Understanding Conflict Resolution

Community Reconciliation through Traditional Ceremonies

Katerina Werkman

The debate on the role of traditional conflict management and reconciliation practices in modern post-war situations is enduring. The central concern is whether approaches that reflect the cultural context of the conflict setting would be better suited for responding to the challenges of reconciliation in war-affected societies. In Sierra Leone, the government and the international donor community focused their efforts and funds on pursuing judicial (through the Special Court) and truth-seeking (through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission) processes. But outside the official mechanisms, people in villages across the country deployed a wealth of strategies and practices of reconciliation, healing and coming together. These included ceremonies and other forms of ritual, the meanings of which were familiar to those participating in them. This article discusses these "traditional" ceremonies and finds that they were an important resource in people's efforts to remake social relationships and restore community cohesion in the direct aftermath of war. It also notes that such cultural resources have been severely impacted by the war. In the processes through which the communities strive for reconstruction and reconciliation these practices are also renewed and reshaped.

Keywords Sierra Leone, re-integration, reconciliation, traditional ceremonies, community reconciliation

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Introduction

For quite some time, discussions have taken place concerning the place of local practices and mechanisms for dealing with conflict and reconciliation in contemporary peacebuilding efforts in Africa have been around for a while. They emerged within the theoretical debates in the conflict resolution field where the concept of transformative peacebuilding produced an emphasis on more culturally sensitive approaches. Lederach, a key proponent, stresses that 'peace building initiatives and solutions [...] must be rooted in the soil where the conflict rages and must be built on contextualized participation of people from that setting if reconciliation is to be sustained.'[1] Similarly, the field of transitional justice as an approach to justice specifically focused on societies emerging from periods of systematic and large-scale human rights abuses and violent conflicts has experienced a clear growth in interest and research into the potential of African traditional practices.[2] Traditional mechanisms have also been put into peacebuilding practices in a number of African post-war countries since the early 1990s. They were explored and adapted to become part of national as well as international strategies and programmes designed to deal with the legacy of violent conflict and find ways for the people to live together. In Mozambique, traditional cleansing and purification ceremonies have contributed to reintegrating ex-combatants into their communities. In Rwanda, the local *gacaca* tribunals have been adapted to deal with the backlog of perpetrators and pursue justice and reconciliation.

In Sierra Leone too, local traditional practices of dealing with conflict, reintegration and reconciliation were adopted in several different contexts.[3] First, many people advocated that the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) make use of the local beliefs and customs which would reinforce people's ownership of the whole TRC process.[4] Ultimately however, this was reduced to the presence of traditional chiefly authorities and religious leaders at the TRC's public hearings and to the final day's closing ceremonies that on many occasions drew inspiration from traditional rituals of forgiveness and reconciliation. While the symbolic value and healing and reconciling effect of these ceremonies has been acknowledged by some outside observers,[5] the limited use of the traditional practice and beliefs was seen by many as a wasted opportunity.[6]

Second, a number of national and international agencies and NGOs, such as UNICEF, the International Rescue Committee, Caritas Makeni

and Children Associated with War, employed traditional cleansing ceremonies in their programmes for child ex-combatants' reintegration. The ceremonies took various forms in the different communities according to the specific local practice but usually consisted of a small sacrifice, washing the child with specially prepared water containing herbs or kola nuts and a prayer.[7]

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Third, a local NGO Forum of Conscience launched the Fambul Tok (FT) programme in Kailahun district in 2008 designed to assist local communities across the country in organising traditional reconciliation ceremonies that they themselves identify as necessary. By the end of its second year of work, Fambul Tok had conducted more than 60 reconciliation ceremonies across Kailahun, Kono, Moyamba and Koinadugu districts.[8]

While distinct in the way they have approached local traditional practices and beliefs, these examples share a commonality – there has been an outside actor either initiating their exploration and utilisation or providing material support for them, or both. Moreover, the TRC closing ceremonies have only been performed at the district headquarter towns and the Commission largely failed to reach out to the more remote areas of the country. The child ex-combatants reintegration programmes have focused on facilitating the return of these children into their homes and not on the other issues pertaining to community reconciliation. Fambul Tok, although specifically encouraging community reconciliation through traditional ceremonies and eventually planning to work nationwide, had only been launched in 2008.

But what did people do to promote reconciliation and reintegration when there was no outside support? Graybill writes that the initiative's consultations preceding the launch of the programme 'revealed that local cultural traditions, dormant since the war, could be reawakened for social healing.'[9] But were they really 'dormant'? Or have they informed and assisted in any way the processes of coping, healing, and coming together in the villages? In what way? And what challenges did they face?

