

Between Western Theory and Local Practice: Cultural Impediments to Truth-Telling in Sierra Leone

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Although truth commissions are thought to provide healing and justice in postwar situations, some scholars worry that such mechanisms emerge from Western theories that may be inapplicable in many cultural settings. Based on an ethnographic study of local experiences of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Sierra Leone, this article describes how local cultural dynamics determine whether truth-telling is experienced as predicted by peacebuilding theory. This article argues that the variability of such dynamics, which create unique local conceptual constructs and norms, often militates against the application of truth-telling processes, and that this was clearly the case in Sierra Leone.

Introduction

Within conflict resolution (CR) we have accepted, to a great extent, the divisions between peacemaking, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding (Galtung, 1976; Fisher, 1993). As a subfield of CR, peacebuilding can itself be divided into three different projects: those of state-building, economic development, and societal reconciliation and justice (Swedlund, 2011, p. 5). This article is concerned primarily with this third project, postwar reconciliation and justice. The theories within this area have been associated with a number of different perspectives: the psychosocial (Fisher, 2001; Kelman, 2004; Maoz, 2004; Nadler and Schnabel, 2008), the legal (Orentlicher, 1994, 2007; Mani, 2002; Teitel, 2003; Schabas, 2004), the religious (Tutu, 1999; Little, 2007; Philpott, 2007, 2009), and more recently, the social or economic (Arbour, 2007; Miller, 2008; Nagy,

2008; Millar, 2011). Another recent perspective, which has proven to be more critical of postwar reconciliation and justice mechanisms, is the anthropological (Wilson, 2001; Kelsall, 2005; Shaw, 2005, 2007; Honwana, 2006; Theidon, 2006).

In many ways, however, while anthropologists often critique theories of reconciliation and justice, their emphasis on the lived experience of postwar situations rarely leads them to focus on developing those theories. This article, therefore, attempts to bridge the gap between the peacebuilding theory and the anthropological critique. By reflecting on findings from an ethnographic study exploring the experience of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in postwar Sierra Leone, this article investigates the “frictions” (Tsing, 2005) that occur between theory and experience, and hopes to lead to more sensitive peacebuilding practice.

This article examines the conceptual constructs that shape local experiences of Truth Commission (TC) processes. Although alterations in commission structure have allowed different iterations of the model to adjust to some extent to local demands in individual transitional situations, I argue that the professionalization of this area of peacebuilding (Kritz, 2009) has led to a reliance on specific conceptions of reconciliation rooted in Judeo-Christian theology (Philpott, 2007) and Western theories of psychological therapy (Pupavac, 2004; Gilligan, 2006). Therefore, although the mechanisms of TC implementation evolve and the specific structures of TCs change incrementally from case to case, the underlying theories remain the same, that truth leads to both healing and justice. The purpose of this article is, therefore, to describe how this impacts the local experience of a TC in one setting, thus allowing a detailed description of the cultural elements that give rise to particular conceptions of healing and justice and therefore impose on the local reception of a TC process.

I proceed by providing brief overviews of the conflict in Sierra Leone and of the theories that guide the administration of TCs in postwar settings. I then review past engagement with conceptions of culture within CR theory, and describe the local experiences of healing and justice in response to the TRC’s work in northern Sierra Leone. I next investigate the difficulty of administering international projects in local settings by exploring the complicated cultural context within which those experiences are embedded and describing their impact on the practice of the TRC. I conclude the article with recommendations for overcoming the problems experienced by the TRC in Sierra Leone in future postwar reconciliation projects.

The Uncivil War in Sierra Leone

In the spring of 1991, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) entered Sierra Leone from Liberia in the southeast. Recruiting from a disenfranchised and alienated population (Archibald and Richards, 2002), the RUF grew in size until the All People's Congress (APC) government, which had been ruling since 1968, fell in a coup in the spring of 1992. From this point on the war was characterized by a series of coups and stalemates, and over the following eleven years as many as 1.7 million people were displaced (Amowitz and others, 2002) and more than 50,000 died (Bellows and Miguel, 2006). Although sporadic and dispersed, the violence during the war was often extreme. Richards (1996) describes the burning of villages and the amputation of fingers and hands, while Williams (2001) notes that combatants were known to mutilate and sometimes even eat their victims during "drug-induced atrocities" (p. 15). In addition, the capture and use of children as couriers, bush wives, and combatants was widely reported (Shepler, 2004; Park, 2006) and the general abuse of the civilian population became a hallmark of the war.

