This article examines the legacies of the brutal civil war in Sierra Leone and its impact on cohesion in rural communities. Post-conflict peacebuilding initiatives in the country focused on the macro level, thus excluding rural communities where most survivors live. The gap left by the national reconciliation project was filled by traditional leaders who used indigenous approaches to foster coexistence in rural communities.

Approaches adopted include commemorative rituals, symbolic cleansing and restoration of sacred spaces. Commemorative rituals focussed on remembering the past (including the civil war) and honouring ancestors, bringing people with a common heritage together, helping to strengthen identity and social ties. Wrongdoers went through a process of ritual cleansing which enabled them to be fully accepted into the community. Shrines desecrated during the conflict were restored with a view to attracting ancestral favours. These rituals have contributed to restoring the social harmony survivors now enjoy.

Keywords: Sierra Leone, civil war, indigenous, reconciliation, cleansing, ritual, sacred spaces.

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Remembering the Past and Reconciling for the Future: The Role of Indigenous Commemorative Practices in Sierra Leone

Introduction

Scholars have taken a keen interest in the study of war commemoration and its significance in helping survivors of a conflict come to terms with their experiences. However, whilst much attention has been given to formal and ‘state-sanctioned’ initiatives, very little scholarly work has examined how ordinary people, especially those in rural African communities, commemorate traumatic events.

The civil war in Sierra Leone (1991 – 2002) was so traumatic that it can hardly be forgotten by the nation, especially by people who had first-hand experience of it. Various agencies, ranging from state to rural communities, are therefore constantly involved in remembering it. Rather than state-sanctioned formal commemorative processes, rural communities rely on indigenous, informal approaches to remembering the civil war, many of which are invisible, especially to strangers and those who may not be familiar with such local processes. Formal commemoration initiatives often result in the erection of monuments with plaques, the establishment of museums or the production of historical documents, which are highly visible to the public. Indigenous remembrance practices on the other hand, are often not so visible and frequently rely on oral transmission, low key rituals and the day-to-day interactions between ordinary people.

This article will look at the legacy of the civil war in Sierra Leone, the extreme violence and destruction that characterised it and how it devastated the cohesion of rural communities. To understand how indigenous commemorative rituals offer communities in post-conflict settings the prospect of reconciliation, the significance and practice of traditional processes for community life in Sierra Leone will be explored, focusing on the Mendi ethnic group in the southern and eastern regions of the country.

Three key indigenous war commemoration practices of the Mendes are particularly relevant here; confession, symbolic cleansing and the performance of rituals in sacred spaces. I will consider how these are used to remember the civil war, and how they help survivors cope with the legacies of conflict and violence. This will show that indigenous commemoration rituals contribute to constructing a collective memory of the civil war, to healing survivors and to promoting coexistence among survivors who were divided by the conflict.

The issues discussed here draw heavily on research into how the civil war is remembered in Sierra Leone. Data was collected between 2008 and 2010 using interviews, focus
groups discussions and observation. Among other things, the study was specifically interested in how rural communities were using indigenous remembrance methods to promote coexistence and come to terms with the legacies of the civil war. The study was therefore unique because it explored informal modes of remembrance and their significance in ensuring healing and promoting coexistence in post-conflict communities. It therefore provides important learning points for future research into the link between indigenous commemoration practices and reconciliation in communities emerging from repression or violent conflict.

**Civil War in Sierra Leone (1991 – 2002)**

In March 1991, armed men from Liberia attacked Bomaru, a small border town in eastern Sierra Leone. A group calling itself the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), led by a former army corporal, Foday Sankoh, claimed responsibility for the incursion. The RUF was supported by Charles Taylor, a local warlord in Liberia, and by mercenaries from Burkina Faso. According to Foday Sankoh, the aim of the uprising was to liberate Sierra Leoneans from oppression by overthrowing the corrupt and repressive All People’s Congress (APC) government and returning the country to a more democratic form of governance (Boas 2001: 713).

Through coercion, cunning recruitment tactics and an available pool of frustrated youths and street children, Foday Sankoh was able to build a large fighting force and take control of strategic locations in the country. The small force that invaded Bomaru could have been easily repelled by government forces, but this did not happen. Military personnel were demotivated and ill-equipped from years of neglect, due to the government diverting resources meant for national security to equip the Internal Security Unit (ISU) instead. The ISU was a branch of the police, which became the state instrument for protecting APC party officials and their business interests. To make matters worse, soldiers were abandoned at the war front by their commanders back in Freetown, who squandered salaries and supplies meant for soldiers at the front. Although the national army was weak and ill-equipped, residents in the eastern region believed that a full scale military response by the APC government could have wiped out the small number of insurgents, thereby curtailing the armed men in that part of the country and eventually crushing the rebellion. Instead of focussing on a robust response, J S Momoh, the then head of state of Sierra Leone described the incursion as a plot by political opponents in the southern and eastern regions of the country to destabilize the government (Abraham 2001: 209).

