

African Style

In West Africa, there's a time-tested method of conflict resolution called the "palaver". In the West, that word often means something else: a whole lot of talk that doesn't really go anywhere. But in the traditional communities of Africa, the palaver is a sophisticated art of social accommodation. Whenever there's a serious conflict in the village, the community gathers under the baobab tree to work through it together. Everything is laid out on the table. Everyone is heard. Everyone gets chance to speak. Everyone matters. The past is dug up; the roots are examined. The voice of the elders is given special weight. Even the ancestors are consulted. It can take days until every story is told, every detail is examined, every matter is considered. A palaver is over only when everyone can look each other in the eye again.

People in Europe and the Americas tend to resolve their conflicts as quickly as possible. Usually, it's the best argument that wins, or just whoever has the most power. Debate often follows the logic of a battle, where the result is the victory of one party over the other.

In Africa, it's a completely different story. The goal of a palaver is to talk through the problem until an understanding is reached that everyone present can get on board with. The aim of the gathering is harmony and genuine agreement among everyone involved. In the West, we often walk away with some rapid result in hand, secretly nursing a grudge and planning to sabotage the agreement or take revenge; in Africa the end of the palaver is cause for celebration. Everyone rejoices that they have been able to come to an agreement on a particular issue, and they laugh, dance, and sing because they're no longer divided. They don't let any bad blood remain between them; they know that bad blood is the root of all evil—and the cause of war.

Bernhard Langenstein, *Desiderata* (Tredition, 2017), 55ff.



REFLECT

Read this description of how conflicts can be resolved. What makes the "palaver" so interesting? What parts of it would you want to borrow for your own life?