants opined that ensuring balance and harmony within the society is one of the objectives of the blood ritual ceremony. According to an elder:

In our community, we are brothers and sisters, and we are not to engage in any form of activity that will destroy our relationship. But you know that, as human beings, we will step on each other's toes. When that happens, we have to bring the people together and help them to forget what happened and build a relationship. When we fight, we also offend our ancestors. So the blood burial is to restore relationships and harmony not only between the individuals but also between the community and the ancestors.

Gathering from this narrative, the priority of the blood ritual ceremony is to restore relationships and harmony in the community. Reconciliation and healing are established not only among the parties but also between the community and the ancestors.

Equally important as observed by other participants is the fact that when conflict occurs, sin is brought to the community and where deaths occur, the spirit of the dead will continue to haunt the community until the necessary steps are taken to cleanse the sins and drive these bad spirits away.

The blood ritual is done to drive away the sins that have engulfed the parties involved in the conflict; send away the ghosts of those who died as a result of the conflict from haunting the living; to help the souls of the dead to reach their maker; to purify the land from evil intents and to serve as a vow for leaders and members of the feuding parties never again to ignite the conflict; the consequence of which is to bear the death that will be inflicted upon them by the gods and ancestors.

This narrative illustrates the role of spirituality in conflict resolution and reveals the wider perspective that societies such as the Bimoba have about conflict including the unwanted repercussions of sin to the community and painful death. Accordingly, the Bimoba recognize the need to drive away sin and the spirits of the dead, otherwise, the community will be haunted.

5.2 | Items used for the ceremony

Participants divulged that the blood ritual follows a prescribed procedure and is carried out with specific items. According to an elder, each item that is used in the ceremony has a precise purpose in the ritual processes and includes, on the one hand, a black chick, a freshly laid egg which is buried, a red cock and a white fowl. Their significance in the processes include:

1. The black chick wards off evil from the land resulting from bloodshed and dispenses forgiveness to feuding parties;
2. The buried freshly laid egg seals off all evil intentions and hasty mouths;
3. The red cock drives away and leads the ghosts and souls of the dead from earth to the land of the dead or back to their maker while
4. The white fowl brings peace, unity, cooperation, reconciliation and co-existence for growth into the future.

In addition to these, another participant expressed similar views on other items that are used for the ceremony. He intimates:

My brother, the blood ritual is not just a ceremony. So, the items that we use are carefully selected to help us achieve the objective that we want to achieve with the blood ritual ceremony. To this extent, we also make use of the following items in the ceremony:

1. A mixed feathered fowl to take care of varied problematic issues that may occur;
2. A dog to guard the souls of the dead against the attack of evil spirits and to accompany them to the land of the dead;
3. A goat for the dead to pay off their debts of sin while on earth and to pave the way on their journey to the land of the dead or their maker;
4. A firearm, bow and arrow, knife or cutlass which is broken into pieces and dropped into the blood burial pit to signify the laying down of arms and the end of the fight;
5. Water or alcoholic drink (pito or schnapps) which is given to the ancestors and gods inviting them as witnesses to the event and appealing to them to help ward off evil, to bring peace and unity and to accept the souls of the dead. This drink is poured into the pit amid incantations of oaths or vows never to begin the fight again;

6. Finally, a black bull or cow if it can be afforded is killed, the blood of which is spilled into the pit to ward off evil and bring forgiveness and reconciliation while the meat is used in merrymaking.

For these narratives, the blood ritual as a peacemaking approach among the Bimoba people deals with all spheres of peacemaking, and as such, the items that are used during the ceremony are carefully selected to enhance the process and achieve the objectives.

On the provision of the items for the ceremony, a participant stated that persons responsible for providing the items for the ceremony are dependent on the scale of the conflict.

I must say that from what we inherited from our ancestors; it is always the responsibility of the parties involved in the conflict that provide the items. So, if the conflict is between individuals, the individuals or families provide the items. If it is between clans over chieftaincy disputes, the clans provide the items. In situations where the parties cannot provide the items, the community will take up that responsibility, because we consider the conflict as a community conflict. However, over the years, we have seen organizations and institutions come in to support the processes.

