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LONG ROAD HOME

Building Reconciliation and Trust in Post-War Sierra Leone

Laura STOVEL
Long Road Home. Building Reconciliation and Trust in Post-War Sierra Leone
Laura Stovel


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FOREWORD

The taxi driver is unforgiving and unrepentant. It is March 2003 and we are on Kissy Road, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 14 months after President Tejan Kabbah announced the official end of the country’s 11-year civil war. As he inches the cab through the throngs clogging the street around the old clock tower, our driver points proudly to the charred remains of the Eastern Police Station. “Do you see that building there?” he asks. “We burned that down.” The whole judicial system is corrupt, he says, explaining his hatred for the police, who comprise the front line and provide the easiest targets of public frustration with government corruption. Police frequently harass motorists, he says, and while poor men can serve years in prison for minor offences, wealthy, powerful people go free after committing major crimes. The January 6th 1999 ‘rebel’ invasion of the city – an orgy of murder, mutilation, rape and abduction – provided a chance for revenge. “The only time you could exercise your power was at that time – with the barrel” (of a gun).1

Our driver says his ‘brother’2 was killed by soldiers of the government-allied West African peacekeeping force, ECOMOG. He boasts that he transported goods for rebel forces during the war and therefore could drive unharrassed in this region. He speaks fondly of the late rebel leader, Foday Sankoh. And he boasts, “In 1,000 years, peace will not come because we will tell our children” about the war and the reasons for it. For all his bravado, his calls for generations of revenge seekers are unconvincing. It simply was not that kind of war.

But also unconvincing are declarations of ‘forgiveness’ and ‘reconciliation’ that I hear repeated like mantras across the country from people who suff ered terribly during the war. “Let’s forgive and forget.” “Leave the past behind.” “Swallow the bitter pill” (of no justice for most perpetrators). “Let sleeping dogs lie.” After all that Sierra Leoneans went through during this bitter war, can they really forget the past that easily, or are these the words of people resigned to no justice and determined to get on with their lives in a country rated by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) as the poorest in the world (UNDP, 2008)? The path to peace and reconciliation in Sierra Leone is far more

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1 According to the International Crisis Group (2001b, p. 6), Revolutionary United Front forces killed approximately one-eighth of Sierra Leone police during the war.

2 In Sierra Leone, people are often called ‘brothers’ or ‘sisters’ when they are cousins, children in the care of the family or even close friends.
complicated than either the taxi driver’s calls for revenge or popular calls for amnesia – leaving the past behind – indicate.

The war in Sierra Leone began in 1991 as an incursion by the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and its Liberian allies against a kleptocratic government in Freetown that failed to provide basic services to the country’s citizens, especially those living outside the capital. The RUF might have found sympathizers to its cause but its widespread use of terror tactics against civilians – precisely the impoverished rural people its leadership claimed to assist – quickly alienated it from the population. The rebels’ practice of kidnapping villagers, especially children, and ‘resocializing’ them as young killers, tore families and communities apart in ways that could not be sustained in peacetime. When the war ended, most combatants and displaced villagers had to return home where they had land and support networks. RUF excombatants had to return to villages often destroyed by forces with which they were associated. And they had to find a way to live with their families and neighbours. How can people learn to trust each other again after so much blood has been shed? How can we talk meaningfully about reconciliation during a tentative post-war peace? And do lessons from Sierra Leone translate into other post-conflict contexts?

This book explores how we might think about reconciliation in a precise way that would be useful for post-conflict policy making. It does so by examining the case study of Sierra Leone. In assessing Sierra Leone’s reconciliation needs, the research digs deep into history. It looks at the tensions that helped tear the country apart, some created by the war, but many of which are rooted in colonial practices of indirect rule and continue to this day. This historical, ideological and cultural context is integral both to the war and to people’s experiences of reintegration and reconciliation. If reconciliation – a neutral term that is not necessarily positive – is to be a just reconciliation for women, children and men of all classes and geographies, policy makers need a deep understanding of the cultural and historical context, one that goes far beyond the rifts of war.