**Legacy of the Civil War**

The civil war was characterized by mass destruction and extreme violence. Instead of liberating Sierra Leoneans as Foday Sankoh had promised, the aim of the RUF was ‘to terrorize the country into submission, into supporting his movement in a trade for mere safety’ (Bergner 2004: 1- 2). The long and brutal conflict brought the national economy and individual livelihoods to a standstill, thereby exacerbating poverty across the country. Although the current government is making efforts to improve the social and economic situation in Sierra Leone, the country remains one of the poorest
countries in the world, ranked 158 out 169 countries in the United Nation’s Human Development Index (Klugman et al 2010: 145).

Widespread violence resulted in the death of thousands of Sierra Leoneans and other nationals. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) report estimated that 4,500 people lost their lives during the conflict, although independent estimates believe that the death toll could be much higher (Conibere et al TRC Report 2004, Appendix 1: 9). It is estimated that more than 4,000 people were subjected to amputation of body-parts, with the majority of them bleeding to death as a result of poor medical services. When the war ended in 2002, about 1,600 amputees were alive, seventy-eight per cent of them males and the breadwinners of their households (Christodulou TRC Report 2004, Appendix 5: 5-10). The prevailing insecurity and widespread violence of the civil war resulted in mass displacement which affected more than half of the country’s population.

Due to high levels of trauma, destruction and visible scars, Sierra Leoneans still have vivid memories of their experiences during the civil war. These memories will continue to haunt survivors for a long time to come. But how exactly do survivors in rural communities remember the civil war and how are its legacies preserved and passed to future generations? How do they manage their war memories and move on with their lives? And finally, how can a community’s commemorative rituals offer the prospect of reconciliation after conflict and the restoration of broken relationships between individuals and within communities?

Indigenous Commemorative Rituals

In most communities around the world, rituals are performed for various reasons such as remembering an important historical event, conducting rites of passage and inaugurating new projects. However, residents in rural communities in the southern and eastern regions of Sierra Leone also use rituals extensively to celebrate success, perform burial and marriage ceremonies, honour people who have contributed to the community and even welcome the harvest season.

In rural communities during the post-war period, commemorative rituals were preceded by elaborate planning which involved preparing sacred sites, inviting other communities and mobilizing resources for entertainment. Based on my observations and from discussions with members of the Mendi ethnic group between 2008-2010, particularly with elders and leaders, rituals tend to have several things in common; these include greeting ancestors and reciting their names, confessing wrongdoing and asking for forgiveness, and offering sacrifices to appease ancestors and local deities.

In communities where I witnessed commemorative rituals, most inhabitants gathered at the sacred site in the morning, with traditional leaders and elders in front and close to the inner part of the shrine. The diviner began the celebration with a formal greeting, calling God and ancestors in a loud expression, ‘Levei yei yo-oo ngi bi loe vei’, a Mendi expression, meaning ‘Almighty God, come down and receive our offering’.

In one community, the diviner explained that the purpose of the ceremony was to remember and pay respect to ancestors, to thank them for protection in difficult times.
and to pray for wisdom to maintain the tradition passed to them by their forefathers. The local historian or storyteller then took over the ceremony and loudly recited the names of ancestors connected with the community, or group of communities that share the shrine. He recounted the deeds of ancestors and their contributions to the community, linking particular ancestors with specific historical events. The historian went on to narrate the history of the group and how they settled in their present location. He used this opportunity to remind people about the civil war and the experiences of the community. He went on to mention the names of people who had died during the war, especially those who lost their lives in the act of helping others.

According to local leaders, this ‘roll call’ serves several purposes. Generally, it reminds community members about their past, more specifically it helps people to remember and honour those men and women in the past who have worked selflessly to establish the community and keep its members together. It enlightens children and young people who may not have heard about their ancestors and their past deeds. Finally, the public pronouncement of names was an invitation to ancestors to be present at the ceremony.