Understandings of the ways in which local techniques of reconciliation and reintegration inform communities' post-war recovery remain limited. This work seeks to partially remedy this by exploring some of the traditional ceremonies and practices that were performed in the villages and by discussing the role they played in the efforts of the villagers to deal with the challenges of post-war reintegration and recon-

ciliation. It builds on informal interviews conducted in Sierra Leone between January and February 2010. I spent twelve days in Freetown and travelled the rest of the time across the country. I visited two districts in the Northern – Port Loko and Koinadugu – and the Southern – Moyamba and Bo – Provinces and one – Kailahun – in the Eastern Province. I spent seven to ten days in each district town and visited two to four surrounding villages; 18 villages in total. I usually returned for two, occasionally three days to each village. I conducted a total of 105 interviews, 55 of these were one-on-one or tandem interviews with people in the communities – chiefs, victims, ex-combatants and civilians. Another 30 were community focus groups with between 3 and 12 participants. In addition to in-depth interviews and group discussions with the villagers, I interviewed religious leaders, NGO staff, and academics in Freetown and the district headquarter towns of Port Loko, Makeni, Kabala, Bo, Kailahun and Moyamba. I had 19 individual interviews with experts – NGO staff, civil society members, religious leaders, academics – and an expert focus group. The expert interviews were done to obtain a broader range of perspectives and perceptions and to consult the preliminary findings from the villages. In total 261 people participated in the research.

Before commencing on the bulk of this work, it is necessary to briefly qualify the use of the terms "tradition" and "traditional" which are problematic in many ways – they often bear Eurocentric connotations that tend to view such institutions and practices as 'patterns followed from "time out of mind" in static political and social circumstances.'[10] But tradition is not something inert, unaltered or archaic. Rather, it is 'inspired by a group's past' but continually updated, adapted and adjusted to respond to the changing political, economic and social circumstances as well as able to incorporate external influences in order to survive.[11] It is in this sense that "tradition" is understood in this work.

This work is structured as follows. First, this work provides a very short background to the war in Sierra Leone as a means of contextualising the conflict and its victims. The next part discussed the meaning of reconciliation based on the interpretations provided to me by the interviewed Sierra Leoneans. The last part explores the ceremonies and their role in reconciliation and post-war recovery at the village level in the selected communities.

The War

The official beginning of Sierra Leone's civil war dates back to March 1991 when rebels of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), led by a former army corporal Foday Sankoh and numbering initially just over a hundred men, entered the Kailahun and Pujehun districts, in the south-eastern parts of Sierra Leone, from neighbouring Liberia.[12] The attacks were preceded by several decades of deteriorating political, economic and social conditions in the country, largely resulting from bad governance and abuse of power, disastrous economic policies, the plundering of the country's rich mineral resources and rampant corruption. Since the introduction of a one-party system in 1978, power and resources were fully in the hands of the All People's Congress (APC) government in Freetown while the upcountry rural areas were largely marginalised – especially the opposition Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) strongholds in the eastern and southern parts of the country.

The abuse of power was not limited to central government. In provincial areas, local government officials and chiefs who retained an important role in interpreting customary law used their authority to 'reinforce hierarchies of class, gender and age and to silence or marginalize those who they perceived as a threat.'[13] It was mainly young men who suffered from this abuse. Compounded by poor educational and employment opportunities this led to the alienation of young men, many of whom left their villages for diamond mines or big towns. The disgruntled youth then formed a ready pool of recruits for the armed factions when the war broke out.[14]

Presenting themselves as liberators, the rebels achieved initial success and enjoyed some (albeit limited) degree of support from the population as they tried to capitalise on people's frustration. The first phase of the war until November 1993 was a 'conventional "target" warfare' with close-quarter fighting between the RUF and the Sierra Leone Army (SLA).[15] After a military coup by a group of young army officers in April 1992, and the setting up of the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC), intensive military operations were launched that brought the RUF to the verge of defeat in November 1993. The NPRC was also seen by many citizens as the desired regime change which detracted the initial sympathy for the RUF. It was at this point that the RUF announced a reversion to jungle warfare that relied on ambush and terror

tactics against both soldiers and civilians, and used abductions, mainly of children, as the main means of recruitment. By making the lives of ordinary people unbearable through large-scale violence that included murder, amputations, rape and torture as well as the systematic destruction of property, the RUF aimed at forcing the government to negotiate a power-sharing deal.[16]

Successive military and later democratically elected governments waged war against the rebels but were unable to decisively defeat them. In reaction to the RUF's scare tactics, the government forces often adopted 'irrational responses' and also committed many serious crimes.[17] After a rebel offensive on Freetown in January 1999 that left many civilians dead and half of the city burnt in its wake, a peace agreement was finally signed in Lomé in June 1999. It granted a blanket amnesty to all combatants[18] and envisaged the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission as an accountability mechanism to 'address impunity, break the cycle of violence, provide a forum for both the victims and perpetrators of human rights violations to tell their story and get a clear picture of the past in order to facilitate genuine healing and reconciliation.'[19] The terms of the peace accord were continuously violated over the next two years and only in January 2002 President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah declared the war was officially over. The 11-year war was characterised by extreme levels of violence against civilian populations and left tens of thousands of people displaced, maimed and traumatised and their communities shattered. Rebuilding these communities and finding ways for the people to reconcile and live together again – combatants and civilians, victims and perpetrators – was arguably one of the greatest challenges the country faced in its aftermath. And yet, a comprehensive approach was undertaken and it is important to flush out an understanding of reconciliation from the perspective of Sierra Leoneans.

The Meaning of Reconciliation in Sierra Leone

The concept of reconciliation has been used with increased frequency on the global level, contributing to a certain ambiguity, an elusiveness in reaching consensus on an appropriate definition. Since discussion of the different approaches to reconciliation is beyond the scope of

this work, I will only attempt to present the most important ingredients of reconciliation as they came out of the conversations with Sierra Leoneans. This will be complemented by insights from other research on post-war reconciliation and reintegration in the country.