The memories of this past violence survive today on the bodies of the victims and on the scarred ground of the country itself, and thousands of amputees, former child soldiers, and the survivors of rape and other violence still struggle with the legacy of war. In the immediate aftermath, in 2002, the international community created two institutions to provide healing and justice. These were the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL), designed to try "those who bear the greatest responsibility," and the TRC, thought to provide *restorative* justice and healing, both to individuals and to the nation as a whole (Evenson, 2004; Schabas, 2004). However, the actual local experiences of the TRC with which I am here concerned have been mixed at best, exhibiting the very friction between theory and practice that many anthropologists critique (Kelsall, 2005; Shaw, 2005, 2007). Before investigating exactly why this is so, it is important to explain how such processes are theorized to work.

The Theory of Truth Commissions

Although each individual TC is "defined and set in motion by a context specific mandate and not by an overarching international law which dictates its form and function" (Millar, 2009, p. 220), over time TCs have become more likely to follow a certain format and include particular characteristics

(Freeman, 2006). These characteristics are included based on their theorized ability to produce certain social effects in response to particular abuses of the past. In the initial South American cases, where many victims had disappeared with no acknowledgment or record on the part of the perpetrators, TCs were thought to provide an account of the past violations, an *acknowledgment* of the clandestine actions of the state (Asmal, 1992; Van Zyl, 2005; Roht-Arriaza, 2006), or an “affirmation of atrocity” (Minow, 1998, p. 4). This acknowledgment of wrongdoing was thought to be a form of justice in itself. In these cases, *truth-seeking* was thought to lead to justice because it overcame the abuse by providing what had been previously denied.

However, following the case of South Africa, the process of truth-seeking has largely been replaced with that of *truth-telling*. Performances of truth-telling are theorized to catalyze psychological or *socioemotional* healing (Nadler and Schnabel, 2008) and to provide a new form of justice—restorative justice—to victims and perpetrators of violence (Leebaw, 2003; Teitel, 2003). A number of scholars have evaluated these new truth-telling TCs quantitatively (Mullet and others, 2008; Kpanake and Mullet, 2010), and ethnographic methods can build on these studies by putting such findings into context and allowing an understanding of the complex interaction between theory and practice within an often-unstable and insecure postwar setting.

It must be noted, however, that comparing quantitative and qualitative methods is sometimes difficult, and comparisons across cases are similarly complicated. Whereas Gibson (2004) found that the South African TRC assisted locals to reconcile with each other in the post-Apartheid period and the positive results from this case have greatly impacted the field and popularized the truth-telling method of reconciliation (Freeman, 2006), the success of this model in South Africa has not been easily replicated. Many have noted that the South African case is somewhat of an anomaly, as the title of Graybill’s (2002) book suggested when it asked whether the South African TRC should be seen as a *Miracle or Model?*

There are a number of elements of the South African case that limit its applicability as a model for a TC in Sierra Leone. For example, one of the primary successes of the South African TRC was its ability to provide “a powerful media image that could be conveyed to the country as a whole” (Van der Merwe, 2001, p. 189), and which provided a “moment of common experience that transcend[ed] the daily divergence of lives” (Krabill, 2001, p. 570). The testimony presented publicly at the hearings “is considered by many as

the most important accomplishment of the TRC” (Popkin and Bhuta, 1999, p. 120). Max du Preez’s “Special Reports” television show was broadcast nationally by the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), and transmitted the stories of both victims and perpetrators into the homes of the average citizen (Daniel, 2000). In addition, in South Africa, where 81 percent of the population was literate at the time of the TRC (United Nations Development Program [UNDP], 1996), the commission could also communicate through the print media.

Sierra Leone’s TRC benefited from no such media exposure. Television coverage barely exists outside of Freetown even today and, with a literacy rate of just 36 percent (UNDP, 2004), even print media had little ability to create a “powerful media image.” The media was a central part of the TRC’s success in South Africa because it gave the commission a much-needed national profile, and, because it was free, this profile was not constrained by the limited reserves (\$18 million per year) of the commission itself (Quinn and Freeman, 2003). In Sierra Leone the commission, on an even more limited budget of just \$4.7 million total (Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC], 2004), largely had to pay for its own sensitization and outreach projects. The public hearings themselves, with the limited audiences they could incorporate, became the primary means of reaching the larger population and it was simply not possible for the Sierra Leonean TRC to have the same level of impact.