This research grew out of my long personal commitment to Africa and to the field of comparative peacebuilding. I have lived, worked and travelled in a number of African countries since 1985. My deep respect for people I met, many of whom struggled to survive amidst war, injustice and poverty, pushed me towards the fields of peacebuilding, development and human rights. My master’s research on peacebuilding education in Bosnia and Croatia, my work with youth in post-war Bosnia, and courses on peacebuilding and post-conflict transitions introduced me to scholars and field workers from a wide range of post-war contexts and showed me the value of a comparative understanding of conflicts and peacebuilding.

After living in Botswana from 1991–1993 during neighbouring South Africa’s transition from apartheid to democracy, I took a keen interest in the proceedings
of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The commission was said to encourage ‘reconciliation’ and provide ‘restorative justice’ for victims of apartheid-era crimes but I was not convinced that it provided either. In my view these concepts and processes had not been fully thought through. As Sierra Leone intended to have its own TRC, it seemed to offer an excellent case study for examining reconciliation and restorative justice in depth. I wanted to know how we can think of reconciliation and restorative justice so they are useful concepts for policy making in transitional societies rather than nice-sounding terms that mean everything and nothing at all.

In Sierra Leone in 2003 I found little resembling restorative justice and had to adapt my research to focus exclusively on reconciliation processes. However, in the end I found that the ontology (worldview) of restorative justice is useful in explaining why lessons from Sierra Leone do not translate well to ethnically or religiously divided societies such as Bosnia. Interestingly, as the explanatory model I present here might predict, when I returned to Sierra Leone in 2008 I found actions consistent with restorative justice processes. I discuss these in the epilogue.

Sierra Leone provides an excellent opportunity to examine post-conflict reconciliation for a number of reasons. First, because the conflict was not ethnically or religiously driven and because the RUF largely obtained recruits using abductions, war rifts were unsustainable in peacetime. Most Sierra Leoneans need to reconcile and this enables the study of post-conflict reconciliation in action. The case study also shows the limits of generalizing about reconciliation.

Second, as the Sierra Leone TRC had some similarities to the South African TRC, I could investigate claims about reconciliation made by both TRCs. The fact that the Sierra Leone TRC coexisted with the Special Court, which was mandated to investigate the most serious crimes of the war, was also interesting. My research did not focus on the Special Court but the court was – and still is – a preoccupation for some who were affiliated with armed groups in the war.

Third, many tensions and inequities in Sierra Leone are rooted in colonial structures and processes of indirect rule. The rural-urban divisions that derive from colonial protectorate-colony relations, the use of chiefs as intermediaries, and the presence of Lebanese-Sierra Leoneans as a middle-man minority group resemble situations in many former colonies. An analysis of the war and peacebuilding that incorporates this understanding may contribute to the small but growing body of literature on post-colonial conflicts.

Fourth, the study has intrinsic value. There is a great need for research and writing on the conflict in Sierra Leone which is currently underserved in the literature. Sierra Leoneans deserve the attention, insights and discussion that good literature and research by nationals and outsiders can provide or provoke.
At the same time, Sierra Leone has much to teach the rest of the world, not least because of its model of religious cosmopolitanism which contributes greatly to peace.

This case study, therefore, has both intrinsic and instrumental value. It seeks to contribute to literature on peacebuilding in Sierra Leone and inform policy in the country. It also contributes to the theoretical understanding of reconciliation in transitional societies and tries to present these findings in a useful way for policy making. These dual goals and loyalties create a tension throughout the book.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**FOREWORD** ................................................................. v

**LIST OF DIAGRAMS** ..................................................... xv

**LIST OF ACRONYMS** .................................................... xvii

**MAP OF SIERRA LEONE** ................................................ xvi

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** .................................................. xix

