Indigenous war commemoration: Healing, reconciliation and identity formation in rural communities in post-civil war Sierra Leone

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Abstract

This essay examines indigenous commemoration practices by rural communities in post-civil war Sierra Leone and their impact on healing, reconciliation and re-shaping group identity. The issues discussed are preliminary findings of an ongoing research into how eleven years of brutal civil war is remembered by Sierra Leoneans and how such memories are helping citizens come to terms with the conflict.

Although rural communities have adopted several approaches to remember the conflict, only three will be examined by this essay and these include restoration of sacred sites, symbolic cleansing and annual remembrance rituals. Data for examining these issues was generated from observation, focus group discussions with communities and interviews with individuals and agencies involved in reconciliation work in south eastern Sierra Leone.

This research has so far observed that most rural communities have sacred sites where rituals are performed to remember ancestors and significant historical events like the civil war. Sacred sites have strong links with the history of a social group and are therefore representations of that group's collective memory. The essay concludes that a common ancestry and collective memory have helped rural communities to reconsider their identities, put the traumatic past behind them and strive to promote coexistence for the benefit of all.

Introduction

A bloody civil war erupted in the West African state of Sierra Leone in 1991 between government forces and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and lasted for eleven years. During the war, more than 50,000 people were killed and about two million got displaced from

their homes (Sesay 2001). At the national level, economic activities stagnated and institutions were weakened, making it difficult for the state to provide basic social services. When the war ended in 2001, the government established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL) to help survivors come to terms with the conflict. The mandate of the TRC was to establish the truth about the war and reconcile divided parties (TRC Report 2004, Vol. 1: 23-26) while that of the SCSL was to prosecute "persons who bear the greatest responsibility for human rights violations" during the war (Special Court Agreement 2002 from www.scsl.org/DOCUMENTS). Although these state building interventions succeeded in compiling a historical account of the conflict, reconciliation activities were largely limited to urban communities and most perpetrators of serious human rights violations were never indicted. Considering that more than 60% of Sierra Leoneans live in rural communities (PRSP 2004), the absence of a comprehensive reconciliation programme was a threat to the fragile peace achieved at the end of the war. Mack (2005) has estimated that about 50% of countries emerging from war in Africa resume hostilities within five years of ending the conflict

In the absence of a nationwide programme for reconciliation and commemoration, rural communities relied on local arrangements to cope with the aftermath of the conflict. Although rural communities adopted several approaches to cope with the war, only three, namely restoration of sacred sites, symbolic cleansing and annual commemorative rituals will be discussed here.

The role of traditional institutions before colonialism: in retrospect

Before Sierra Leone was colonized by Britain, traditional institutions were responsible for maintaining law and order as they regulated trade, settled disputes and reconciled tribes that were in disagreement (Fyle 2002: 58, Alie 1990: 13-19). After colonization however, the British minimised the authority of traditional institutions, describing their systems as unhelpful, in a bid to entrench political control over the newly declared protectorate. Even when the British left after independence, successive post-colonial governments maintained the status-quo, further undermining the traditional leadership to suit their political aspirations (TRC Report 2004, Vol. 2: 30). Since wartime and post-war governments were still weak to provide basic services, rural communities had to rely on traditional support systems for direction.

Intervention by traditional institutions

The end of the civil war and disarmament of combatants heralded the return of displaced communities to their devastated communities to begin the process of reconstruction. There was however a high level of distrust between returnees and their neighbours who stayed behind during the war. While returnees accused their neighbours of collaborating with armed men to loot, kill and rape, those who stayed behind saw the returnees as cowards who abandoned their responsibility to protect the community. The tension in most communities was not conducive for reconstruction and this situation was made worse with the return of former fighters who had been disarmed.[1] With a weak police and judiciary, rural communities had to turn to traditional institutions to address the prevailing insecurity.

The first challenge of traditional leaders therefore was to reduce the level of suspicion and distrust between people. They achieved this by promoting dialogue between people to enable them share their personal war experiences, a form of community based truth commission which people trusted more than ongoing national one.[2] Once people started talking to each other, the level of trust began to increase gradually and the foundation for the following interventions was laid.

Restoration of shrines

After minimising the level of anger and suspicion through mediation, traditional institutions set out to restore shrines to their original states of sanctity, to make them suitable for ancestors once more to reside and “rest in peace”. Shrines are used by rural communities for indigenous religious rituals and to communicate with ancestors. In Sierra Leone some other West African countries, shrines are common features of rural settings and are usually placed in demarcated areas, for ritual purposes only. Sacred sites are part of the community's history as they are considered to have been established by forefathers who founded those communities. Due to their long association with a group's past, shrines are representations of collective memory and

[1] Ex-fighters were hated for their role during the war and were seen as potential sources for destabilizing communities in the future

[2] People generally perceived that the TRC and SCSL had strong links in terms of exchanging information. Most people therefore refused to testify before the TRC, fearing that their testimonies will be used by the Special to invite them in as witnesses.

are therefore important assets in rural communities. They are considered the resting places of ancestors and are revered and protected by concerned communities (Probst 2007: 203-106).