It is clear from this narrative that, while it is the responsibility of the parties in the conflict to provide the items for the performance of the ceremony, there are situations where the community and other institutions and organizations come in to support the parties by providing the items for the ceremony.

5.3 | Procedure and principles

Some participants underscored the fact that the blood ritual ceremony has established procedures and principles that must be observed when it is being performed. As regards the individual who presides over the ceremony, a participant indicated that it is the Nayiri, Overlord of the Mamprugu Kingdom, in whose stead, the head of the clan would take up the responsibility:

When it comes to conflicts that concern chieftaincy, the Nayiri, the Overlord of the Mamprugu Kingdom presides over the ceremony. When the conflict is between individuals or between families, the head of the clan presides over the ceremony. Sometimes, family heads also preside over the ceremony. So, the type of conflict that we want to resolve will determine the person who presides over the ceremony.

Different layers of authority preside over the ceremony, which is determined by the type of conflict at stake. Of great significance here is the fact that the Nayiri is from the Mamprusi ethnic group, which is different from the Bimoba. It is however understandable that on matters of chieftaincy, he has ultimate authority over the Bimoba jurisdiction and as such, it is convenient for him to preside over any ceremony that borders on chieftaincy.

Moreover, some participants disclosed that the performance of the blood ritual to make peace between people or families is carried out in an open space and everyone in the community is allowed to attend and witness the process and its outcome. An elder noted:

We usually perform the blood ritual at the market square or the chief's palace and it is done in the open for everyone to see. Everyone is allowed to attend; children, women, young people, the spirits, and our ancestors. When we do it in the open, the clouds become a witness to the process, our ancestors can see clearly what has transpired during the process and give their blessing to the outcome.

This narrative suggests that transparency is valued in the blood ritual ceremony. By providing the opportunity for the participation and witnessing of many groups and institutions, transparency is brought to bear in the process with the parties becoming satisfied with and bound to the outcomes.

With regard to the actual performance of the ceremony, some participants indicated that a series of activities are carried out from the beginning until peace is established so that the parties are satisfied with the outcome. A participant had this to say about the ceremony:

We start the ceremony with a prayer to our ancestors requesting their presence to support us and to be witnesses. The one presiding over the ceremony makes a brief opening remark about the ceremony and why the gathering is necessary. The feuding parties select three persons each of whom comes forward with their items to make oaths and vows on behalf of their family members and then narrate their stories. Before the oaths and vows are taken by the representatives of the parties, prayers (libation) are said by the shrine head.

The animals are not slaughtered but are cut into two equal parts and the blood is allowed to drip into a dug hole and then buried with other items such as the cutlasses, firearms, bow and arrow, including the chick and the eggs. It signals that the weapons used for the conflict have been destroyed and all evil intent discarded. The cutting of the animals and fowls into two equal parts during the blood burial ceremony is done by an elder or a chief whose clan does not enjoy chieftaincy. He is known as a Gbanjook. The Gbanjook usually buries any dead chief.

The first part of the ceremony is done to establish witnesses, seek the support of the ancestors, and create the enabling environment for the parties to freely express themselves using stories and the establishment of truth. The process also signals the destruction of the physical and mental weapons of war. The last part of the peacemaking process involves peace speeches that are delivered by the elders and other senior members of the community as well as merrymaking as opined by one participant:

After we have heard the stories of the parties and the animals are cut into two and their blood buried with the weapons that we use for the conflict, the opportunity is created for speeches to be made by the elders, the spiritual leaders, and other opinion leaders of the community. In all the speeches, we try to let the parties know of the relationship that exists between them, the effects of the conflict on the community and environment, and on our relationship with our ancestors.

We also use the speeches to educate the parties and everyone present on the need to focus on sustaining the peaceful and beautiful relationships that the community

has enjoyed over the years. Where there is reparation, we do so but we focus on ensuring that all the parties are satisfied with the outcome.