There were a number of other significant elements that facilitated the success of the South African case but were absent in Sierra Leone. The very presence and leadership of Tutu and Mandela and the unprecedented level of international media attention both had positive effects, and the very nature of the conflict in South Africa, in which the primary and overriding division was between racialized communities, was amenable to a reconciliatory process of this nature. Those who had committed abuses were understood by the TRC to have done so as part of a larger conflict between social groups. Indeed, amnesty was provided by the TRC only for abuses committed for political purposes (Gibson, 2002). In Sierra Leone the conflict was not primarily fought between preexisting social groups, and many abuses were not committed primarily for political purposes. It is broadly recognized today that no preexisting ethnic or racial identity was involved in the pursuit of the war (Stovel, 2008). In fact, Sierra Leone has become somewhat of a “poster child for theories that distinguish ‘new’ civil wars driven by greed and economic motivations from ‘old’ conflicts shaped by ideologies and political demands” (Humphreys and Weinstein, 2008, p. 439).

Shaw (2005) argues that the perceived success of the South African case has “valorized a particular kind of memory practice: ‘truth-telling,’ the public recounting of memories of violence” as the best, if not the only, way to achieve the redefinition of collective memory (p. 1). As stated earlier, this method of intervention is based on its theorized effects in relation to the abuses of the past. In South Africa it was applied and, many argue, successful because it responded to the local needs and was able to benefit from local strengths. The problem arises when the model is transported out of one context and into others.

The TRC in Sierra Leone, starting its work five years later, chose to follow that case’s performative truth-telling process. The presentation of testimony in front of public audiences in each of twelve district-headquarter towns throughout the country catered, it was claimed, “to the needs of the victims” and promoted “social harmony and reconciliation” (TRC, 2004, p. 231). The peacebuilding theories of performative reconciliation and justice, as had been popularized by that largely dissimilar case in South Africa, were embodied and embedded in the practice of truth-telling within the TRC in Sierra Leone. However, it is this very performative process that makes modern TCs reliant on local perceptions and receptions of their work. Performance demands local cultural salience and a connection to the norms and expectations of the local community. Evaluating such processes demands, therefore, a new attention to cultural norms and an anthropological perspective on peacebuilding.

Anthropology and Postwar Peacebuilding Theory

Schatzberg (1993) has argued that culturally variable conceptions are problematic for the application of “theoretical models derived primarily from the experience of the West” (p. 445). In this case he was talking about democratization, and he made it clear that in much of Africa political legitimacy is based on a “complex and largely unarticulated moral matrix” divergent from that in the West (p. 451). He described this moral matrix as similar to Victor Turner’s *root paradigm* (1974), wherein “certain consciously recognized (though not consciously grasped) cultural models in the heads of the main actors” delimit ideas of what is appropriate, or what is normal (p. 458). I want to take this insight and apply it to peacebuilding, a field where deep thought about the cultural variability of concepts, and the resulting problem for practice on the ground, is rarely considered.

Scholars in the field of anthropology have long studied the diverse indigenous methods of conflict resolution in societies around the world (Dillon, 1976; Eckett and Newmark, 1980; Hamer, 1980; Podolefsky, 1990; Al-Krenawi and Graham, 1999) and a handful of CR theorists have made valiant and informative efforts to incorporate anthropological insights into their work on negotiation (Cohen, 1997), mediation (Augsburger, 1992), dialogue (Abu-Nimer, 1999; Smock, 2002), peacekeeping (Rubinstein, 1993, 2003), and general CR theory (Bernard, 1957; Fink, 1968; Lederach, 1995; Avruch, 1998). However, these authors focus on particular processes of conflict resolution that in their specifics involve forms of interaction and communication unlike the public performances and mass audiences of modern TCs.