The act of remembering and honouring ancestors is usually followed by an act of collective confession and a request for forgiveness led by the diviner. Confessions involve acknowledging the wrongs done by the community at two levels – first, offences by community members against God and ancestors, and at the second level, wrongs carried out between individuals. Acts of collective confession often end with a plea for ancestors to forgive their living relatives.

In a typical commemorative ceremony, confession and the plea for forgiveness are followed by libation and the offering of sacrifices. Libation is often carried out by the diviner and involves pouring a strong alcoholic drink and water at the entrance of the shrine for ancestors. Cooked food is then offered to ancestors and in one community, a sheep was slaughtered in the shrine and its blood used as an offering.

As part of the concluding rite, the chief or an elder is invited to address ancestors and to present to them the major issues affecting the community, requesting guidance and the wisdom to solve them. At this point, people also silently meditate on their personal petitions. My interviews with community leaders identified unity, cooperation, general well-being, productive economic ventures, fertility for women and favours from governmental and non-governmental development agencies as the most common of petitions.

Of the petition items presented to ancestors, two are particularly significant for group cohesion and coexistence: unity and cooperation, attributes that help to prevent conflict among people who live in close proximity. Chiefs and household heads know that without the social glue of unity and cooperation, life in rural communities would be hard and chaotic.

All commemorative rituals end with the diviner offering the final prayers, and then a celebration. The end of commemorative ceremonies usually signifies transition to a new and more hopeful era.
Communities always expect a sign from local deities and ancestors to indicate that requests have been heard and will be treated favourably. The first year the commemorative ritual was performed in Bomaru after the end of the civil war, one of the things the community prayed for was fertility among women and for the community to be blessed with children to replace relatives who had died during the conflict. A focus group discussion with the community in 2009, revealed that a few months after the ritual, a higher than average number of women became pregnant, and the community experienced a baby boom the following year, which was attributed to this request. In some communities, rainfall on the day of the ritual is their indication that ancestors are pleased and that sacrifices have been accepted. In Ngolahun for instance, the community informed me that heavy rainfall is always their sign from ancestors and a youth leader insisted that ‘no matter the time of the dry season, it always rains on the day of the ritual’. There are no scientific explanations for these claims, but communities have a strong belief in them.

Commemorating the Past: Formal and Informal Practices

In remembering the civil war in Sierra Leone, and on other occasions where the past being remembered is traumatic in nature, commemoration can serve to heal survivors, helping them come to terms with abuse, loss and broken social networks (Blair and Michel 2007: 27 and Stephens 2007: 245). Since commemoration focuses on projecting the past into the present, it could be argued that it is an educational process aimed at inducting new members into the social group. As demonstrated in the commemorative rituals above, elders provide information about ancestors, the origin of the group and the experiences of the community during the civil war. This is valuable information for new group members, especially young people who may not have heard such historical information.

Commemoration practices can either be formal or informal. Informal commemoration practices, in contrast to formal displays of public remembrance usually initiated by the state or by civil society organisations, take place in the course of everyday interactions by ordinary people. Compared to state-sanctioned practices, informal modes of remembering are not so widely researched, although they have long been identified as key methods of creating and sustaining collective memory (Gongaware 2003: 488-489). Storytelling, rituals and the use of symbols are major strategies for expressing and sharing representations of the past in rural African communities.

People in rural communities in the southern and eastern regions of Sierra Leone adopt various strategies to come to terms with the legacies of a conflict; three strategies (confession, symbolic cleansing and the performance rituals of sacred spaces) will be discussed here. These three strategies are important because, in addition to healing hurt and promoting coexistence, they also make a significant contribution to constructing a shared memory of past, thus helping survivors to remember the past together, including the civil war.

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1 While in Bomaru, I was shown several children between the ages of 6 and 7 years, claimed by the community to be children delivered to replace those who died during the war.
Three Indigenous Commemoration Practices of the Mendes

Confession or admitting wrong doing is prevalent in rural communities in the southern and eastern regions of Sierra Leone. Without confession for instance, a healer/diviner may have difficulty understanding the disorder presented by a patient, thus making treatment difficult. For disagreements to be resolved effectively, chiefs and elders insist that wrongdoers confess their actions in the presence of other people. Depending on the nature of the offence, wrongdoers are often encouraged to undergo a process of symbolic washing, to make them clean enough to be reconciled with others.