The English word reconciliation made its way into Sierra Leonean parlance most probably through the work of the country's TRC and activities implemented by local and international NGOs. Consequently, it is used to describe the national level efforts; the terms used to describe the process at the community level are different. On an individual level, reconciliation is expressed through the notion of having '*kol at*' (cool heart).[20] Although having '*kol at*' is a personal condition, its meaning is strongly relational. It means that one's heart does not contain feelings of anger, resentment or grudge against others and refers to the person's capacity to have proper social relationships with others.[21] Indeed, Shaw notes that in Temne, one of the major local languages, parts of the body are often used 'as tropes for the capacity to relate to others.'[22] A young man in a village in Kailahun District likened '*kol at*' to 'peace of mind' which was a necessary condition for one to be part of a working community: '*If you have peace of mind as an individual, you will come together with the others, eat together, hug each other and that will bring reconciliation.*'[23]

Collective reconciliation at the level of a community, be it a family, village or a larger group, is best expressed by the phrase '*le we mak wan word*' (let's make one word): '*A single tree cannot be a forest. So one person cannot promote or develop the community until others go with him, you go together, put things together, then you try to work for the better to develop this community. It is unity. And that is wan word.*'[24] Unity and the ability to work together resonated very strongly in people's descriptions of what reconciliation was about. The progress of reconciliation – or the lack of it – was often illustrated by reference to practical examples of accomplished or ongoing work in the village. These expressions of reconciliation go beyond a mere statement of peaceful coexistence as they emphasise cooperation. This must be seen in the context of the vital importance that social networks play locally.

People almost unanimously confirmed that such unity or reconciliation had been achieved in their village.[25] Not one of them related this to knowing the truth about the past (as the TRC model promotes), nor

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to seeing the perpetrators punished (as the international criminal justice has it). Instead, they often repeated one single formula: 'Forgive and Forget.' Let us now look at both of them in turn.

The prevailing response to dealing with the past in terms of 'Forgive and Forget' has sometimes been put down to a specific Sierra Leonean cultural characteristic.[26] Many outside observers have been fascinated by the 'forgiving nature' of the local people. Dowden, for example, admits he is 'always struck by the spirit of forgiveness' and 'talent for reconciliation' at the end of African wars, including the one in Sierra Leone.[27] I also heard reference to the culture of forgiveness from a number of Sierra Leoneans in Freetown during my first visit in 2008. My interviewees in the villages, many of whom said they have forgiven, however never spoke of the forgiveness as a natural quality they possessed.

It is important to explore the nature of this forgiveness by looking first at an excerpt from an interview with an elder who lost his father in the war. The RUF locked him up in a house together with other villagers and set it on fire. He saw forgiveness in these terms:

> Elder: '*We only accept to forgive because we have no other alternative. For the sake of peace. Like we, the old people, it was only with the help of god that we were not killed during the war. We will never forget, we are forgiving, but we are still reminded of how our homes were vandalized and how people here were injured.*'
>
> Me: '*If you had a choice what would you like to happen to the perpetrators, what would you suggest?*'
>
> Elder: '*We have no alternative but to leave our case to god.*'[28]

Two important aspects of forgiveness in post-war Sierra Leone are evident from this passage: a strong sense of pragmatism and deep religiosity. First, coming together and accepting former fighters back into a community was, to many, the only available option to secure peace for the future.[29] Forgiveness meant avoiding further violence. Indeed, statements such as '*we have the belief that if you punish them, they will not be happy about it and will revenge*'[30] were common. The second element in the Sierra Leoneans' forgiving attitudes is the strong sense

of religiosity among many sectors of society.[31] Sierra Leoneans often turn to religion in their responses to the experiences of the violent war and their religious beliefs undoubtedly shape their ideas of forgiveness, reconciliation and justice. In many communities, religious leaders were active in promoting reconciliation and religious spaces provided a safe space where former combatants could plead for acceptance into the community. But religion is not only a source of charity and forgiveness. God was to be, for many of my sources, also the ultimate arbitrator of justice. People often declared their forgiveness in this life together with an expectation of justice being served by god in the hereafter:

> We were told that nobody should revenge. That was the first message that came to us. Everybody was made by God. And if the person knows that all that he was doing was bad, then it is left with the Almighty. But we ourselves, we were made by God, so we don't have to revenge. They [the chiefs] were just telling us – let us forget about it, let us leave everything to the Almighty to decide.[32]

To a certain extent, placing ultimate justice in the hands of God has to do with a history of injustice in Sierra Leone and people's inability to seek retribution and justice from the state institutions. Thus, it is not only an expression of deep religiosity but also of the prolonged failure of the state to provide people with justice, the rule of law and security. Shaw finds that many people 'located forgiveness within multiple continuing forms of structural violence in the present: powerlessness, exclusion, poverty, marginality, insecurity.[33] Forgiveness in this sense

> does not denote the absence of culpability but rather its expansion to implicate a much broader set of actors and institutions – the failure of the state, the failure of government, the failure of the legal system, the failure of education, the failure of development, the failure of the international community.[34]