For example, Rubinstein's work on peacekeeping (1993, 2003), Schirch's work on peacebuilding (2001, 2005), and Avruch's influential "Culture and Conflict Resolution" (1998), which covers mediation, negotiation, and track II diplomacy efforts, each take great care to discuss the role of cultural assumptions and the need for cultural sensitivity. They also articulate nuanced conceptions of culture as socially constructed, variable, and adaptive. However, these authors in no way tackle the public and performative nature of truth-telling processes and the manner in which this is theorized to elicit emotive and cognitive changes. As such, this CR literature fails to take the specific dynamics of TCs into account, and thus, fails to analyze the results of cultural diversity for such performative processes.

Lederach (1995) demands a nuanced and adaptive, or an *elicitive*, approach to conflict transformation processes and training, but in his work specifically dealing with reconciliation (1997, 1999) his specific biases privileging truth, mercy, justice, and peace portray a particular conception of reconciliation that is, according to the theories of his earlier work, culturally prescribed. His approach to reconciliation directly reflects his particular religious faith and training, as do those of many others (Tutu, 1999; Gopin, 2001; Smock, 2002). Such theories of reconciliation are, as Philpott (2007) has argued, rooted in the Abrahamic traditions. As such, the theories within CR that have attempted to take culture seriously either fail to address the processes unique to reconciliation, or fail to break from restrictive cultural constraints. I attempt, therefore, to bridge the gap between anthropologists such as Shaw (2005) and Das (2003, 2007), who discuss postwar recovery but do not attempt to develop CR theory, and the peacebuilding literature within CR, which has failed thus far to respond to the anthropological critique.

To do this I approached the project as an ethnographic study of the local experiences of the TRC, and spent from August 2008 until June 2009 in one rural northern town called Makeni. I conducted participant observation among a variety of local organizations and gained many insights into the experience of living in rural postwar Sierra Leone. In addition, I conducted a series of sixty-two semistructured interviews to investigate local understanding, perception, evaluation, and overall experience of the process. Together, the participant observation and interviews provided both direct evaluations of the process from local people and an understanding of the political, economic, social, and cultural context in which to situate those evaluations.

Local Experiences of Psychosocial Reconciliation and Justice

In two previous articles I have described the TRC's ability to provide, first, psychological healing (Millar, 2010), and second, postwar justice (Millar, 2011). These articles present the voices of Makeni residents and show quite clearly that the impact or effect of the TRC's public truth-telling was not what peacebuilding theorists would predict. Although members of the local elite were more likely to report a positive experience of the TRC process (Millar, 2010), the overwhelming finding was that conceptions of psychosocial healing and reconciliation in Makeni and the surrounding villages are distinctly different from what peacebuilding theorists suggest.

As Hanna, a young housewife in Makeni, said, the TRC was largely "coming to add pepper in my wound." It was widely seen as a provocation, as it provided nothing that Makeni residents considered helpful and was just *tok-tok*, Krio for too much talk. Our normative ideas about what people need in order to heal wartime traumas, often some combination of truth, apology, forgiveness, and acknowledgment (Tavuchis, 1991; Kriesberg, 1999, 2004; Lederach, 1999; Fisher, 2001), were simply inapplicable among local non-elite residents of Makeni.

The same is true with regard to local experiences of justice. The theory argues, or it could be said, the normative claim goes, that TCs produce restorative justice within the community (Leebaw, 2003; Menkel-Meadow, 2007), and some authors have even demanded a postwar or post-transition "right to truth" that ensures victims and survivors the universal right to such justice (Antkowiak, 2002; Naqvi, 2006). But again, when you investigate local experiences of the TRC in Sierra Leone and actually ask people whether it provided them with a sense that justice had been

done, the answer is largely negative (Millar, 2011). To most residents of Makeni, living as they do on the edge of survival, justice would have been a return to the lives people were living prior to the violations of the war—the provision of housing, health care, education, employment, roads, and food. During my research I found that few residents of Makeni found truth-telling to provide either a cathartic experience or a sense of justice.

