

**‘Our brothers who went to the bush’:**

**Post-identity conflict and the experience of reconciliation in Sierra Leone**

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**Abstract**

A number of distinct sub-fields within conflict resolution share foundational theories and emerge from similar understandings of social conflict. One of the most influential of these theories assumes that conflict environments give rise to ‘otherizing’ dynamics between competing groups. This theory assumes that conflict occurs between and further reifies identity groups. It follows from this theory that conflict resolution practice, and particularly that within the sub-field of peacebuilding, must undermine dyadic ‘in-group/out-group’ conflict through processes of reconciliation and transitional justice. However, the theorized dynamic does not always pertain. In Sierra Leone the truth and reconciliation commission was tasked with fostering reconciliation between the perpetrators and victims of wartime violence. This article describes, however, how former combatants in Sierra Leone are described by many as brothers and friends, as opposed to hated members of a collective “other”. These findings attest to a distinct lack of ‘otherizing’ dynamics and demand a reconsideration of peacebuilding practices after what are often considered ‘new wars’ or ‘post-modern conflicts’ in sub-Saharan Africa. The article argues that some contemporary conflicts might best be considered post-identity because they are based less on national, racial, religious, or ethnic identity than on circumstance, need, and opportunity. In addition, after post-identity conflicts truth commissions may create new competing identities, such as those between victims and perpetrators. In such cases the applied conflict resolution

interventions must emerge from new conflict resolution theory which can adequately understand contemporary conflict dynamics and begin to develop non-identity focused interventions.

## Introduction

In *The Functions of Social Conflict* (1956), Lewis Coser argued that conflict serves to reify the boundaries between groups, to strengthen group control mechanisms, solidify group identity, and provide the 'in-group' with an 'other,' or an 'out-group,' against whom aggression is expressed. Few ideas have affected more areas of the field of conflict resolution (CR). Within the subfield of peacebuilding this theory is rarely questioned and many common processes, such as intergroup contact (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998), dialogue groups (Burton, 1987; Saunders, 1999), and reconciliation (Fisher, 2001; Nadler and Schnabel, 2008), are primarily concerned with the deconstruction of such in-group/out-group dichotomies.

I argue in this article, however, that not all conflicts generate this 'otherizing' affect. Although the dominant cases of 'intractable conflict' within the literature (Saunders, 2003; Halperin, 2008), such as those in Israel/Palestine, Northern Ireland, South Africa, Rwanda, or the former Yugoslavia, are considered to be identity based and identity producing, a growing literature argues that many contemporary wars in the developing world are dominated not by national, religious, racial, or ethnic distinctions, but by poverty, unemployment, and lack of opportunity. The emergence of what have been called 'new wars' (Kaldor, 2006) or 'post-modern conflicts' (Duffield, 1998) attests to the changing dynamics of violent conflict and the increasingly untenable position of theories grounded uncritically in an identity based conception of conflict. The central thesis of this article argues, therefore, that as the dynamics of war itself evolve postwar dynamics may not be amenable to mechanisms of CR based on theories emerging from the study of identity conflicts. I argue that the ongoing shift in the underlying structure of a subset of contemporary wars in the developing world demands that the CR community re-theorize the foundations of its practice. I illustrate this with the example of Sierra Leone.

The work presented here emerges from a larger project designed to investigate the local understandings and experiences of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)<sup>1</sup> in one

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article the term 'TRC' refers specifically to the Sierra Leonean case, while 'TC' refers to truth commissions as transitional justice processes in general.

semi-urban town in northern Sierra Leone. In this article I use a subset of the resulting data as a window onto the dynamics of peacebuilding in this setting. I investigate the use of ‘otherizing’ language regarding the perpetrators of violence by the victims and witnesses I interviewed. As the stated goal of the TRC in Sierra Leone was to create a ‘climate which fosters constructive interchange between victims and perpetrators’ (TRC, 2004: 24), this article presents valuable data not only about the success of the process, but about the relevance of intergroup reconciliation itself within this case, and within the subset of contemporary conflicts of which this case is emblematic. Although these findings emerged from a project designed with another purpose in mind and therefore need further confirmation, they are a much needed step forward in understanding the relevance of traditional CR thinking to complex contemporary conflicts.