Likewise, a participant had this to say on the merry-making stage of the peacemaking process.

The meat of all the sacrificed fowls and animals is cooked and all leaders, feuding parties and their family members present do swear the highest ancestral oath and then eat it together. This is followed by drumming, dancing and merry-making which becomes the order of the day, hence, the peace which eluded this particular society has returned.

We gather from the foregoing narratives that the establishment of peace in the community is considered the ultimate responsibility of all community members. Therefore, the speeches that are made represent the voices of all segments of the society, including the ancestors. In addition, the end product of the process is not to blame anyone, instead, the objective is to defeat the common enemy. As such merry-making represents the joy that good has triumphed over evil.

6 | DISCUSSION

The present study was conducted to understand the unique features of the blood ritual approach to peacemaking among the Bimoba of Northern Ghana. The study specifically explored the objectives of the blood ritual approach to peacemaking, including the items used as well as the procedures and principles therein. Drawing from the narratives on the blood ritual architecture, the attention of peace practitioners, trainers and researchers is tuned to several observations or issues that are of relevance to every peacemaking process.

In the first place, the findings of the study suggest that the Bimoba conceptualization of conflict and peace is broad. Conflict within the epistemology of the Bimoba is not just about a disagreement between two parties, be it individuals or families. Rather, conflict is viewed as transcending such boundaries and is interpreted as relating to sin or an offense against the ancestors. Conflictual relationships thus go beyond the parties (the two families) to include the clans, the entire community as well as nature, and the supernatural, embodied in the supreme being the *Yennu* “the God of the Bimoba.”

Therefore, the outbreak of conflict between individuals in the community is an offense against the gods and ancestors of the community. Where lives are lost, the community is considered to have been cursed. The Bimoba worldview of conflict is thus encapsulated in the conviction that conflict destroys not only the relationship between the parties involved in the conflict but the entire relationship between the community and the *Yennu*.

Related to the conceptualization of conflict, the Bimoba worldview of peace goes beyond the existence of harmony between the parties to include the gods, ancestors, and the spirit of the deceased. Hence peace for the Bimoba is not just limited to the parties in the conflict. It also entails the building of cordial relationships with the gods, ancestors and spirits of the deceased. This broader understanding of peace by the Bimoba influences their practice of peacemaking in the community.

Peacemaking is practiced from three dimensions. The first dimension is the resolution of the dispute between the parties. The second entails washing away the sins that have been

committed by the parties against the gods and ancestors while the third dimension deals with the spirits of the deceased, that is, sending the ghost of the deceased away; helping the spirits of the deceased to reach the creator and the purification of the land from evil intent. These three dimensions are interrelated and must be achieved at the same time. Undertaking one dimension and leaving the rest means that peace has not been established.

Second, it emerged from the data that the ultimate objective of the blood ritual process focuses on re-establishing and rebuilding damaged relationships as a result of the conflict and reconciliation. The process does not seek to establish any guilt. Instead, it helps the parties to identify points of commonality as they tell their stories which are then used to re-establish and rebuild the broken relationships. This confirms the position of many scholars that the overarching goal of dispute resolution in indigenous communities is not to exact punishment but to repair the damaged relationships (Boege, 2011; Tuso & Flaherty, 2016).

The restoration of relationships is not limited to only the parties engaged in the conflict. The Bimoba view conflict as a destroyer of the complex web of relationships that exists in the community. Such a web of relationships transcends man to include the natural environment, the gods and the ancestors. Consequently, during the blood ritual ceremony, the re-establishment of relationships between the community and the environment, ancestors, and the gods is also given the needed attention. Indigenous people view the world as cosmo-centric, which influences the conflict transformation procedures that indigenous people employ in the resolution of conflicts (Walker, 2004).