Local Cultural Dynamics and the Formation of Peacebuilding Concepts

The findings presented earlier are illustrative of a disconnection between peacebuilding theory and practice. The brief explanations given for this disconnection, which focus on the very practical needs of Sierra Leoneans in the postwar environment, do not sufficiently explore the complexities involved in the collision of concepts in peacebuilding processes. Such an exploration demands more concentration on the cultural dynamics operative in the local setting and in the minds of the local audience. In this case, these cultural dynamics fall into three main categories: (1) the local “aesthetic of secrecy,” (2) the predominance of and reliance on patron–client networks, and (3) the influence and role of religion. Although these three factors are interrelated and interacting as they impact on the reception of the TRC process, I will first discuss each dynamic individually and will return at the end to the complicated interaction between the three.

Aesthetics of Secrecy

In her critique of the TRC, Rosalind Shaw argues that in Sierra Leone “social forgetting is a cornerstone of established processes of reintegration and healing” (2005, p. 1). Memories of violence in Sierra Leone have historically been deposited as cultural artifacts common in the everyday rituals of traditional life, but are rarely discussed openly in public or explained and described in front of an audience (Shaw, 2002). Mariane Ferme (2001) describes such artifacts as reifications of social memory and explains the process by which this occurs as part of the production of secrecy and the manner by which social actors both believe and *make people believe* in order to maintain power and influence.

Following this line of thought we can understand the aesthetic of secrecy as a network of interrelated social norms that operate to generate a social structure centered around the control of knowledge and the management

of impressions—a structure that hides painful social memories within physical artifacts and ceremonial rites and rituals, memorizing them out in the open but in a concealed form. There are a number of institutions and practices within which we can see the operation of this aesthetic in the everyday lives of Sierra Leoneans.

The first is the prominence of secret societies throughout the region, the most prevalent being the men's Poro society and the women's Sande or Bundu societies. Throughout Sierra Leone the leaders of these societies "claim exclusive knowledge of the skills required to safely separate and purify male and female elements and to conduct ordinary people through the dangerous transitions that involve contact with the opposite sex" (Bledsoe, 1984, p. 466). Each society controls powerful magical objects and the fearsome devils, which are held in awe by members and nonmembers alike. In Makeni, friends of mine often expressed true fear at the power of the secret society elders and their magic. According to a number of my informants, this great power, the knowledge of which is tightly controlled, allows the Poro to kill men and then restore them to life, or to remove men's body parts such as fingers and penises, and rejoin them at a later time. The fear of these societies and their incredible powers drives non-initiates indoors during initiation periods and fills young initiates with an awe and reverence for society elders.

Another dimension of this aesthetic is the tendency for Sierra Leoneans to separate space assigned for secret knowledge and secret communication from space assigned for public or non-secret events. As Murphy explains, "[t]he archetypal spatial contrast . . . is the contrast between the 'village' as a public domain and the 'forest' as a hidden domain of secret ritual and clandestine meetings" (1990, p. 27). In sacred, secret spaces, often in the forest, medicines are mixed and manipulated, protective spirits are called on and communed with, and secret society initiation rites and rituals are performed. In Makeni, this division of space reinforces the awe and fear associated with the power and authority of the secret society elders, secret space being marked off from non-initiates and a source of terror for those who fear the unseen powers that reside there.

This secret knowledge, secret power, and secret space also informs political action, as it is by controlling access to knowledge of these secrets that societies can control potent political forces (Bledsoe, 1984). As Murphy states, "an extraordinary political performance or outcome evoke(s) the wonder of a secret source of transformative power generating astonishing public effects" (1998, p. 564). The result is that "surprising political outcomes

derived from intricate clandestine strategizing or secret mystical manipulations evoke recognition of actors transcending the official public rules of the political order,” in essence, garnering fame and recognition for somehow circumventing the usual procedures or transparent political processes (Murphy, 1998, p. 567).

This all leads to what could be seen as the final social product of the aesthetic of secrecy, the bestowal of status and power based on the control of information. In a society where secrecy is of the utmost importance, “(a)ccess to secrets can mark the success or failure of individuals who attempt to advance within politico-economic hierarchies” (Bledsoe and Robey, 1986, p. 205). Politicians themselves become famous and gain power by mastering the many “intricate political tricks” that are necessary to manipulate public and private images, the public and secret space, and, most importantly, the secret knowledge (Murphy, 1998, p. 570).