Before proceeding, a comment on what I mean by this term ‘post-identity.’ In this article I do not argue that all conflicts today are driven by non-identity dynamics, nor that all conflicts of the past were driven by issues of identity. Instead the term is used, first, to underscore the shift from conflicts thought to be driven *primarily* by issues of identity to those *primarily* detached from such issues, and second, to highlight the reliance on identity based conceptions of conflict within the CR community, which must itself begin to make a post-identity shift. By using the term ‘post-identity’ I hope to emphasize how our current theory and practice are built upon conceptual constructs of identity in relation to conflict, and to then promote a paradigmatic shift towards a CR theory that can theorize non-identity conflict, and, therefore, non-identity based interventions.

The article proceeds in six parts. In part one I provide a review of otherizing theory within the CR literature before presenting a very brief description of the war in Sierra Leone and the practical application of peacebuilding theories in the work of the TRC in part two. In part three, I describe the ethnographic methodologies used in this research, and in part four I present the resulting data which describes a social experience of the war divergent from that predicted by otherizing theory. I describe one significant reason for this in part five, viewing the Sierra Leonean war and the experience of locals within it through the lens of so called ‘new wars’ theory. I argue in this section that the situation in Sierra Leone reflects a trend in contemporary warfare in the developing world; a trend which is contrary to theories central to the CR literature.

I conclude with suggestions both for the practice of TRCs, and for the development of a new post-identity CR theory.

### **Creation of the ‘other’ in war**

Over the past half century an eclectic array of CR practices have gained a great deal from a diverse range of academic fields, including political science, economics, anthropology, social psychology, and sociology. These practices include arbitration, mediation, negotiation, track II diplomacy, intergroup dialogue, peacekeeping, peacebuilding, and reconciliation. As briefly noted above, the idea of otherizing is foundational to a number of these subfields. Throughout CR literature the assumption is that conflict occurs between and further reifies social groups, and that the goal of CR processes is to deconstruct the in-group/out-group dichotomies constructed in conflict. Osgood’s (1962) Graduated Reciprocation in Tension Reduction (GRIT) approach was seen as lessening the tension between two opposing groups, while Allport’s (1954) intergroup contact theory, and the significant literature that has developed from it, likewise proposes methods for breaking down intergroup animosities (Schofield, 1979; Pettigrew, 1998; Miller, 2002; Dixon and Rosenbaum, 2004; Dovidio, Gaertner & Kawakami, 2003; McClelland & Linnander, 2006).

Facilitated contacts between individual representatives of conflicting social groups, pioneered by Burton (1987) and refined and applied by a host of very influential contemporary CR practitioners and theorists (Azar, 1990; Kelman, 1999; Kelman, 2004; Ma’oz, 2000, 2010; Saunders, 2001; Abu-Nimer, 1999), similarly assumes that conflict occurs only between such social groups. All of these scholars work within a paradigm of CR wedded to the idea of *identity driven* and *identity generating* social conflict. Schirch, reflecting the general understanding within the field, has argued that conflict is ‘basic to the construction and maintenance of identity’ and identity is very often ‘based on perceptions and constructions of an adversarial “other”’ (2001: 149-150).

Within the peacebuilding literature it is assumed that experiences of conflict produce *collective emotional responses to conflict*, variably described as humiliation (Lindner, 2002), victimization (Montville, 2001), disempowerment (Abu-Nimer, 2001), trauma (Roht-Arriaza, 2006: 4), resentment (Murphy, 1988), or shame (Retzinger & Scheff, 2000), and that these

responses must be overcome, or somehow ‘worked through,’ in a collective psychologically healing process. Rothstein has argued that ‘since there is obviously an important psychological or emotional component [to] protracted conflicts, there is surely likely to be an equally important psychological or emotional component to their resolution’ (1999: 239).