For this reason, Stovel warns against reinforcing a belief in ultimate justice because 'it also may lead [people] to accept lack of justice which is both their due and is needed to end impunity.'[35] There is another way of looking at it, however, if we accept that justice can indeed have 'a supernatural dimension.'[36] Leaving the punishment in the hands of God and other spiritual powers means that people can concentrate on their more immediate needs to restore a functioning community,

which is paramount in an environment often characterised by scarcity of resources and high degree of mutual dependence.[37]

Forgiving and forgetting the war means not talking about it or seeking confessions from the perpetrators. A man in a village in Kailahun District summarised these sentiments in a proverb: '*If you've come to tell me that you killed my father, I want you to show me his grave.*'[38] Asking questions about the past only produces more questions and resentment, it keeps the violence in the present, which make it impossible to 'cool down' the heart and move away from the past. Shaw speaks in this context about 'social forgetting.'[39] She sees it as a process

> different [...] from individual forgetting, in that people still have personal memories of the violence. But speaking of the violence – especially in public – was (and is) viewed as encouraging its return, calling it forth when it is still very close and might at any moment erupt again.[40]

"Remembering" war or the inability to "forget" was expressed as an individual rather than a community matter. More importantly, remembering it was related to present material hardship resulting from the war. Material compensation makes 'forgetting' and achieving '*kol at*' possible, or at least easier, by giving the survivors the opportunity to rebuild their life and move on*:*

> All hearts are not equal [...] Those who had houses and those houses were burnt, even if that person may have peace of mind, at any time he or she reflects back to the past he will have no peace perhaps because that person is old now and cannot afford to put up another house. So that is the problem now.[41]

Traditional Practice and Reconciliation

Rural communities in Sierra Leone use a wealth of ritual and religious practice to respond to violence, regulate and remake social relationships and restore community cohesion. Ceremonies and rituals of a great variety took place in post-war Sierra Leone.[42] In all the villages, people confirmed that they performed a ceremony or another coming-together event to mark the end of hostilities, promote unity in the village as well as re-establishing the broken relationship with the spiritual world. They were performed on family as well as on community level and within the community's secret societies and laid the foundation for future coexistence of the communities.[43] They often

shared common features and served common purposes although the specific forms and features varied from one chiefdom to the next.[44]

Consider this brief account of a ceremony in one of the villages:

> When the war was over, we came back and offered a sacrifice of white bread [beaten flour and kola nut]. For the people that have gone to return because we were scattered. By doing that we started returning, bit by bit from different places of hiding. We offered a big sacrifice, a bull, once we returned in full. That we offered because of the bad things that went on and that we saw and also to reunite ourselves.[45]

Two women in the village gave a more detailed account of this "big sacrifice:"

> First during the night a "play" was performed for more harmony by the women. A dance was performed by the women. This included a prayer to the ancestors. We swore that all that brought evil to us will suffer. We asked the ancestors for protection and for nothing sinister to happen again. Also the men went to the bush to consult the spirits and then organised their own 'play' at night. After we did these activities, men and women separately, we came together as the whole village and made the collective sacrifice of a red bull and ate it together. It created unity and oneness.[46]

They later continued on the effects of the ceremony:

> It has gone a long way in assisting us and in ensuring for us that something like that [war] was not going to happen again. Also for those that have gone, and for those that are not present for their safe return. It wasn't automatic, not that after a ceremony all is done. It will come over time and we have patience. But when we see the result we believe that it comes because we performed all this. We did all these sacrificial ceremonies to live in peace and harmony until god meets us. [...] We believe that the ceremonies will help in achieving that.[47]

The elders emphasised another important aim of the ceremony:

> ... the play, in essence was to ensure that no one can hold grudge to the next person, like this person was responsible for this act or this person was responsible for this act.[48]

Some of the important functions of the ceremonies are evident from these short descriptions. They assist in at least four interrelated areas: restoring relationships with the spiritual world, forging com-

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munity cohesion, reintegrating perpetrators and providing a symbolic closure. It is worth presenting these in more detail.

Restoring Relationships with the Spiritual World

One of the key tasks in the direct aftermath of the war was to restore relationships not only among the living but also between the living and ancestral spirits. Most communities had not been able to worship their ancestors while being on the run during the conflict, and wanted to pay their respect and announce their return through the offering of a sacrifice. My sources spoke in terms of offering the ancestors an apology or at least an explanation for their long absence. A minimal sacrifice – '*feeding of the ancestors to show that they have not been forgotten*'[49] – was made in all the villages I visited.