In Makeni such practices were clear in most communications that involved money, authority, or power. Local people I worked with tried to constantly micromanage information in an attempt to control the potential outcomes of each interaction. When I first arrived in Makeni I often felt as though I was being told just enough to feel informed, but not enough to know anything specific. Communication in such a context places a premium on controlling, as opposed to transferring, information. We can easily see, however, how the need to *make people believe* will impose itself on the operations of a *truth* commission. Similarly, we can easily see how the control of information might be intricately related to the maintenance of patron–client relationships.

Patron–Client Networks

Nyerges (1992) argues that the particular ecology of Sierra Leone leads to a high valuation of human labor, and therefore to wealth-in-people. That is, “[o]n the frontier, the direct expression of and means to wealth is the control of persons, their reproduction, and labor” (Nyerges, 1992, p. 863). In support of this theory, Ferme found that “the first indication of a rural Mende’s wealth, be he chief or commoner, was the number of his wives, children, and other dependents” (2001, p. 172), and Jones (1983) describes the wealth of one powerful Mende as consisting “not only of goods (both European and African) and fine houses, but also of human beings whose services he controlled” (p. 103).

But this system is not, as it may initially appear, characterized simply by top-down dominance or manipulation. Indeed, systems of patron–client

relationships are reciprocal relationships. When consumption by the big persons is “balanced by generosity and other benevolent forms of extension to their dependents and supporters, big persons are understood as acting within moral limits” (Shaw, 2002, p. 256). In this way there is “the implicit understanding that a chief will give his protection to those who submit to his authority and place themselves in his hands” (Jackson, 2005, p. 47). Leach (1994) reports that Gola big persons often provide men the money necessary for brideprices, thus “giving them leverage over the labour [sic] of both the man and his new wife” (p. 82), but also providing a way for that man to obtain a wife, which may otherwise be impossible. However, if and when the big persons overdo their privileges, they are no longer operating within the socially normative processes of give and take. Shaw (1996) in fact argues that such big men risk being accused of the worst forms of cannibalistic bad medicine.

What is important here is the implication of mutual dependence and of social connections between people at different levels of society. In contemporary Sierra Leone big persons are politicians, representatives of international nongovernmental organizations, businessmen, religious leaders, traditional chiefs, and leaders of the local secret societies. These big persons are responsible for the needs of their dependents, and their dependents rely on them for resources, support, and opportunities. In many ways such patron–client relationships are the norm, they are the accepted practice. Within such a context the norm is for patrons to provide resources, whether cash or in-kind, to distressed or needy clients. The TRC, as a UN-organized and primarily white, European-run operation, was recognized as a patron by Sierra Leoneans. In accordance with local norms, it was expected to do the responsible thing and provide those clients with necessary resources. This is, of course, not what it set out to do, but it is the norm within which it was operating and the standard by which it was judged. In such cases, where justice would be considered the provision of resources or the rebuilding of prewar lives, TCs clearly are not the answer to local needs.

In recognizing this complex relationship between power and authority, responsibility and legitimacy, we must also recognize the potential for this cultural dynamic to influence local conceptions of the TRC. Although it may be inappropriate to judge the commission negatively for not providing something TCs are not designed to provide, it is not illegitimate to judge it negatively for saying it is coming to help victims but to fail to understand how local people themselves define postwar help. In addition,

local conceptions of power and legitimate authority diminish the non-elite role in processes of peacebuilding. Local people do not see themselves as decision makers; they are decision recipients. As one interviewee noted, those who participated in the process were the stakeholders, those who “hold the town.” The patron–client system is in many ways the antithesis of the liberal system from which truth-telling processes arise. Clients are very explicitly not the equals of their patrons, and they should not take an equal role in disseminating knowledge and presenting *truth*. This alternative conception of individual power and agency is influenced and compounded also by local religious beliefs and commitments.

Religious Leaders and Beliefs

Early in the research process it became evident that religion was playing an extremely important role in local evaluations of the TRC. It became clear first that much of the commission’s rhetoric about the importance of peace and forgiveness had been accepted by local people, but also that it had been accepted long before the TRC arrived. Locals saw the TRC as primarily coming to talk, and in their opinion the religious leaders, the imams, priests, and ministers, had already done this. To most non-elite locals, whether Christian or Muslim, the TRC process was in a very practical way redundant. Interviewees described the message of the priests, pastors, and imams very clearly. When we asked Sallamatu, an older Muslim woman, what the imam had said to her about forgiveness, she said:

He is telling us that everything is finished. You should just *bear now for all that has been done to you*. Whatever they did to you, your person, your father, your mother, your husband, *you need to bear and leave everything to God almighty*.