These beliefs about the nature of conflict become important, even when mistaken, because they then drive the choice and design of CR mechanisms. An applied solution to any problem always emerges from practitioners’ theories regarding the nature of that problem (Kaufman, 2006: 204). Within peacebuilding literature reconciliation processes are understood to be the solution to such problems. They are thought to overcome the ‘psychological phenomena’ experienced in conflict (Maoz, 2010: 115). It is for the creation of psychological healing between identity groups that such processes are administered. Reconciliation itself is often considered an *individual psychological process* which is thought to have wider group affects (Kelman, 2004; Moaz, 2000; Fisher, 2001; Saunders, 2001), or as a psychological process realigning cognitive and emotional understandings of the relationship between groups (Bar-Tal & Benink, 2004: 34). In this view, reconciliation is conceived of as a *collective psychological process*, or ‘the process of removing conflict-related emotional barriers that block the way to ending intergroup conflict’ (Nadler & Schnabel, 2008: 39). In all of these theories we can clearly see reflections of Coser’s formulation of social conflict. In each, reconciliation processes are thought to transform in-group/out-group dichotomies.

### **The Sierra Leone “civil” war and reconciliation**

Between 1991 and 2002, Sierra Leone experienced what has usually been called a civil war, but which exhibited few of the usual hallmarks of competition for civil authority or for the right to govern. In the spring of 1991 the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) entered Sierra Leone from Liberia in the southeast, recruited from a disenfranchised and alienated population, and began to grow in size and strength (Archibald & Richards, 2002). Although the RUF claimed to be fighting only for the ouster of the All People’s Congress (APC) government that had been ruling Sierra Leone since 1968, when that government fell in a coup in the spring of 1992 the RUF did not lay down their weapons. Instead, and highlighting this war’s diversion from the usual model of a struggle for political ends, the violence continued, increased in intensity, and, in the next

eleven years, more than 50,000 people died (Bellows & Miguel, 2006: 394) and as many as 1.7 million were displaced (Amowitz et. al., 2002: 214).

The violence during the war, although sporadic as opposed to sustained and dispersed as opposed to concentrated, was often extreme. The parties are reported, for example, to have burned down villages and chopped off individual's fingers and hands (Richards, 1996: 6), to have fought 'at close proximity with low-technology weapons: light armaments, cutlasses, machetes, [and] knives' (Hoffman, 2006: 15), and to have mutilated and sometimes even eaten their victims during 'drug-induced atrocities' (Williams, 2001: 15). In addition, the capture and use of children as couriers, 'bush wives,' and combatants, was widely reported (Shepler, 2005; Park, 2006: 327). There was little strategic value, in the traditional sense of the term as a taking and holding of territory, to many of the attacks during the war. Undefended villages were often raided, pillaged, and abandoned in hours, and the conflict was generally characterized more by a failure of the elite to subdue and pacify the armed groups than by the desire of the RUF to take legitimate control of the state.

Throughout Sierra Leone today, the memories of this past violence are imprinted on the bodies and lives of its victims. Thousands of amputees struggle to survive without jobs or social services, former child soldiers try to build lives with little education or family support, and survivors of rape and other violence struggle with social stigmas and medical complications. In response, at the end of the war two institutions were created to generate long-term peace and reconciliation among the population. These were the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL) and the TRC. The SCSL was designed to try 'those who bear the greatest responsibility' and supposedly to provide *retributive* justice to victims, while the TRC was thought to provide *restorative* justice and reconciliation, both to individuals and to the nation as a whole (Evenson, 2004; Schabas, 2004).