During the war however, most shrines around the country were desecrated by armed men and it is believe that defiling a sacred place will offend and displace ancestors, causing the community to forfeit ancestral protection and favours. The overall aim of shrine restoration therefore was to re-establish the broken links between the past and the present and between the spirit world of ancestors and that of the living.[3] In the process of restoring these broken links, communities were able to strengthen relationships between individuals and families once divided by conflict, thereby promoting coexistence.

In rural Sierra Leone, individuals and families are endowed with different skills to perform public functions. Some are natural leaders, providing direction, others are diplomats, intervening and settling disputes and others are oral historians, to name a few. Apart from the physical realm, some individuals possess skills that address the spiritual concerns of communities - diviners and healers belong to this group. As a Sierra Leonean growing up in rural communities, I noted long ago that these skills were widely distributed in communities. It was however during this research that I understood the significance of such pattern of distribution. Even distribution ensures that knowledge and skills are never in the hands of one family, thus making people in rural communities to rely on each other for support and survival.

Restoring a public asset like a shrine requires community-wide input as the skills required are in the hands of different individuals and there is no way a community can undertake this venture if they are in disagreement. Divided communities were therefore faced with two options, remain divided and break connection with their ancestors or reconcile as a family and enjoy their favours. Faced with this dilemma, communities had no choice but to reconcile, put individual pains of the civil war behind them and work together for a better future of the community. Common ancestry and the aspiration for a shared future are probably contributory factors to the culture of social forgetting of trauma that is prevalent in Sierra Leone (Basu 2007: 239). Restoring a shrine involves structural rehabilitation where necessary, followed by purification to make it suitable for ancestors. Purification involves sprinkling water mixed with

[3] Interview with Hassan Feika, Bo, 12 May 2009. Hassan Feika is the Director for Bo Peace and Reconciliation Movement, an NGO involved in settling disputes using traditional approaches.

herbs around the shrine to literally “wash it”. Symbolic washing is followed by offering food and drink sacrifices to appease ancestors, which will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

Symbolic cleansing

Individuals who commit heinous crimes[4] such as murder, rape and cruelty to children are considered defiled and spiritually unclean. To foster harmony between these individuals and the community including ancestors, some form of symbolic ritual cleansing is necessary. However, cleansing individuals who committed such crimes during the war posed dilemmas for traditional leaders. In rural communities, purification rites begin with a public confession of the wrongs done and a plea for forgiveness from victims and the whole community. Considering that people were struggling to recover from abuse and trauma, a public confession by an ex-combatant would infuriate the community, especially victims. This phase of reconciliation was therefore handled carefully with the chiefs and religious leaders counselling victims to forgive to forgive their relatives. After confession, reactions were encouraged from victims to literally 'remove the bitterness from their hearts' and to forgive for the benefit of the community.[5] Once confession and forgiveness were concluded, the wrongdoer was handed over to the traditional healer/diviner for symbolic cleansing. Cleansing involves washing the individual with water mixed with special herbs and the diviner chants throughout the process for ancestors to forgive. On completion of symbolic washing, the person was considered clean enough to reconcile with the community.

Water is a principal element in purifying both man and shrine. While water is generally considered to purify and sustain life, it is also a symbol for maintaining cordial relationships in rural communities. In Sierra Leone, attributes like anger, hate, lack of forgiveness and greed are related to the state of one’s heart. Hence, krio terms like *"bad at"* (bad heart or selfishness), *"wam at"* (hot heart or bad temper) are used all over the country.[6] While water purifies, it is also meant to "cool" the hearts of individuals to improve their relationship with others. On completion of symbolic washing, water is offered to the individual to drink and to rub on his/her chest. Water is also used extensively in other parts of Africa for ritual purposes. In Nigeria for

[4] Crimes such as murder and rape are matters for state courts to handle. In most communities, people who get acquitted by the courts are still considered to have wronged the whole community. They are therefore required by tradition to undergo purification rituals to help them reconcile with others.
[5] Discussion with Peter Mboyawa, Kailahun, 4 May 2009
[6] Apart from Krio, most local languages also link negative attributes to the state of one’s heart.

example, water from the Osun River is believed to have cleansing and healing properties and bathing with it marks the climax of the annual Osun festival (Probst 2007: 104-105).