In Sierra Leone and other West African countries, shrines or sacred spaces are common features of rural settings and they are usually set aside in demarcated areas for ritual purposes only. Shrines provide spaces for people in rural communities to perform commemorative rituals, communicate with spiritual beings and to offer sacrifices to appease ancestors. In some communities in Sierra Leone, these spaces are clearly marked with fences and flags, however, in most communities sacred sites are not visibly marked. Apart from local inhabitants or people who can discern hidden symbols in the forest, a stranger can pass by a sacred grove without noticing it.

Confession

When the war ended and displaced people returned home, the high levels of trust that had existed between people before the conflict had been eroded, replaced by fear and suspicion. To address this complex emotional climate and to promote coexistence, some traditional leaders organized open dialogue sessions. These open discussion sessions or ‘mini’ truth commissions enabled survivors to talk about their war experiences. Compared to the nationally organized truth commission, most survivors found the community-based ones more acceptable, as these were presided over by people they knew and could relate to. These sessions were effective because when elders and traditional leaders in Africa attempt to resolve a disagreement, they focus more on soothing the feelings of disputants, rather than levying accusations of wrongdoing. With the focus on soothing feelings, the possibility of having honest discussions and reaching a compromise that restores relationships is likely to be higher compared to conflict resolution processes that focus on laying blame and imposing punishment (Malan 1997: 20). This indigenous conflict resolution approach focuses on both the victim and wrongdoer, setting the stage for a speedy resolution and lasting coexistence. Archbishop Desmond Tutu described the approach:

...the healing of breaches, the redressing of imbalances and the restoration of broken relationships. This kind of justice seeks to rehabilitate both the victim and the perpetrator, who should be given the opportunity to be reintegrated into the community he or she has injured by his or her offence (Tutu 1999: 51-52).

Confession for Healing and Reconciliation

In some communities in the southern and eastern regions of the country, open dialogue sessions developed into detailed acts of confession by wrongdoers. Confessions generally revealed the truth about violations, some of which were disturbing for
survivors, especially those who were hurt by such violations. Fambul Tok, a national non-governmental organisation (NGO) partnering with traditional leaders to ensure reconciliation, provided counselling for communities in order to prepare people for issues that could emerge from confession sessions. In a personal discussion with John Caulker, the director of Forum of Conscience and the national coordinator of Fambul Tok, he noted that although the process of revealing the truth about certain violations during the war was difficult and emotional, and confession sessions were often interrupted with uncontrollable wailing, these emotional outbursts are seen as important indicators of healing and reconciliation (Caulker 2009).

Through my discussions with community leaders, I learnt that confessions helped to reduce rumours and accusations which had previously fuelled tension between people. For victims, knowing the truth about violations and hearing a plea for forgiveness by an offender had a cathartic effect on them. In a personal interview with Joseph Benji, he described how, with the truth revealed and the stance of elders to forgive, most victims decided to put violations of the past behind them for the sake of the wider community (Benji 2010).

The Role of Public Confessions in Constructing Collective Memory

In addition to healing, confessions also bring personal war experiences into the public domain, thereby helping to construct a collective memory of the conflict - a local history of the civil war at community level. However, memories of the civil war generated at this level are based purely on the personal experiences of members of that community; such memories can be in conflict with what other communities and even the state remember about the event. If not managed properly, such area-specific war memories can be misused by people, especially politicians, to become a source of tension.

Through their interaction with rural communities, Fambul Tok experienced another side of public confession. Public confession also acts as a powerful tool for naming and shaming individuals who engaged in anti-social acts and human rights violations during the conflict. In most rural communities in Sierra Leone, public naming and shaming for wrongdoing smears an individual’s name and social status, which itself is considered by local communities as a serious punishment for the offender (Keen 2005: 302). Solomon Berewa, a former attorney general and vice president in Sierra Leone who supported traditional justice processes, made the following observations in an interview.

If someone wrongs you... and he [she] comes forward and owns up to it, that would bring some element of degradation to him [or her] and in the process might chasten him [or her]. It will also bring some element of comfort to the victim (Lord 2000: 58).

Confessions have played various roles in different nations emerging from conflict. While confessions in post-apartheid South Africa provided amnesty for perpetrators, they ensured reduced prison terms for individuals charged with genocide in Rwanda (Payne 2004: 115). In rural communities in southern and eastern Sierra Leone however, the
motive for confessions was slightly different; it contributed to reducing tensions and increasing trust between people. In some communities and depending on the nature of the offence, confessions prepared wrongdoers, especially former fighters, for ritual cleansing that facilitated acceptance by and reintegration into their communities.