**CHAPTER 1**
**INTRODUCTION: THE RESEARCH JOURNEY** ......................... 1

**PART I**
**RECONCILIATION AFTER VIOLENT CONFLICT: CHARTING THE TERRAIN**

**FOREWORD** ................................................................. 9

**CHAPTER 2**
**THE GEOGRAPHY OF RECONCILIATION** ............................ 11

1 Levels of reconciliation .............................. 12
   1.1 Individual reconciliation ......................... 12
   1.2 Group-level reconciliation ......................... 15
   1.3 National reconciliation ......................... 15

2 Reconciliation as narrative .......................... 17
   2.1 ‘Reconciliation for realists’ .................... 17
   2.2 Conciliatory revisionism: The survivor story . 19
   2.3 The case for ‘amnesia’ ......................... 21
CHAPTER 3
RECONCILIATION OR RESIGNATION: POWER, JUSTICE AND POLITICAL RECONCILIATION. 25
1 Political reconciliation as envisioning a shared political process 26
2 Political reconciliation as a shared political process 28
3 Justice, power and reconciliation 29
4 Mind vs. feeling 31
5 Individual reconciliation with the state 34
6 National reconciliation: Imagining a nation and building consensus 35
Conclusion 36

CHAPTER 4
A RESTORATIVE APPROACH TO RECONCILIATION 39
1 Restorative justice: A humanizing paradigm for justice? 42
2 Psychological contributions: Trauma and the memory trap 47
3 Community dynamics of war and state-sponsored terror 50
4 Culture, ideology and the ‘treasure trove of custom’ 53
5 Religion, culture and the articulation of reconciliation 57

PART II
THE STORY

CHAPTER 5
DIAMONDS, GREED AND ‘SAN-SAN BOYS’ 63
1 Colonialism, patrimonialism and the entrenchment of clientalist rule 63
2 Diamonds and a step towards democracy 65
3 ‘Forever wealthy strangers’: The Lebanese in Sierra Leone 67
4 The shadow state, diamonds and “political food” 71
5 Underplayed ethnic and regional divisions 75
6 Years of rebellion: The alliance of students and marginalized youth 77
   6.1 Qualifier: The problem of ‘lumpen’ youth 78
7 The call to revolution 80
8 Regional players 83
# Table of Contents

## CHAPTER 6

**THE ‘REBEL’ WAR**

1. The RUF insurgency .......................... 87
2. The 1992 NPRC coup .......................... 90
3. The demise of the military ...................... 94
4. The creation of civil defence forces (CDF) ........ 95
5. Executive Outcomes ............................ 97
6. The rise of civil society ......................... 98
7. The 1996–1997 Kabbah government and the Abidjan peace talks 100
8. The May 25th coup and the AFRC/RUF regime ........ 102
9. Diamonds: the fuel of war ..................... 108
10. The January 6th invasion ....................... 108
11. The Lomé Peace Accord ....................... 111
12. The war’s end .................................. 120

## CHAPTER 7

**WHO ARE YOU FOR? WOMEN, CHILDREN AND HIERARCHIES OF POWER**

1. Childhood in Sierra Leone ..................... 124
2. Ambiguous spirits and the path to adulthood .......... 129
3. Initiation by fire – the distorted training of child fighters 131
4. The plight of civilian children during the war ........ 134
5. A ‘culture of silence’: The status of women in peacetime 135
6. Women’s and girls’ experiences during the war ........ 138

## PART III

**FINDINGS**

## FOREWORD

................................................. 145

## CHAPTER 8

**INSTITUTIONS OF REINTEGRATION**

1. “There is no bad bush to throw away a bad child”: the guiding ideal .... 147
2. Ordinary foot soldiers .......................... 149
3. An uneasy return: The Mende village of ‘Togo’ .................. 156
4. Internal exiles: The town of Makeni ...................... 159

Intersentia
Table of Contents

5 Life on hold: CDF amputees near Freetown ......................... 162
6 “Regional Warriors”: Squeezing water out of stones ............ 165
7 Placating the spoilers ........................................ 168
8 Reintegrating former child combatants .......................... 171
9 Conspicuously absent: The demobilization of women and girls 180
10 NaCSA: The civilian equivalent of NCDDR? ....................... 183
11 Conclusion ......................................................... 186