Not only had the absence of sacrifices affected the relationship with the ancestors. During the war many moral codes and taboos – such as committing incest, having intercourse in the bush, killing, etc – had been broken. Sarpong suggests that since in much of Africa moral/social codes including taboos come from God and ancestors, breaking them offends God and destroys peace. It follows from this that 'restoring peace in society is to find out what has gone wrong spiritually and through special rituals to restore the state of equilibrium.'[50] All communities had made some kind of initial offering to their ancestors however, cleansing the communities of broken taboos often require more elaborate ceremonies including the offering of larger animals such as cows or goats. Not all communities have succeeded in performing such ceremonies. The need to address these outstanding rituals was frequently reiterated as their absence was felt in everyday misfortunes. My interviewees spoke about this: '*Because the bush has not been cleansed after people having intercourse there, this has led to bad harvest and to the youth dropping out of school.*'[51] Similarly, a very strong shared belief in the relationship between the sacrifice and improved conditions emerged from the interviews:

> Immediately after the war, when we were doing farming, we were not getting good yields. Until we performed the ceremony – but the year that we performed that ceremony, up to now there is rice. We are still harvesting. Some people have even abandoned the rice. We have good yield.[52]

Once ceremonies are performed there is no expectation of immediate relief or improvement. However, positive developments that do

take place are perceived a result of performing them. The belief that the community will reap the fruits of its efforts results in the courage and motivation to undertake activities such as farming. In this way, performing the right ceremonies can also have a critical impact on post-war reconstruction in the villages.

Community Cohesion

Apart from mending the relationship between the living and their ancestors, ceremonies also served to restore relationships among villagers and foster community cohesion. As these ceremonies are based on practices that have often taken place in villages for generations and are familiar and significant events to most participants, they serve to re-establish people's bond to the locality, foster feelings of belonging and confirm the familiar values of the community. By practising these ceremonies, the communities 'create their social and moral world anew as they re-member it through ritual:'[53]

> It makes us remember that we did this, when our grandmothers and grandfathers usually worked with the tradition. So if we are doing the same thing we just remember our forefathers, our parents who have been doing that tradition, so [...] that is why we like it.[54]

They further help strengthen the relationships among individuals and families in the community. Building on Durkheim, Richards writes that 'rites, as collective actions without practical purpose, generate social solidarity through emotional entrainment:'[55]

> During the dancing, if somebody has hurt you before, during that time you hug yourselves, you eat together and then the person that have done wrong will feel happy – that the brothers that I hurt still love me, I should come back and live with them.[56]

Ceremonies are also particularly powerful events that bring people together to share experience and initiate a process of social recovery. Schirch believes that 'doing something together helps them [people doing it] feel as one.'[57] That the 'doing something together' was an important aspect of the ceremonies is also clear from the way they were organised:

> We said every household should prepare a meal, so that we could bring the food together, so that everybody could come around and lay their hands on this food. Men went out to hunt

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and women collected palm oil.[…] we gathered and all the village people came together, and we decided that we should cook a very big meal to pass the ceremony for the war that had happened. […] People came with rice, animals, so we prepared the food for the ceremony, which everybody observed and there was a happy mood.[58]

The contribution of food (and cooperation to catch or produce it) relates to community cohesion in the sense of creating community spirit through a joint effort. It also has the integrative aspect, often involving the settled inhabitants as well as new strangers (often fighters that had stayed behind in their former stronghold). The importance of the ceremony is underlined by the emphasis placed on communal work in the Sierra Leonean understanding of reconciliation. By accomplishing organising a ceremony the community had proven to itself that it was capable of achieving something through cooperation.

On a more symbolic level, the actual sharing of food is in itself understood as a gesture of reconciliation:[59] '*Dipping your hands into the same bowl*' symbolises '*togetherness.*'[60] This seems to be a common understanding across the country: '*How can we show that it is finished? When we all sit down and eat together. That eating shows that the ex-combatants have been forgiven.*'[61]

Ex-Combatant Reintegration

The ceremonies were also important avenues for reintegration and acceptance of former fighters. In one village in the Kailahun District where people who fled during the war found upon their return ex-RUF fighters living in their village, a group of elders explained at some length how the ceremony had been a symbolic expression of both groups that they were ready to live in peace together:

We did it because we felt that even those that remained here (ex-combatants) and those who came (the original inhabitants that had fled), if we don't do it we would just be sitting and nobody would care for each other. […] If we had failed, those that had come want to revive the ceremonies and the ones that remained would have said no, it would show that there was not going to be any peace. But when we came we told them, we don't know exactly what happened, is it that

our ancestors were mad over us, is that why these things were happening? When we came we had to do it. And when we did it, we were together [...] there is reconciliation taking place in the community.[62]

Publicly confessing or explaining one's deeds does not seem to have been part of the local ceremonies. Most commonly, returning ex-combatants first turned to the chief and the elders to gain permission to re-settle in the community. The chief would then plead for acceptance by the community on the ex-combatants' behalf, often during a ceremony, and acceptance would be sealed by asking ancestors for forgiveness for all the bad that was done. Coming together to perform the ceremony was an expression of the desired reconciliation by all participants. The fact that a ceremony was organised and the community participated showed an intention, a desire for a peaceful and better future. It provided a platform to acknowledge some of the wrongs committed and to accept the ex-combatants without explicitly referring to their deeds. According to an NGO worker, being an active part of ceremonies by contributing or undergoing cleansings that the community is expecting go a long way in showing that you want to fit back in:

> If you want to stay in the community you have to go through those rituals. You see out there, they have no other alternative. All have committed a lot of atrocities in the community, if people say this is what you have to do to stay with us in our community, they have no way out, but to go through it or live on their own. It is a demand from the community.[63]

Understandably, many villagers shared a feeling of discomfort and fear of the ex-combatants. But also the hesitation on the side of the ex-combatants to approach fellow community members may have sometimes been caused by fear of being rebutted. By taking part in the ceremony they could show that they had changed their ways. As one RUF ex-combatant in Kailahun explained: '

> [...] of course, it was good. Before the ceremony we had the fear people would point fingers at us and say that we are not part of the community. But after the ceremony they saw that we are really seeking for peace and after the ceremony it was good and nobody pointed a finger at me. And there was peace after this time.[64]

This is not to say that a ceremony can magically produce reconcil-

iation. Understandably, the acceptance and reintegration of ex-com-
batants (especially adult ones) is a much more complex and delicate
process in which a ceremony can only play a part.