This was the general message communicated by the religious leaders, and most residents of Makeni seemed to agree that it was their responsibility to forgive because, as we were regularly told, “God forgives us.” When we asked Fata, a sixty-one-year-old Catholic man, about what his priest said about the war, he said:

Well, they were comparing with our savior Jesus Christ. He dies for our sins and we that committed the sins killed him. But at the time Jesus was on the cross he said that they should forgive us for the sin. So they usually give those examples when the priest preach in the church, and

he also said that all of us are sinners and if you commit a sin know that you want God to forgive you, so *you also need to learn to forgive others.*

In this way local non-elites in Makeni had learned from their religious leaders that it is their responsibility to forgive, that God expects them to forgive, and that the only justice will come through God. It could of course be argued that the preaching of religious leaders did not end the war, and that people may not forgive each other solely because of preaching. However, this underestimates the power of God in the everyday life of Sierra Leoneans, which is quite unlike that in the West. In Makeni, very few people I met cared whose God you believed in, but it was very important that you do believe because God was very real in the lives of locals in Makeni. He imposed his will on a daily basis and on the minute events of life. In Sierra Leone, God is believed to intervene in reality and determine the course of events. In practical terms, or at least in relation to the truth-telling practices of the TRC, this everyday power and reality of God, of a power outside and above man, limited the importance of simple processes like personal forgiveness or human justice. To many in Makeni, it is not man's role to choose forgiveness, it is man's role to "bear and leave all to God."

We heard repeatedly during our interviews that individuals had "*lef ma case fo God*" (left my case to God). According to Yeabu, a thirty-year-old food-seller who had left Makeni when she was younger but had returned during the war, forgiveness means, "Let me don't go and talk about it again. Let me leave him to the almighty." And Karimu, a thirty-six-year-old Temne man working as a farmer, believed that to forgive means "to *bear and leave everything to God.*"

The significance of these quotes can be understood only by realizing that, to many in Makeni, God is seen in everything that happens. Some even expressed the opinion that he was the cause of the war itself. This was Amadu's opinion. As he said:

Always I remember my family members that were killed during this war. I will never forget about them and it is always in my heart, but I have nothing much to do because I also believe *that it was planned by God for it to happen.*

Perhaps the most influential interviewee to make this argument was the District Chief Imam, who stated:

Anything that God has made to be a destiny to you there is no way except that it has to happen. If you see a rebel comes, he comes and cut off your hands or he comes and kill you, *it is God almighty that agrees*. Like when we were here in Makeni . . . the place where they ran to, it was there they went and died. Some, where they went to, is where they amputated them. You see, those things *all it is God Almighty*. Anything that has held you, now, which happens to be in your life, *you should leave everything to God*.

I acknowledge that it may be difficult for Western readers to understand the significance of these kinds of thoughts for processes such as truth-telling within a TRC. Many in the West, and particularly in the United States, believe in God, but we largely balance or even countermand this belief with convictions about our own personal agency. As Shapiro and colleagues argue, Western psychology has largely been committed to an *internal* locus-of-control, an “understanding of control as active and instrumental,” located within the individual and not out there in the world (Shapiro and others, 1996, p. 1216). We see ourselves as actors; independent, responsible, and powerful. We see our decisions regarding choices to forgive, to forget, or to impose justice as significant influences in our world.

However, such internally centered ideas of control “are most effective when events are actually controllable” (Shapiro and others, 1996, p. 1216). As Achebe (2010) argues, many Igbo women in the Nigerian-Biafran war “succumbed to a spirit of ‘powerlessness’ in the face of the trauma of war” (p. 786). She argues, in this piece, that a two-process model of primary and secondary control is far more pertinent, where internal control is maintained in times of security and stability, but less agentic modes of control, “usually interpreted as signs of relinquished control,” are displayed in times of insecurity and violence (Achebe, 2010, p. 788). This is very similar to what I observed in Sierra Leone, where the power of religious belief, and the idea that God is the master of one’s destiny, impinges on the relevance of simple manmade processes of healing or justice in an unpredictable and still-insecure postwar environment.

