



# A Personal Journey: Promoting Conflict Intervention Initiatives in Mali, West Africa

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## **Abstract**

This article traces the development of the author's evolving ideas and proposals, developed initially without mediation/conflict intervention training, to establish Conflict Intervention links between Ireland and Mali, West Africa. It tracks the evolution of these ideas from 2004 to 2014, starting with short-lived plans for a novel decommissioning initiative in Ireland, to a proposed major confidence-building International Conference, then to a story-telling intervention, finally to a generic proposal to develop unspecified Track Two and/or Track Three initiatives. The article identifies the main motivation as being to share the experience and expertise gained in Ireland through the Northern Ireland/Ireland/UK conflict and its on-going resolution. It outlines the basis for and aims of the various proposals as they evolved, and briefly describes their culmination in an exploratory visit to Mali with Glencree Centre for Peace and Reconciliation. The article highlights the role Ireland can play in the international conflict resolution arena.

## **Keywords**

Conflict Intervention, initiatives, Mali, West Africa

## **Background**

It was the monument, la Flamme de la Paix, in the fabled city of Timbuktu which started this whole process. Or perhaps it was the sights, sounds and sensory overload of the three previous days' travelling from Mopti and the splendour of the Dogon valley. Or maybe the complex and fascinating Dogon mythology, involving holy men (Hogon) who spend their lives totally isolated in a secret and sacred cave in the face of the Bandiagara escarpment, the cliff where the pygmy tribe, the Tellem, lived from the 11<sup>th</sup> century, or the story of two children of two warring families, whose adventures and lucky escape led to enduring peace between the families.

Whatever the trigger, it was during that first visit to Mali, West Africa, in January 2004 that I started to investigate conflict intervention possibilities between Mali and Ireland. Since then, my ideas regarding options and proposals have been evolving and developing, culminating in an exploratory visit to Mali, in November 2013, with a member of the International Programme of the Glencree

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Centre for Peace and Reconciliation (Glencree). If brought to fruition, this proposal for Track II and/or Track III initiatives, would involve a number of appropriate organisations in these two islands, along with key influential- decision-makers, civil society groups and grass-roots groups in Mali.

During that first visit in 2004, I had no idea where my initial plan would take me and I had no training in Mediation/Conflict intervention. That started in June 2010. What I did have, was an abiding interest in and concern for the situation in Northern Ireland and the protracted conflict over the previous thirty years or more and had followed closely the peace process which had finally brought an end to the violence. It is only in retrospect that I have attached theoretical principles and concepts to this ongoing process. During the decades of the most recent “troubles” in Ireland, I followed the course of the conflict closely, and made efforts in a very small, but direct and individual way, to increase understanding between communities and to influence the evolving Peace Process.

### **Initial Visit to Mali: Festival au Desert, 2004**

Having become interested in the Tuareg people in 1991, I travelled to Mali in January 2004, to attend the “Festival au Desert”, held yearly since 2000, at the dried-up oasis of Essakane, deep in the Sahara Desert, 90 Km outside Timbuktu. I have visited Mali many times since then and have learned much about the history of the Tuareg and of Mali. I have also got to know something of the desert North and the city and region of Timbuktu.

During that first visit in 2004, I experienced the landscape and conditions in Mali as a series of visual and sensory avalanches, which initially nearly overwhelmed me. In subsequent visits, I have seen the same impact on others visiting for the first time. I was also struck by the parallels between Ireland and Mali; the many cultural, social and ethnic riches, including music and dance, ancient seats of learning and a wicked sense of humour, alongside colonisation, famine, protracted armed conflict and, in the mid-late 1990’s, impressive efforts, initially successful, to construct a lasting peace.

### **Flamme de la Paix, Timbuktu**

Learning, in 2004, of the armed conflict which ranged from 1991-1996, and the apparently successful Peace Treaty of 1996, it struck me that we in Ireland and the armed groups, (e.g. the IRA [Irish Republican Army]), could learn a lot from the way the parties in Mali had reached agreement. We could also learn from the way they had achieved decommissioning of weapons, to the extent that, essentially, all the weapons had been destroyed. That was, of course, not the complete reality; I learned much later that not all rebel weapons had been put beyond use. However, it prompted my first foray into considering a conflict intervention linkage between Mali and Ireland.

The signing of the Peace Treaty was celebrated with a massive bonfire in Timbuktu, visible for hundreds of kilometres, giving a powerful signal to those out in the desert that the conflict was over. The fire burned for three days; many combatants came from the desert and threw their newly-



redundant weapons on the bonfire. Thousands of weapons burned in the blaze. Subsequently, a huge monument was raised where the bonfire had burned; this monument and the bonfire are known as La Flamme de la Paix, the Flame of Peace. The charred remains of many of the weapons destroyed in the bonfire are preserved in the monument, and are clearly visible at the foot of the great structure.