Closure

Much has been written about Sierra Leonean communities preferring
to leave the past behind and to 'Forgive and Forget' rather than pub-
licly recounting episodes of war violence.[65] The ceremonies assisted in
the process of social forgetting by symbolically drawing a line in the
sand. The following statement is illustrative:

> So if we have come and we have performed the ceremony like
> that, to say let us experience reconciliation among ourselves.
> So that one is over and we do not see the need to accuse any-
> one and say "you did this, you did this."[66]

Sometimes such closures were formalised during the ceremony by
installing bylaws that banned people from pointing fingers at anyone
in relation to whatever happened during the war or using terms such
as 'ex-combatant' or 'rebel' at all. Performing the ceremony could thus
be seen as representing a symbolic break with the past. The war was to
be left behind and the focus should be on making a better future.

Conclusion

Reconciliation is a long and complex process. It is not automatic or
straightforward and there is no single way of bringing communities
together after a violent conflict. In Sierra Leone, the government and
the international donor community focused their efforts and funds on
pursuing the judicial (through the Special Court) and truth-seeking
(through the TRC) processes. Little attention was given to exploring
and supporting other processes that would reflect local priorities and
conciliatory needs. Outside of official mechanisms, people in villages
across the country employed a wealth of local practices of reintegra-
tion, reconciliation and healing. These included ceremonies and other
forms of ritual, often improvised and adapted versions of established
practice, the meanings of which were familiar to those participating in
them. These were an important resource in people's efforts to remake

social relationships and restore community cohesion in the direct aftermath of the war.

First, they served the aim of facilitating community cohesion and ex-combatant reintegration. Secondly, just as they support togetherness among the living, they also foster the restoration of relationships with the spiritual world and thus ensure the support of ancestors. It is through this symbolic reconnection with the ancestral spirits that the past and present are re-linked after the war and a better future is envisaged. This makes these ceremonies an important part of post-war reconciliation efforts. Lastly, ceremonies were sometimes perceived as a particular moment in time when reconciliation had been declared and jointly endorsed. While representing the beginning of a long process rather than an achieved end state of reconciliation, they provided a symbolic closure, a break with the past.

The major obstacles for communities to perform the ceremonies were of a practical nature. In most communities people blamed lack of money, but others pointed to the permanent loss of the unique knowledge that disappeared with the death of specialists in the war. The war has caused major damage to many sacred places, including ancestral shrines. But there certainly are more factors at play that explain why in some communities ceremonies took place while in others people only lamented their absence and loss. There seems to be a relationship between the declared unity in the village and performing ceremonies. In one village in Luawa chiefdom, people proudly stated that despite the lack of money and food, everyone was encouraged to contribute at least a cup of rice and young men were sent to hunt for animals to carry out the sacrifice and cook a joint meal: '*We have done a small ceremony but we have a plan to do the proper one, and whatever happens we must do it, so that we can continue to experience peace and unity among us.*'[67] Contrarily, in a village in the Sanda Magbolonthor chiefdom, the chief told me: '*Money is not sufficient to perform the required sacrifices. Not much has been performed, nothing at all in fact. It is better to do nothing than to do it half-heartedly.*'[68] In the latter, my field notes also describe a prevailing heavy atmosphere of frustration and anger combined with despair and general destitution much unlike any other community I visited during my fieldwork. This suggests that the ability to perform any of the traditional ceremonies, instead of just bringing about unity

and reconciliation could in fact already be an expression of the capacity of the community to come together for a joint goal.

Given the prominent role traditional chiefly authorities and elders play in most of the established processes of dispute resolution and reconciliation, the quality of leadership in adapting these mechanisms to dealing with the post-war challenges seems critical. This, however, also usually meant that this reconciliation happened on 'old terms' – with the pre-war social order with its injustices and marginalisation of certain groups largely restored. In this respect, there is space where outside assistance could be fruitfully used. But this can hardly be done without increased sensitivity and understanding of the local conciliatory needs and preferences.

It makes sense to the local communities to use what they 'know' to face the challenges presented by the need to foster coexistence after the war. The communities have shown strong resilience and the ability to restore relationships and reintegrate those who have harmed them, among other things through means of local traditional practice. But it must also be emphasised that the ceremonies and other local practices of social recovery are not an easily transferable, universal formula for assisting the achievement of reconciliation in all the communities across the country. The situation in the villages that this paper focused on is very different from that in towns. Some of the most affected groups such as amputees and the war wounded, many of whom stay in specially constructed settlements usually outside major towns, are often disconnected from their home communities and their social and spiritual networks that provide the background for the traditional practice. In my conversations in an amputee and war wounded settlement outside Port Loko, people saw little value in performing any ceremonies to help them deal with their ordeals.