Being cognizant of the web of relationships defined in these communities, the blood ritual processes of peacemaking are aimed at restoring relationships that have been broken as a result of the conflict. This is done through the process of reconciliation where the parties admit wrongdoing to each other and are supported to forgive each other, and rituals are performed to ask for forgiveness from the gods and ancestors and to appease the land (environment).

Third, another ethos that emerges from the data is the application of rituals in the ceremony of peacemaking. Rituals constitute an important component of the peacemaking processes among the Bimoba and symbolize the establishment of a connection between the community and the ancestors or gods. Rituals are the channels of communication between the community and the gods and ancestors and they are performed in the ceremony for several reasons.

The rituals are performed to signify the coming together of the parties to live in peace and harmony; to drive away the sins that engulfed the parties involved in the conflict and send away the ghosts of those who died as a result of the conflict from haunting the living; to help the souls of the dead to reach their maker, and purify the land from evil intent. The ritual also signifies the taking of vows by the parties to submit themselves to the ritual process and indicate their willingness to make peace and restore relationships (Faure, 2000; Long & Brecke, 2003; Wanis-St. John, 2013).

Related to the above is the role of the gods and ancestors in the peacemaking processes. The gods and ancestors of the Bimoba people play a significant role in the blood ritual ceremony wherein they serve as witnesses to the processes. In addition to this, the gods and ancestors are the final arbiters of the process and therefore bring legitimacy to the ceremony that is performed. The blessings of the gods and ancestors are therefore required for the success of the process. Likewise, the gods and ancestors are also actors in the peacemaking processes. Conflict is considered an offense against the gods and ancestors and as such in the process of peacemaking, efforts are made to re-establish harmony with the gods and ancestors, and requests are made for the cleansing of the sins of the community. This is one of the unique features of the blood ritual ceremony of the Bimoba people.

Fourth, the blood burial ceremony is based largely on the culture of the Bimoba people. The ceremony is guided by the norms, beliefs and values of the Bimoba, which are entrenched on the values of interconnectedness, relationships, and social harmony and is carried out with the sole purpose of re-establishing these cultural values. Similarly, the process is led by the spiritual head of the Bimoba land, in this case, the Overlord of the Mamprugu Kingdom, the Bunkpurugu Naba or the head of the specific clan. Per Bimoba culture, the chief is the spiritual head of the community and all matters of spirituality are handled by the chief in consultation with the supervisor of the shrine of Bunkpurugu. In addition, the killing of the animals is done by the *Gbanjook* who is an elder of a chief but whose clan does not qualify for chieftaincy. It is the responsibility of the *Gbanjook* to bury any chief that dies. The process is, therefore, context-based and specific (Avruch, 1998; LeBaron & Pillay, 2006; Mac Ginty, 2011).

Fifth, the blood ritual ceremony is participatory, in that it is open to all members of the community including women and children. The participatory nature of the process has dual effects. In the first place, it ensures transparency in the process, therefore, giving legitimacy to whatever is done as well as garnering public support (Murithi, 2008; Olowu, 2018). Secondly, it serves as a learning platform since the ceremony is open to everyone and all members of the community are invited to witness it (Kemp & Fry, 2004). During processes of indigenous peacemaking, an avenue is created for children to internalize the core values, beliefs and expected codes of conduct of the society. The children are taught ways of making peace and are expected to grow up as good citizens of the community having imbibed such values. The blood ritual, therefore, exposes the young ones to the social and cultural mechanisms by which members of the community can contain conflict and maintain conditions of relative peace. It is, therefore, an unconscious learning environment for the young ones (Wanis-St. John, 2013, p. 365).

Sixth, a comparison of the blood ritual approach with other indigenous peacemaking processes such as the Ubuntu, Gacaca, Jirga, Mato Oput, and Sulha reveals some similarities. These include among other things, the fact that there is an interplay of cultural values and norms with the objective of relationship building and community reconciliation. Other similarities besides the foregoing two include the use of rituals and the fact that the mediators are predominantly men who are deemed to have enormous knowledge and wisdom about the culture. As a result, finally, in most of these indigenous approaches, there is no gender equality.