Even from that first visit, I started to explore what I might do, within my limitations as just one individual, to develop links between Ireland and Mali.

### **The Stalled Decommissioning Process in Northern Ireland**

Following renewal of the IRA ceasefire in July 1997, the Good Friday Agreement was ultimately signed in April 1998 and subsequently endorsed throughout the island of Ireland in joint referenda in May 1998. Elections to a new Northern Ireland Assembly were held in June 1998. The issue of decommissioning continued to impede progress to the devolution of powers from Westminster to Stormont, and the deadline in October 1998 for the formation of the Executive was missed. Further attempts to implement the Good Friday Agreement during 1998 and much of 1999 also failed (Melaugh, n.d.). This was largely due to the stalled process of decommissioning.

Powers were finally devolved from Westminster to Belfast in December 1999 and the various institutions outlined in the Agreement were established. There was a series of reviews of the working of the Agreement and several suspensions of the institutions of devolved government.

In October 2001, the IRA announced that it had begun to decommission its weapons (Melaugh, n.d.). This was repeated in April 2002 and October 2003, but no final decommissioning was in sight. The stalemate continued for a number of years, and seemed an interminable and insoluble “roadblock” to advancement of the Peace Process. It was against this background that I first heard of the Flamme de la Paix.

### **Decommissioning Conference 2004**

My first effort towards a conflict intervention initiative was to try to make the parties to the conflict in Ireland aware of the achievement of the Malian Government and the Tuareg in ending their conflict, and in decommissioning their weapons. I started to research and establish contacts towards organising a Conference in Ireland, to which would be invited the various parties to the conflict in Mali from 1991- 1996 and participants in their Peace Treaty negotiations. The aim was that parties to the Northern Ireland conflict, particularly the IRA, who were “hesitant” about decommissioning, might learn directly and jointly from the Tuareg and the Malian government, how they had achieved decommissioning so quickly and effectively and then might be influenced to follow suit. The added bonus of this Conference would be that the direction of assistance towards achieving peace would be from Mali to Ireland; that is, from “global South” to “global North”, a neat reversal of the usual aid direction.



Having received support in principle from the UN Representative who had facilitated the peace talks in 1996, and having suggested the proposal to a number of people with access to relevant high-level personnel in Mali, my plan was happily rendered redundant in July 2005, when the IRA issued a statement announcing an end to its armed campaign and instructing all IRA units to dump arms. In September 2005, the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning announced that the IRA had completed the decommissioning of all of its arms (Melaugh, n.d.).

### **Proposal for an International Peace Conference in Bamako/Timbuktu**

A low-grade renewal of fighting began in Northern Mali in May 2006, which “at first, appeared to be a limited affair. Yet it underscored shifts in Malian Governance in the North that bore the hallmarks of the country’s future collapse” in 2012 (Thurston, A, and Lebovich, A, 2013:24).

Visiting Mali for the third time in November 2006, I noted increasing tensions between the Tuareg minority and the Malian Government. I began to consider how best to promote understanding and solidarity between the two key parties. I was becoming aware that both parties saw the peace treaties they had signed as ends in themselves; that is, they were working on durable, sustainable peace and reconciliation being immediately achieved through a single peace treaty, rather than through long-term commitment to a comprehensive and on-going peace process (Corry, 2014).

I started to consider a major international Peace Conference, where Tuareg representatives, along with representatives of the Malian Government might be invited to discuss, compare and contrast, with the various parties to the Northern Ireland peace process, their respective experiences of peace building and conflict resolution.

Without any underlying theoretical framework, my thinking was that:

- a) while the Irish Peace Process was well promoted and celebrated throughout the world, the Malian Conflict and their efforts at developing a peaceful resolution were totally unknown;
- b) whereas the “Peace Dividend” was clearly highlighted and appreciated in Northern Ireland, neither the Tuareg nor the Malian Government had any sense of having obtained any such Peace Dividend;
- c) Thus, neither side to the Malian conflict had any “meas” (i.e. deep-seated respect), for the peace they had initially achieved;
- d) A joint presentation to an International Conference, a veritable “Tale of Two Peace Processes”, in the capital, Bamako or Timbuktu, with all the publicity it could attract, might raise the international profile of Mali and its Peace treaty;
- e) Participants might also glean new insights into Peace Processes, Conflict Resolution and Peace-building and the differences between Peace Treaties and Peace Processes.

The Tuareg and the Malian Government representatives would be working as a team, and as co-equal participants in the Conference, along with a joint group of participants from Northern Ireland, Ireland and the UK. The aim of the Conference would be to give the Malian parties a sense

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of joint identity in working and speaking as a single “team” together, and to increase their sense of pride and ownership of their achievements thus far, thereby building some level of trust and mutual understanding, while developing their awareness of the need for a prolonged and comprehensive process to achieve sustainable peace and ultimately reconciliation. I now see this proposed conference as a form of Track Two intervention (Corry, 2012; Hottinger, 2005).