It would be a mistake to present the traditional reconciliation and cleansing ceremonies as a panacea for fostering a successful reconciliation process. They, after all, are also part of the damaged social fabric and not a static tool ready to be used in mending broken relationships and safeguarding unity and social renewal. But they are also rooted in the local communities' history, as well as their understanding of what reconciliation means, and have shown a high degree of adaptability to the contemporary needs of combatant reintegration and rebuilding relationships after the war. Overlooking them or barely instrumen-

talising them to turn them into an accessory of the externally-driven peacebuilding processes would therefore be just as flawed.

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Notes

1   John Paul Lederach (1997), *Building Peace. Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, p. 107.

2   Cf. Luc Huyse and Mark Salter (2008), *Traditional Justice and Reconciliation After Violent Conflict: Learning from African Experiences,* Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.

3   For a more detailed discussion of these see Kateřina Werkman (2010), 'Tradition-based Reconciliation Ceremonies and Rituals in Post-war Sierra Leone,' in Patrik Chabal and Petr Skalnik (eds.), *Africanists on Africa*, Berlin: LIT Verlag.

4   Expert Interview 12; Expert Interview 10; Manifesto 99 (2002), 'Traditional Methods of Conflict Management/Resolution of Possible Complementary Value to the Proposed Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission', Unpublished Report for the OHCHR in Sierra Leone.

5   Tim Kelsall (2005), 'Truth, Lies and Ritual: Preliminary Reflections on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Sierra Leone,' *Human Rights Quarterly*, 27, pp. 361-391; Laura Stovel, 'Long Road Home: Building Reconciliation and Trust in Post-War Sierra Leone', PhD diss., 2006, Simon Fraser University.

6   Expert Interview 12; Joe A.D. Alie (2008), 'Reconciliation and Traditional Justice: Tradition-based Practices of the Kpaa Mende in Sierra Leone,' in Huyse and Salter (2008).

7   John Williamson (2006), 'The Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers: Social and Psychological Transformation in Sierra Leone,' *Intervention* 4:3, pp.185-205; or Osman Gbla (2003), 'Conflict and Postwar Trauma Among Child Soldiers in Liberia and Sierra Leone,' in Amadu Sesay (ed.), *Civil Wars, Child Soldiers and Post Conflict Peace Building in West Africa*, Ibadan: College Press Publishers.

8   Fambul Tok International (2010), 'Community Healing in Sierra Leone and The World. Our Second year,' Annual Report. Available at: <http://www.fambultok.org/wp-content/uploads/FTIAnnualReport2010.pdf> (accessed 24 April 2011).

9   Lynn S. Graybill (2010), 'Traditional Practices and Reconciliation in Sierra

Leone: The Effectiveness of Fambul Tok,' *Conflict Trends*, 3, p.44.

10   Alie (2008).

11   Stovel (2006); Alie (2008).

12   For a more detailed discussion of the causes and events of the war see e.g. Paul Richards (1996), *Fighting for the Rainforest: War, Youth and Resources in Sierra Leone*, London: James Currey; Ibrahim Abdullah (ed.) (2004), *Democracy and Terror. The Sierra Leone Civil War*, Dakar: Codesria; David Keen (2005), *Conflict and Collusion in Sierra Leone*, Oxford: Palgrave Macmillan; or Witness to Truth: Report of the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2004), available online at: <http://www.trcsierraleone.org/drwebsite/publish/index.shtml > (accessed 18 April 2010).

13   Laura Stovel (2008), 'There's no bad bush to throw away a bad child': 'Tradition'-inspired Reintegration in Post-war Sierra Leone', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 46:2, pp. 305-324.

14   Danny Hoffman (2003), 'Like Beasts in the Bush: Synonyms of Childhood and Youth in Sierra Leone,' *Postcolonial Studies* 6:3, pp. 295-308; Alie (2008); Witness to Truth (2004).

15   Witness to Truth (2004), Vol. 3A, p. 110.

16   Idem., p. 178.

17   Idem., p. 183.

18   Following violations of the Lomé agreement, president Kabbah's government approached the UN Secretary General on 12 June 2000 with a request to initiate an establishment of an international criminal court. The Special Court for Sierra Leone was established in January 2002 and given the mandate 'to prosecute persons who bear the greatest responsibility for serious violations of international humanitarian law and Sierra Leonean law committed in the territory of Sierra Leone since 30 November 1996. Statute of the Special Court for Sierra Leone (2000), Art.1. Available online at: <http://www.sc-sl.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=uClnd1MJeEw%3D&> (Accessed 23 June 2012).

19   Lomé Peace Agreement (1999), Art.XXVI.

20   '*Kol at*' is the expression in Krio, the Sierra Leonean lingua franca. The expression in Temne is '*ka-buth ke-thofel*', in Mende it is '*ndi lei*'. Johanna Boersch-Supan (2009), 'What the Communities Say: The Crossroads Between Integration and Reconciliation. What Can Be Learned From the Sierra Leonean Experience?,' CRISE Working Paper 63, p.13.

21   Boersch-Supan (2009), p.13 , cf.Shaw (2005), 'Rethinking Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. Lessons from Sierra Leone', Special Report 130, United States Institute of Peace. Available online at: <http://www.usip.org/files/resources/sr130.pdf> (Accessed 08 October 2010).