CHAPTER 9
THE SIERRA LEONE TRC: A SNAPSHOT .......................... 187
1 The origins ......................................................... 187
2 The mandate ....................................................... 188
3 Difficult beginnings .............................................. 190
4 TRC hearings: snapshots ........................................ 197
   4.1 Snapshot 1: Cautious beginnings in Freetown .............. 197
   4.2 Snapshot 2: The opening ceremony at Bo Town Hall ...... 200
   4.3 Snapshot 3: The Bo Hearings ............................. 201
   4.4 Snapshot 4: From Soldier Killed Rebel Junction’ to Peace Junction ........................................ 207
   4.5 Snapshot 5: The Kailahun hearings .......................... 207
   4.6 Snapshot 6: ‘The Slaughter House’ .......................... 210
5 The TRC as restorative justice? Apologies, forgiveness and reconciliation ........................................ 213
6 Breaking the silence: The TRC report ............................ 216

CHAPTER 10
“WE WATCH THEM”: BUILDING TRUST IN THE ABSENCE OF OPENNESS ........................................ 221
1 “You are a bloody rebel!”: On the front line ..................... 221
2 “We market in ‘Do you know who I am?’: Regaining trust in the state ........................................ 224
3 “How fo do?” (What can we do?): Informal community reconciliation ........................................ 229
4 Reconciliation between indigenous and Lebanese-Sierra Leoneans ........................................ 237
5 Conclusion ............................................................. 238
PART IV
CONCLUSION

CHAPTER 11
BEYOND THE IMPASSE ....................................................... 241
1 Laying the foundation: Early peacebuilding efforts ............... 243
2 Preconditions for sentient reconciliation ............................... 246
3 Implications ................................................................. 248
4 Conclusion ................................................................. 250

EPILOGUE ................................................................. 253

APPENDIX: CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS ............................... 267

BIBLIOGRAPHY ........................................................... 273
LIST OF DIAGRAMS

Diagram 2.1 Levels of Reconciliation ............................................. 16
Diagram 3.1 Priorities of post-conflict transitions .......................... 25
Diagram 3.2 Means of facilitating and assessing conciliatory efforts and
goals relevant for peacebuilding ................................................. 33
Diagram 3.3 Political and national reconciliation in post-conflict
transitions ................................................................................. 36
Diagram 4.1 Reconciliation needs addressed by restorative justice .... 46
Diagram 11.1 The flow of transitional and conciliatory processes ..... 242
**LIST OF ACRONYMS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AFRC</td>
<td>Armed Forces Revolutionary Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APC</td>
<td>All People's Congress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCP</td>
<td>Commission for the Consolidation of Peace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDF</td>
<td>Civil Defence Forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIDA</td>
<td>Canadian International Development Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DDR</td>
<td>Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (process, not institution)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DFID</td>
<td>British Department for International Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECOMOG</td>
<td>Economic Community of West African States Monitor Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECOWAS</td>
<td>Economic Community of West African States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HRW</td>
<td>Human Rights Watch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICG</td>
<td>International Crisis Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRC</td>
<td>Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMF</td>
<td>International Monetary Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISS</td>
<td>Institute for Security Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MADA</td>
<td>Mining Area Development Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NaCSA</td>
<td>National Commission for Social Action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCDDR</td>
<td>National Committee for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NPFL</td>
<td>National Patriotic Front of Liberia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NPRC</td>
<td>National Provisional Ruling Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RUF</td>
<td>Revolutionary United Front</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRC</td>
<td>Truth and Reconciliation Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLA</td>
<td>Sierra Leone Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLPP</td>
<td>Sierra Leone People's Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLST</td>
<td>Sierra Leone Selection Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UDP</td>
<td>United Democratic Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNAMSIL</td>
<td>United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNOMSIL</td>
<td>United Nations Observer Mission in Sierra Leone</td>
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MAP OF SIERRA LEONE

Map No. 3902 Rev. 5 United Nations Cartographic Section
January 2004
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