Symbolic Cleansing

Ritual cleansing is common in Africa and it is often used for healing and for helping survivors come to terms with the legacies of violence or other traumatic experiences (Ranger 2004: 114 and Nolte-Schamm 2006: 90-91). Cleansing rituals are important components of indigenous conflict resolution systems in Africa and they are highly appreciated by disputants, especially those in rural communities. The process of ritual cleansing and the symbols used are grounded in tradition, which is valued and understood by those who use them (Allen 2008: 47).

In rural communities in south eastern Sierra Leone, individuals who commit despicable crimes like murder, rape and desecration of sacred places are often considered spiritually unclean and are therefore stigmatized by other community members. In order to be readmitted into the community and be reconciled with others, tradition demands that such individuals undergo a process of ritual cleansing. Although fighters, especially those who committed serious human rights violations such as rape and murder during the civil war, received a blanket amnesty under the Lome Peace Agreement of 1999, some communities suggested that these wrongdoers be cleansed to ensure acceptance and reintegration into their communities.

According to traditional leaders, purification rituals for ex-fighters are conducted by local diviners or herbalists and involve physically bathing the offender with a view to making the former fighter spiritually clean. Selected herbs believed to have healing and mystical properties are ground into a pulp and mixed with water, which is used to wash the offender. While the wrongdoer is being washed, prayers are chanted to local deities and ancestors to forgive and accept the individual. Once bathed, drinking water is usually offered to the individual to drink and to rub on their chest and face. At this stage, the wrongdoer is considered clean enough to be reconciled with the entire community. The end of cleansing is usually followed by a celebration with food and drink, to symbolize re-admission of a family member into society and as a gesture to appreciate leaders and elders for resolving yet another conflict in the history of the community.

The Significance of Water in Ritual Cleansing

Water is the most important ingredient in the purification process. While water is generally considered to give and sustain life, it is also seen by rural communities as an important element for maintaining cordial relationships. In Sierra Leone, emotions like anger, greed and difficulty with forgiveness are often associated with the state of an individual’s heart. Creole terms like ‘bad at’ (bad heart or selfishness), ‘wam at’ (hot heart or bad temper) are used all over Sierra Leone and other local languages also tend to link these qualities with the heart. While water purifies physically, it is also believed to have mystical powers that literally cool the hearts of individuals, thereby reducing negative emotions and improving a person’s relationships with others.
Cleansing to Deliver from Guilt

Apart from rural communities, evangelical or Pentecostal churches also used ritual cleansing extensively to heal survivors who manifested severe emotional and relationship problems after the civil war. In addition to physical injuries, many survivors suffered psychological disorders as a result of their experiences during the civil war. While some survivors in urban settings benefited from clinical psychotherapy, a large number turned to Pentecostal churches for healing, to deliver them from past guilt or experiences and to be reconciled with God and man. The cleansing process described by Pentecostal churches as deliverance, involved penance and prescribed prayers over a defined period, under the supervision of specially trained deliverance ministers. On completion, it was believed that deliverance gave concerned individuals a sense of being set free from bondage (for example, guilt or shame), which went a long way to improving their relationship with other people.²

Restoration of Sacred Spaces

During the civil war, several sacred places in the southern and eastern regions of the country were violated by armed men. Considering the significance of sacred spaces in the lives of rural communities, leaders addressed the purification, or restoration, of these spaces through ritual cleansing.

Sacred Spaces as Sites of Memory

As explained in an earlier section, shrines are important features of rural communities in Sierra Leone and other West African countries. Communities in the southern and eastern regions of Sierra Leone generally believe that shrines were established by their ancestors, thus sustaining strong links with the community’s past. Sacred spaces are often seen as symbols of the group’s collective memory. Considered as the resting places of ancestors and local deities, sacred sites are revered and communities are prepared to do all they can to protect them from violation (Probst 2007: 203-206). Since a sacred space symbolizes the heritage and identity of a social group, desecrating it could be equated to destroying that group’s past and therefore stripping it of its identity (Evaldsson & Wessels 2003: 64). It is further believed that defiling a shrine will offend ancestors and possibly displace them, subsequently causing the concerned community to forfeit its ancestral protection and favours. Failure to appease angry ancestors will make the concerned community or family vulnerable to a chain of misfortunes.

During the civil war a number of sacred spaces in the region were desecrated by armed men who used them for combat and other purposes. Given the relationship between sacred sites and the identity of communities, and how this relationship is valued, elders worked with communities to re-dedicate sites to their original states of sanctity, to enable ancestors to return and to resume commemorative rituals. In the

² Personal communication with a Pentecostal Church minister in Bo, May 2009.