22   Rosalind Shaw (2010), '*Tok af, lef af* ': A Political Economy of Temne Techniques of Secrecy and Self', in Ivan Karp and D.A. Masolo (eds.), *African Philosophy as Cultural Inquiry*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 40.

23   Focus Group 19.

24   Interview 35.

25   This is not to say that such reconciliation or unity is a state of perfect har-

mony of interests or of equal relationship among its members. Indeed, the present author as well as other researchers found abundant evidence that there persists discrimination against former combatants, which is often expressed in covert and subtle ways. Further, chiefs and male elders are in a dominant social position to youth and women. See Kateřina Werkman, 'Seeking Community Reconciliation through Traditional Practice. The Sierra Leonean Experience,' PhD diss., Univerzita Karlova, 2012; Stovel (2006), Boersch-Supan (2009).

26 Cf. Rosalind Shaw (2009), "The Production of 'Forgiveness': God, Justice, and State Failure in Postwar Sierra Leone', in Kamari Maxine Clarke and Mark Goodale (eds.): *Mirrors of Justice: Law and Power in the Post-Cold War Era*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 208-226.

27 Richard Dowden (2008), *Africa: Altered States, Ordinary Miracles,* London: Portobello, p. 305.

28 Focus Group 10.

29 This view was also often presented to the communities by the country's government and by the local traditional authorities. There was a very strong appeal by the government to the nation to accept the ex-combatants and 'Forgive and Forget'. Several people even today refer to the president's post--war message.

30 Interview 32.

31 According to statistics, Sierra Leoneans are about 77 % Muslim, 21 % Christian and 1 % traditional/animist. Most Sierra Leoneans also practice animist beliefs along their Muslim or Christian faiths, belong to the local secret societies and take part in diverse ritual practice. See Shaw (2009).

32 Focus Group 20.

33 Shaw (2009), p. 222.

34 Idem.

35 Stovel (2006), p. 71.

36 Victor Igreja, 'The Monkeys' Sworn Oath. Cultures of Engagement for Reconciliation and Healing in the Aftermath of the Civil War in Mozambique', PhD diss., Leiden University, 2007, p. 370.

37 Idem., pp.369-370.

38 Focus Group 29.

39 Shaw (2005), p. 9.

40 Idem.

41 Focus Group 21

42 Cf. Shaw (2005), Stovel (2008), Utas (2009), Stark (2006).

43 Secret societies are sodalities widespread among the inhabitants of Sierra Leone as well as other societies of the Upper Guinea Coast of West Africa. The most common secret societies in Sierra Leone are Bondo (in the south it is usually called Sande) for women and Poro for men. Secret societies mediate and control the power of the supernatural – the world of ancestors and spirits, so that they work in favour of the community. The societies also serve as educational institutions that supervise the rites of passage of young girls and boys into adulthood. Production of 'fully socialized human beings' is one of the main purposes of the societies.

44 The ceremonial acts such as reconciliation and cleansing rituals or pou-
    ring of libations have their roots in the traditional belief systems, which
    share some important similarities among the different ethnic groups in
    the country. Fundamental to these beliefs is the belief in the supernatural.
    This has three main elements. The first is the belief in a supreme being.
    Second is the belief in spirits or natural divinities that mainly reside in the
    'bush' and can be either good or bad. Third is belief in the spirits of the an-
    cestors who continue to influence the day-to-day affairs of the living. For
    more detail see: Manifesto 99 (2002), Alie (2008).
45 Focus Group 5.
46 Interview 16.
47 Idem.
48 Interview 15.
49 Interview 5.
50 Peter Sarpong (1988), *African Theology: A Simple Description*, Ghana: Cabo
    Publications, p. 360 cited in: Susan M. Cutter, 'Grassroots perspectives of
    peace building in Sierra Leone 1991-2006', PhD diss., 2009, Coventry Uni-
    versity, p. 45.
51 Focus Group 13.
52 Focus Group 23.
53 Rosalind Shaw (2002), *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical
    Imagination in Sierra Leone*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 268.
54 Focus Group 25.
55 Paul Richards (2006), 'An Accidental Sect: How War Made Belief in Sierra
    Leone,' *Review of African Political Economy*, 33:110, p. 652.
56 Focus Group 15.
57 Lisa Schirch (2005), *Ritual and Symbol in Peacebuilding*, Bloomfield: Kuma-
    rian Press, p. 139 cited in: Ezechiel Sentama, 'Peacebuilding in Post-Geno-
    cide Rwanda: The Role of Cooperatives in the Restoration of Interpersonal
    Relationships.' PhD diss., Gothenburg University, 2009, p. 53.
58 Focus Group 3.
59 cf. Lindsay Stark (2006), 'Cleansing the Wounds of War: an Examination
    of Traditional Healing, Psychosocial Health and Reintegration in Sierra
    Leone,' *Intervention*, 4:3, pp. 206-218.
60 Focus Group 27.
61 Interview 3.
62 Focus group 27.
63 Expert Interview 13.
64 Interview 41.
65 See Werkman (2012), Shaw (2005) and (2007), Kellsall (2005), Stovel (2006).
66 Focus Group 28.
67 Interview 48.
68 Focus Group 12.