A challenge associated with the approach, however, is the extent to which the blood ritual is recognized and accepted by parties and institutions that do not share the same culture as the Bimoba people. For instance, the application of the blood ritual ceremony in the resolution of chieftaincy conflicts in the community did not achieve the expected results. After going through the blood ritual ceremony, the two actors took the dispute to the Northern Regional House of Chiefs for adjudication. This action raises three important concerns, which form some of the weaknesses of the indigenous peacemaking process. In the first place, it demonstrates that the parties did not fully recognize the process and therefore failed to comply with the outcomes. Second, the process did not fully address the underlying issues of the conflict, which is, the rightful occupant of the skin. Third, the Regional House of Chiefs, which is an external institution, did not recognize the outcome of the blood ritual processes as its legitimacy was and is only limited to the Bimoba community (see Latigo, 2008).

As already intimated, the approach has gender implications for peace processes and peacebuilding. The entire processes of the blood ritual call to question the need to ensure gender equality in peace processes and peacebuilding. Although the approach allows for the participation of all persons in the community including women, such participation is reduced simply to one of observation. The approach, therefore, does not provide the space for the involvement

of women and apparently does not attend to their needs. Issues addressed during the blood ritual do not also consider the crucial factors that affect women in post-conflict societies. These observations are in line with the argument that indigenous peacemaking approaches are sometimes discriminatory against women and other marginalized groups (Mac Ginty, 2008). Consequently, the attainment of gender equality in peace processes and peacebuilding as enshrined in the UNSCR 1350, under indigenous approaches such as the blood ritual, become problematic and difficult to attain.

There are two major limitations to this study. First, our interview participants did not include those who submit themselves before the blood ritual processes for redress, solace and solutions. As such their perspectives on how they feel about the ritual processes and whether it meets their expectations and hopes are not captured in this study. Second, the reliance of the researchers on only the perspectives of the elders of the community on the blood ritual architecture constitutes a major limitation of the study. Limiting our sample to only the elders of the community necessarily excluded a critical section of the community such as young people, women and other vulnerable groups. Given the role played by young people, women, and vulnerable groups in peacebuilding and coupled with the fact that these groups suffer most in times of conflict, incorporating their views and perspectives on the blood ritual approach to peacemaking would have enhanced the discussion. As a result, answers to the following major questions are outstanding: (i) Does the blood ritual processes address the hopes and aspirations of those who appear before it for solace and solution? (ii) Are the perspectives of the elders on the blood ritual architecture shared by these vulnerable groups? and (iii) Do these vulnerable groups consider the blood ritual a significant approach to conflict resolution in the community? These limitations arise from the purview of the present study which sought to precisely ascertain the expediency of the blood ritual architecture from only the nuclear actors and connoisseurs of the approach; the elders. Subsequent studies could consider the role of the critical set of “passive” actors in the entire peacemaking enterprise and whether the blood ritual processes do address their hopes and expectations.

7 | CONCLUSION

This paper sought to answer the question on what the architecture of blood ritual, an indigenous peacemaking strategy among the Bimoba of Northern Ghana was. The narratives of the participants lead us to draw the following answers to the question: First, the blood ritual approach to peacemaking is participatory, focuses on re-establishing relationships, is based on the culture of the Bimoba and involves the use of rituals. Second, the process does not seek the interest of any of the parties in the conflict, but rather that of the Bimoba as a community. Although the blood burial ceremony has impacted positively on the peace that is being enjoyed by the community and is expected to bring finality to the outstanding chieftaincy conflict, the question that remains borders on the extent to which this can be achieved since the dispute is still pending at the Northern Regional House of Chiefs. In general, the output of the research efforts will enhance comparative analyses leading to the identification of similarities and synergies for policymaking, training, and research. Likewise, the variations can serve as a lesson-learning frontier toward the collective drive to improve peacemaking, from both an emic and etic perspective.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this research are referenced in the paper and are privately available from the corresponding author upon request. A special repository has been set up.

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