Summary

Cultural Ideologies of Peace and Conflict: A Socio-Cognitive Study of Giryama Discourse (Kenya)

This study is inspired by the idea that ‘ordinary’ people, and especially their understandings and beliefs, are an essential – yet relatively neglected – factor in intercultural conflict resolution. Within the wider context of social studies of conflict and its attempted resolution this is a cognitive study of their understandings (i.e. the ‘cultural understandings’) of ‘peace’ and ‘conflict’. The overall framework is that of anthropological linguistics, with its characteristic view of language as linguistic practice.

An analytical model is developed and applied to a case study of the Giryama of Kenya. This model facilitates accounting for an insider view as well as a cross-cultural comparison. It can be used for studying ‘cultural understandings’ of ‘peace’ and ‘conflict’ in other communities, and renders outcomes that can be compared. The research domain is everyday and public discourse. Being generally shared, everyday and public discourse is an appropriate domain for the exploration of ‘cultural understandings’.

The book consists of four parts.
Part I contains a description of the theoretical background and the analytical model (chapter one). Additionally, it includes an introduction to Giryama society (chapter two). Giryama society features in the case study, which is presented in parts II and III.
Part II presents an analysis of three Giryama terms which reflect core elements of the Giryama ideology of ‘peace’.
Part III focuses on the analysis of three Giryama terms of ‘conflict’ to illuminate the Giryama ideology of ‘conflict’
Part IV is the conclusion.

Part I (chapter one) focuses on the concept of ‘cultural understandings’. A description is given of its characteristic elements, which are adopted from theories in the field of the cognitive
sciences. A fundamental characteristic of ‘cultural understandings’ is that they are shaped in human interaction.

After the cognitive framework of ‘cultural understandings’ has been outlined, two other concepts are introduced, which are fundamental to this study’s approach. These concepts, cultural ideology and cultural discourse, are discussed in their particular relationship to ‘cultural understandings’.

Cultural discourse – i.e. everyday and public discourse – is the domain in which ‘cultural understandings’ of ‘peace’ and ‘conflict’ are studied. Discourse is typically language-in-action. As a result, meanings that are produced in discourse are more than the ‘direct’ (referential) meanings of words. They are complex entities, which include non-verbal elements as well as references to a socio-cultural context. This particular perspective on language facilitates a study of ‘cultural understandings’ as a social phenomenon through linguistic practice.

Cultural ideology is the overarching ideational framework from which ‘cultural understandings’ are assumed to derive their forcefulness. Translated into socio-cultural practice, this implies that ideological charging determines the degree in which ideas, which are included in ‘cultural understandings’, are experienced as ‘normal’ (and hence normative). Viewing ‘peace’ and ‘conflict’ from this angle, we find that cultural discourse contains focal points of ideology. These are words that manifest themselves in different social contexts and which organise one or more socio-cultural domains. In fact, one can make a list of so-called cultural key words (the term and method of description are borrowed from the (cultural) semanticist Anna Wierzbicka). One important criterion in the assessment of a key word is that it is a common word – following the cognitive scientist Eleanor Rosch, it is assumed that common words are re-presentations of most generally shared knowledge.

The analysis aims at gaining insight into the meanings of these key words. After all, they include ideological components. The outcome of the analysis is a description of their meanings. This is done in simple language, which is easy to understand. The reason for using simple language is that it facilitates cross-cultural accessibility, which in its turn facilitates cross-cultural comparison.
In Part II, three Giryama key words of ‘peace’ are discussed: *kuelewana* (understand each other) (chapter three), *kilongozi* (leader) (chapter four), and *ts’i* (land) (chapter five). *Kuelewana* (understand each other) highlights ‘peace’ as a social (ideal) phenomenon; *kilongozi* (leader) is the mediator of ‘peace’. *Ts’i* (land) reflects ‘peace’ and ‘conflict’ as existential entities; ‘peace’ and ‘conflict’ imply the continued existence of Giryama society and its disintegration respectively.

In Part III the Giryama ideology of ‘conflict’ is highlighted through three ‘conflict’ terms. In fact, *k’ondo* (conflict) (chapter six) is the only Giryama ‘conflict’ key word. There are two other words that are related to *k’ondo* (conflict), which are *fujo* (trouble) and *viha* (war). *K’ondo* (conflict) is the type of conflict in which the community has the most acute experience of lack of well-being. This lack of well-being is essentially understood in terms of emotional and social deterioration – the social ideal of *kuelewana* (understand each other) being under pressure – rather than in terms of physical or economic decline.

The ending of *k’ondo* (conflict) and *fujo* (trouble) appears to be a prominent entailed understanding of the concepts of conflict. This is not the case with *viha* (war). In fact, *viha* (war) is not considered part of the socio-emotional experience of the Giryama. *Viha’s* lack of salience in the Giryama context highlights a potential cross-cultural misinterpretation – seemingly equivalent words, such as *viha* (war) and ‘war’, are attributed very different degrees of salience. English (and Dutch) lexical counterparts of other Giryama key words show a similar picture.

Part IV, the conclusion, reiterates the central arguments, and reflects on the positive impact that *cultural ideologies* can make in situations of (potential) intercultural conflict. Besides their ‘representative’ quality i.e. their being (almost) generally shared among the members of a community, it is argued that they could be used to understand the cultural context of conflict and thereby facilitate their resolution. In that context the socio-cultural discourse framework is a pre-eminent instrument. This study has depicted the conceptual outlines of the potential of cultural ideologies as a paradigm in intercultural conflict resolution. A more applied kind of research could highlight the practical dimensions of that potential.