In many ways, this faith in the unseen is interconnected with and reinforced by the aesthetics of secrecy predominant in the region, and the undermining of foundational concepts of individual agency by all three of these cultural characteristics significantly erodes the local social salience of truth-telling for the provision of healing and justice. These three characteristics are

representative of, and sustained by, a particular cultural context within which Sierra Leoneans live their lives. As such, they each lead from, but further promote and contribute to, the conceptual or ideational space occupied by the average Sierra Leonean, and in this ideational space healing and justice are not served by truth-telling.

Conclusion

The truth-telling processes within the TRC are built on implicit conceptions of truth as foundational for experiences of postwar healing and justice. But in Sierra Leone truth is not understood as it is in the West, where truth and knowledge are seen as inherently good and healing. In Sierra Leone the control and communication of knowledge is far more involved in the management of power and influence, and in the messy realms of occult power, invisible forces, and authority. In this context we see the interaction and mutual reinforcement of a number of constructs that undermined to a great extent the theorized connection between the performance of truth and experiences of healing and justice.

We come now to recommendations and to applying lessons learned to future practice. The first recommendation is simply that both theorists and practitioners of postwar peacebuilding take these findings seriously. My findings reiterate and confirm many of the anthropological findings previously published, but which have failed to gain traction within the peacebuilding community. We must not assume that either incremental structural changes or the inclusion of local civil society leaders will overcome the frictions between local and Western conceptions of self and society that are fundamental for ideas of healing and justice. I have shown elsewhere that locals experience these processes very differently from the elites who claim to represent them (Millar, 2010). As a result, simply including national or regional elites into processes of truth-telling does not guarantee local relevance or cultural salience. In addition, variances in factors such as communications media, literacy rates, leadership skills, commission funding, international attention, and the nature of the conflict and of past abuses highlight the need for in-depth understanding of local situations if we hope to overcome cultural differences.

Leading from this, the second recommendation is that TC planning and administration be *preceded* by on-the-ground assessments of local conceptions of healing, justice, peace, and reconciliation. These concepts must be defined by local beneficiaries, not by normative theory derived in the

West or by local elites. There is, of course, a place here for national elites and culturally informed outsiders such as clergy living in the country or anthropologists who have studied particular localities for decades. Indeed, greater inclusion of these resources must be prioritized, and not included merely as rushed and superficial analyses such as were conducted prior to the administration of the TRC in Sierra Leone (Manifesto '99, 2002). Such brusque assessments fail miserably to understand and communicate the nuances of local needs to the practitioner community and must be replaced by the systematic collection of ethnographic knowledge about a locality prior to the application of peacebuilding processes.

Finally, I recommend the inclusion of post-process ethnographic evaluations in the planning and funding of such projects. Although the findings from individual ethnographic studies are not easily generalizable to later cases, if the peacebuilding field as a whole commits to ethnography as one of the elements of process evaluation, we can develop a better understanding of local conceptions of complex concepts such as peace, justice, healing, and reconciliation and potentially avoid disconnections and frictions in the future. To correctly evaluate the impact of postwar processes we must learn to identify, operationalize, and measure local understandings of complex concepts. Only such metrics should be used for measurement of the success of peacebuilding projects. As it stands now, the disconnect between ethnographic analysis, which is occurring primarily outside the peacebuilding community, and the practices of that community means that we are failing to understand local impacts, except through the perspective of local elites. Where we stand now, with an array of diverse processes being applied with little effort toward understanding local experiences of those processes, is clearly not the way forward.

The apparent success of the South African case is an interesting anomaly. It does not mean that South Africans have incorporated more Western values than have Sierra Leoneans. Given the much greater saturation of South Africa with infrastructures of communication and transportation, which allow greater contact with foreign ideas and processes, this cannot be ruled out. However, this case may simply highlight the fortuitous combination of favorable characteristics in the right place and at the right time, or perhaps the complementarity of local conceptions of Ubuntu in South Africa with the theology of reconciliation and theories of psychological healing that dominate TC theory. It clearly indicates, however, the many differences in human, social, cultural, and economic resources, and in the nature of the past conflict and abuses between the various postwar situations

that have hosted TCs. I point also to the potential value of comparative ethnographic analyses to develop peacebuilding theory.

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