I researched the history of Mali and the protracted, inter-current conflict that had beset the country since its independence from France in 1960. Over the next while, I developed a background document towards the proposal, which I presented to the Mali Interest Group in London in September 2010. At that meeting, a representative of the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office expressed a keen interest in the idea and sought further information. However, the developing hostage-taking incidents in West Africa, and my own pressing commitments, prevented this idea from advancing any further at that stage.

### **Mapping the Conflict**

The conflict in Mali is highly complex, arising from structural factors, such as poverty and poor governance, perceived marginalisation, and many other issues; it is not possible in this article to provide a comprehensive analysis. Some important conflict-critical factors only can be given here as a general guide. (For a more comprehensive analysis, see Healy, 2013, Whitehouse, 2013, and Morgan, 2012.) Mali, one of the world’s 25 poorest countries, is a vast, land-locked country, financially extremely poor, but socially, culturally and historically very rich. Until the 2012 conflict erupted, health and poverty indices were gradually improving. The South is Savannah or Sub-tropical; the North is Sahel or full-blown desert. Its vast border areas are highly porous and difficult to police. A democratic Republic since 1992, Mali was seen internationally, until 2012, as the model of democracy on the continent of Africa.

As a multi-ethnic society, Mali has worked hard at maintaining good inter-ethnic relations, with many traditional rituals and mechanisms for dealing with or preventing inter-ethnic tensions (Healy, 2013, Appendix 3).

The fundamental structural issues are of poverty, lack of development, and lack of adequate infrastructure. Anecdotally, marginalisation, along with poor governance and an increasingly aloof and corrupt Government, allegedly complicit in the growing drug trafficking in the far desert north, has been seen by many as too passive in its handling of Tuareg unrest. Additional factors include increasing Al- Qaeda (AQMI [ Al-Qaeda Maghreb Islamique] and AQIM [Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb]) presence and activity in the far north.

However, while it is widely acknowledged that the Tuareg rebels have re-kindled armed conflict, Mali’s conflict is not just related to the so-called “Tuareg problem”, but has wider and more complex roots (Whitehouse, 2013), and the structural issues referred to above affect not only the Tuareg, but also all the different ethnicities in Northern Mali and to a lesser extent in the south.



The Tuareg are a nomadic ethnic group of Berber origin, distributed throughout the Sahara and the countries of North and West Africa. They are a minority group within Mali and even within Northern Mali.

They had a long history of rebellions against French colonization until final defeat in 1905. Since Mali peacefully gained its independence from France in 1960, they have cyclically rebelled against the Malian Government, initially a Soviet-backed dictatorship. These uprisings seemed to follow a similar pattern as to their start, course and end.

During the rebellion of 1960-1963, the Army massacred hundreds of Tuareg civilians, which has lived long in the Tuareg social memory. There may be, however, a level of selective amnesia among Tuareg for other events and incidents. For instance, there is little acknowledgement of the reality of Tuareg history and fame as “Lords of the Desert”, wherein the Tuareg were feared as mighty and vicious warriors. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, few white people survived a voyage into the Sahara.

In addition, the issues of the slave trade and current forms of indentured service, involving the black Bella people, tend to be glossed over. The renewed armed conflict in 2012 saw resurgence of inter-generational slavery, though some assert that it was a simple question of various armed groups recruiting child soldiers.

The Tuareg fear the disappearance of their rich traditional culture and nomadic lifestyle. There are also internal intra-ethnic tensions within the very strict hierarchical clan structures of the Tuareg. Previous “serfs” are now in powerful positions in public administration, while the higher-status groups are, by and large, uneducated and mired in poverty.

It would seem that only a minority of Tuareg choose rebellion and independence, the majority seeking merely to survive the extreme conditions of their beloved lifestyle and to live life in peace. It is apparent that non-rebelling, civilian Tuareg are seriously disadvantaged by the conflict, ending up each time the conflict erupts, as refugees in neighbouring countries, or internally displaced within Mali.

The main active rebel group, the MNLA (Movement National de Liberation del Azawad), emerged in October 2011 out of many other groups over the past fifty years. They portray themselves as secular democratic separatists, not motivated by religious zeal. The proposed new independent state, to be called Azawad, would theoretically bring prosperity through income from reported oil, petrol and gas reserves. However, the existence and exploitability of such resources is not fully proven (Studer, 2013, Whitehouse, 2013).

Two Jihadist groups, formed in late 2011, emerged as significant actors in the recent conflict: MUJAO (Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa) and Ansar Dine (a militant Islamist group). MUJAO being predominantly comprised of individuals from a number of external countries, while Ansar Dine is led by a Tuareg former rebel and Malian Ambassador, Iyad Ag Ghali.