In Zimbabwe, some communities have similar practices which they refer to as spiritual healing or “re-ordering of society after a conflict”. Among these communities, healing is undertaken to restore broken relationships too but they go a step further by getting perpetrators to pay some form of compensation to their victims (Schmidt 1997: 79-85).
process of restoring these broken links, the community was able to achieve two things; strengthening relationships between individuals who were divided by the conflict, and commemorating the past, including the civil war.

Rehabilitating a social asset like a sacred site requires the involvement of all in the concerned community. Shrine restoration involves repairing both the physical damage and purifying the shrine to make it suitable for ancestors. The purification ritual is conducted by a diviner and involves sprinkling water mixed with selected herbs in the interior and immediate surroundings of the shrine, literally to wash it to attract ancestors once more.

The diviner wields considerable influence in the community, and is often seen as the only person capable of providing answers to certain challenges facing the community (Alie 2008: 137). As a Sierra Leonean growing up and working in rural communities, I noted long ago that these particular skills were widely distributed in communities, but it was only in the course of research that I understood the significance of such patterns of distribution. Wide distribution ensures that skills are never concentrated in the hands of one family or an individual, thus making people in rural communities rely on each other for support and ensuring that issues affecting the community are addressed collectively.

Since the skills to repair the physical damage to a shrine and to restore its sanctity require a number of individuals and households, it would be impossible for a community to successfully undertake the restoration if members were in disagreement. From discussions with residents in the research area, I learnt that the Mendes believe that for ancestors to accept sacrifices and respond to requests, communities must approach them as a united and reconciled family. Post-civil war communities were therefore faced with two options; remain divided and break the connection with their ancestors, or reconcile as a family and enjoy their favours. Faced with this dilemma, people had no choice but to put the individual pains of the civil war behind them, in order to reconcile and work together for the benefit of the community.

**Conclusion: Indigenous Commemoration and Coexistence**

The spread of Christianity and Islam, and the condemnation of traditional rituals by religious leaders, describing them as satanic and unacceptable to God, led to the abandonment of indigenous commemorative practices by many communities. However, the quest by communities to remember the truth about the civil war and to address its legacies has contributed to the revival of indigenous commemorative practices. After the war, some communities across the southern and eastern regions saw the need to resume commemorative rituals in order to appease ancestors and to ‘heal the land of all the ills done to it’.

3 An awareness gained from the author’s own experience growing up in Sierra Leone. This observation has also been referred to in an (unpublished) PhD: Prince Sorie Conteh (2008), The place of African Traditional Religion in interreligious encounters in Sierra Leone since the advent of Islam and Christianity. PhD thesis submitted to the University of South Africa.

4 Peter Gboyawa, Kailahun, May 2009. Peter described the ills as killings during the war, desecration of sacred places, people wrongly claiming what was not theirs, etc.
value of making peace with their ancestors as an important strategy for reconciling divided parties in rural communities. On the need to recognize and honour ancestors, a town speaker and community leader in Ngolahun made the following remark during a personal interview:

We made a big mistake in the past when we abandoned the rituals and in doing so, we turned our backs on our forefathers. If we are not careful, our children will turn their backs on us while we are still alive. Without our forefathers, we cannot be here today and without them, having a bright future will be impossible. We need to look back on the past, to turn to our ancestors for direction and for peace in our hearts and in the land (2009).

Despite ferocious attacks by Christian and Islamic religious leaders who continue to condemn traditional practices, just as colonial administrators did in the past, some post-conflict rural communities remain determined to restore links with the past and to honour ancestors. Religions however, should be able to support the cultural practices of their adherents, as they are responsible for ensuring the holistic development of people; they should focus not only on the spiritual aspects.

Traditional commemoration practices, including rituals, can enable people and communities in post-conflict settings to address internal divisions and soothe emotions. These practices have contributed to the bringing of former enemies from the civil war together, and have laid the foundation for coexistence which communities now enjoy. With a weak judicial and security system in the immediate post-war years, traditional institutions have generally helped rural Sierra Leoneans to come to terms with the civil war and its legacies more than any other institution in the country. While state institutions were still struggling to help the nation remember eleven years of bitter conflict, rural communities devised strategies in the form of rituals to commemorate the conflict, to heal hurts and to celebrate the resilience of ordinary people and their determination to foster cordial relationships.
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