Indigenous commemorative rituals[7]

Annual festivals and commemorative rituals are used by various communities around the world; no wonder Gilmour concluded that "modern societies still need myth and ritual". While the aim of annual celebrations is to remember significant past events, ancestors and local heroes, they also create opportunities for people who share similar values to interact and strengthen their identity (Cannadine 1992: 103). Similarly, rural communities in Sierra Leone have used annual traditional ceremonies to honour ancestors, remember the past and strengthen social ties/networks that were broken by the civil conflict.

In some communities, rituals tend to follow similar patterns and usually commence with the following incantation by the diviner, *"Leve yei yo-ooo ngi bi lo vei"*[8] (Mendi, which translates as "Almighty God, come down and receive our offering"). After the formal opening, the local historian then recites the names of ancestors, recounting their deeds in the past. Public recital aims at recognizing contributions made by ancestors and it is also a call for their presence at the gathering. Recognition of ancestors is followed by the diviner doing a general confession on behalf of the community with a request to ancestors to forgive the wrongs done by the living. Instead of asking for forgiveness, a few communities prevailed on ancestors to intercede for them before God.[9]

Pouring of libation follows next and involves sharing alcohol and water with ancestors. The use of alcohol symbolizes friendship and sharing with the dead while water is meant to "cool their hearts" for the living and to bless them abundantly. Libation is followed by offering cooked food and in some cases an animal could be slaughtered to offer its blood.

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[7] Annual commemorative rituals are prevalent in the southern and eastern regions of Sierra Leone and are organized to remember ancestors and important historical events.
[8] South eastern Sierra Leone (where this research has so far covered) is predominantly inhabited by the Mende tribe. Among the Mendes, God is known by several names and "*Leve*" is one of them. They further believe that *Leve* is too mighty to be approached directly and people/communities must seek his favour through ancestors and local deities.
[9] Field notes from eastern Sierra Leone, May 2009.

Once drinks are shared, issues affecting the community are presented to the ancestors with a request for guidance and wisdom to address them. While the general appeal is being made, individuals are expected to silently present their personal or family wishes to ancestors. In some communities, the chief is required to make a promise to do all she/he can to keep the community united and to resolve conflicts swiftly and honestly. Annual commemorations end with entertainment which can last for the whole day.

Rituals are held in the dry season and post-civil war rural communities have used them to remember and to promote coexistence. As stated above, rituals require active involvement of the entire community and therefore provide an environment for individuals divided by conflict to discuss and interact. Rituals also have strong tendencies to strengthen group identity and cohesion and this is based on the following reasoning. Annual ceremonies and shrines are deeply rooted in the past of a social group that tend share common values and heritage. In as much as annual ceremonies are meant to reaffirm a common ancestry and remember a collective past, they also help a group to redefine its future through the appeal made on behalf of the entire community. A common past and a shared future are therefore strong elements for defining group identity and maintaining cohesion.

Traditional ceremonies in rural Sierra Leone are conscious efforts by communities to communicate with and foster a relationship with a supernatural being, although adherents prefer to do so through their ancestors. Winter (1998) described this approach as secular spiritualism; a religious practice in which adherents believe in the existence of life after death and strive to communicate with the dead who are believed to have supernatural powers. Belief in a supreme being and attempts to communicate with ancestors are also basic tenets of African Traditional Religion (Kamara, 2003: 564)

Observing commemorative rituals remind me of a typical Roman Catholic act of worship. When the Catholic Church celebrates mass, priests invoke the names of saints to intercede for adherents, individuals confess their sins and ask for forgiveness and the congregation reaffirm their faith and identity through the Apostles Creed. The mass ends with offering and sharing of bread and wine which are similar to the procedures at annual indigenous rituals.

Conclusion

Traditional commemorations and rituals have been helpful in post-conflict communities in rural Sierra Leone. In addition to reconciling divided communities, they have also contributed to strengthening group identity and unity which are key requirements for conflict prevention. Aware of the effectiveness of indigenous mechanisms for resolving conflicts and helping survivors cope with the effects of the civil war, the truth commission recommended that they be considered to promote reconciliation and unity (TRC Report 2004, Vol. 3b: 437- 439). Although efforts are being made improve the security and judiciary sectors, rural communities in Sierra Leone will remain isolated for some time and will have to rely on traditional systems to promote peaceful coexistence. Rural communities in Sierra Leone have demonstrated a willingness to put the brutal conflict behind them, build relationships and chart a new way forward. While the government will find lessons from rural communities useful for promoting national unity, transitional justice practitioners too could find them helpful for addressing divisions in post-conflict situations in Africa.

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