External Actors principally include France, Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Niger, Burkina Faso and the USA.

### **Proposal for a Story-telling Project 2011-2012**

While prospects for the holding of a high-profile International Conference in Timbuktu or anywhere in Mali faded with increasing hostage-taking activities in the Sahel, I was still trying to devise a way of bringing the Ireland/Northern Ireland/UK experience of Conflict Resolution to the assistance of the parties in Mali. I finally settled on the less ambitious but highly feasible and more targeted concept of a story-telling project.

This would involve the bringing of key figures and influential opinion-formers from all sides in the conflict in Mali to Ireland, to meet together, away from the public eye, for a week or so of mutual story-telling and relationship-building. This visit would include connecting with key participants in the Northern Ireland Peace Process, as well as a visit to Northern Ireland and other possible events. It might then be followed by a subsequent return visit to Mali by the people whom the Malian/Tuareg group had met in Ireland.

Again, the deteriorating situation in Mali, and my own commitments, prevented the completion of this submission before the resumption of armed conflict in mid-January 2012.

### **Resumption of Armed Conflict, 17<sup>th</sup> January 2012**

In mid-January 2012, Tuareg rebels (MNLA) rekindled the armed conflict in the North; dozens of Malian soldiers were massacred shortly afterwards and in March there was an “accidental” coup (Callimachi, 2012). In the political vacuum that followed, the MNLA joined with erstwhile unfavoured Jihadist groups, Ansar Dine and MUJAO, and swiftly took over the Northern region, jointly declaring the North as the Independent Democratic Republic of Azawad. The MNLA were later side-lined by Ansar Dine and MUJAO, who declared Azawad an Islamist State and promptly imposed an extreme form of Sharia law on a population of moderate Muslims.

In January 2013, fearing imminent over-run of the country by the Jihadist groups, the Malian President urgently called France’s President Hollande and asked for immediate French intervention. France responded within hours and over the next two months ousted the Jihadists from the North. French forces were greeted by the people of Mali, including the population of the North, as heroes and liberators. A reduced French force (SERVAL) remains in place, along with a UN Mission (MINUSMA [Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali]) and a small contingent of West African forces. A Peace treaty was hastily signed in Ouagadougou in June 2013, enabling Presidential and Legislative elections to take place in Autumn 2013, the new President receiving a huge mandate for peace and reconciliation and Government reform.





## Continued Pursuit of Conflict Interventions

Following the resumption of armed conflict, the situation in Mali/ Azawad changed almost by the day, making all previous possibilities redundant and making predictions for the future almost impossible. However, the need for an intervention and the offering of assistance in conflict resolution was now even more important, though more difficult, than ever.

I resolved to pursue my proposal, deciding not to specify what form any such initiative might take. Whatever initiatives might be established, it would be important to utilise the indigenous cultural and traditional practices in dispute settlement already in existence (United Nations, 1999).

I mapped out in detail the history and complexity of the Malian conflict and the value of an Irish peace- building initiative. There is a multiplicity of what I have termed “Axes of Mistrust”, each needing attention in a comprehensive peace process (Healy, 2013). The proposed Intervention/s would be aimed at addressing one or more of these aspects. Glencree agreed to seek funding from the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) for an exploratory visit to Mali.

In July 2013, DFA funding was secured and in November 2013, I accompanied Colette Nkunda of Glencree’s small International Programme staff, for a two-week intensive scoping visit to Mali. There we met a number of Government Ministers and/or their senior staff. We spoke with the Security and Political representatives of MINUSMA (the UN Mission in Mali); the EU-EEAS (European Union – European External Action Service); Tuareg civilian representative groups; the anti-slavery group Temedt; a number of national and international NGOs; a number of individuals, including a returned refugee; and the US and UK Ambassadors and the French First Consul.

We were invited by MINUSMA to join a Prime Ministerial two-day mission to Gao, where we saw at first hand the limited nature of Government rule in the far North-East town of Kidal.

We spoke to a number of groups in Gao, including women’s groups, and attended the Reconciliation session of the “Assizes du Nord”, a series of public, inclusive meetings designed to start the process of inter-ethnic and inter-community dialogue.

In these meetings and interviews, we explored the desire for and possibility of a variety of Track Two and/or Track Three initiatives, seeking organisations and individuals with whom Glencree might partner if any initiative were to be established. Currently, the final report of the visit and an updated conflict analysis are being prepared. Should any interventions be recommended, these will need to be approved and funding secured before any commitment can be given to the establishment of any initiative.

If ultimately this is achieved, then I feel I will have succeeded in my dogged ambition to offer to Mali and the parties in conflict there, the experience and expertise gained in this country from our own experience of conflict, resolution and efforts to achieve long-term reconciliation.





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