The TRC primarily carried out this work through a 'series of thematic, institutional and event-specific hearings in Freetown' (TRC, 2004: 181), and 4 days of public hearings and one day of closed hearings in each of the 12 district headquarter towns throughout the country. These public hearings were intended to 'cater to the needs of the victims' and promote 'social harmony and reconciliation' (TRC, 2004: 231), and can thus be seen as the prime vehicle for overcoming the otherizing effect of the war. During the hearings, individual witnesses, victims, and

perpetrators presented their stories throughout the country, sitting with a counselor at a small table flanked by the Commissioners on one side and the leader of evidence on the other.

Testimonies were presented not in the search for new data about the events of the conflict, as this had already been collected in the earlier statement taking phase, but solely for the purpose of carrying out psycho-social processes of inter-group catharsis, or reconciliation.

However, many audience members were bored by such processes, and frustrated with sitting and listening for hours without food or water. Many expected the TRC to provide something for their time and for requiring them to hear again these bad tales from the past. The scholars who have studied the local experience of the TRC have found that it failed to provide what the local people expected or needed (Shaw, 2005; Kelsall, 2005; Jackson, 2005: 169-171; Stovel, 2008; Millar, 2010b, 2011a). Nevertheless, even though the TRC failed to meet local expectations, there is a logic to the process, developed over the last few decades, which demands the presentation of victim, witness, and perpetrator stories, this particular form of *truth telling*. It is a process thought to have particular psychosocial effects, to produce, in short, intergroup reconciliation. This is a logic largely constructed on the in-group/out-group paradigm.

Most early truth commissions (TCs) investigated government records and conducted interviews of witnesses and victims of state abuses upon citizens in order to provide a report to the executive branch of government. These early commissions largely stopped at that point, producing only a record (Hayner, 2002), a statement of truth. However, over time, reconciliation theory placed increasing attention not simply on the investigation of truth, but on the *performance* of that truth (Freeman, 2006; Shaw, 2005) and on the completion of an interactive social 'cycle' of 'acknowledgement, apology, forgiveness, and assurance' (Fisher, 2001: 37). Whereas there are a number of versions of such theories (Kriesberg, 1999, 2004, 2007; Lederach, 1999; Fisher, 2001), all include some form of truth presentation and some form of public apology and forgiveness. In this way an account of the past violations, an 'affirmation of atrocity' (Minow, 1998: 4), is considered central to the initiation of *healing* among victimized populations, and to a healing of the state as a whole (Tutu, 1999). The collective psychological traumas of conflict are said to be undone by this intergroup reconciliation process.

However, as a number of scholars have noted, the truth telling process of the TRC in Sierra Leone largely failed to create psychological catharsis among local populations (Shaw,

2005; Kelsall, 2005; Millar, 2010b). Although there are a number of interrelated reasons for this failure (Shaw, 2005, 2007; Kelsall, 2005; Millar, 2010b, 2011a, 2011b), in this article I focus specifically on the structure of the conflict itself, the dynamics of the violent events. This article builds, therefore, on prior findings and extends and enhances explanations for the failures of the TRC in Sierra Leone, arguing that the very structure and dynamics of conflict affect the possible benefits of truth telling processes. Although these findings require confirmation, they begin to uncover a growing dissonance between CR theory and conflict reality in a growing subset of contemporary conflicts.

### **Methodology**

The larger project from which this data emerges was conducted in direct response to the disconnect between the positive conceptions of reconciliation in CR literature (Fisher, 2001; Kriesberg, 1999, 2004, 2007; Abu-Nimer, 2001; Lederach, 1999), and the significantly less positive evaluations of TRCs by anthropologists in the field (Wilson, 2001; Theidon, 2006; Shaw, 2005; Kelsall, 2005). The goal of this project was to use ethnographic methods to investigate the relevance of CR theory, to assess it from an insider's perspective, and to assist therefore in its development and growth. Only a focused ethnographic study could accomplish this, and, therefore, a fieldwork site was chosen.

Makeni, the headquarter town of Bombali district in northern Sierra Leone, was chosen for a number of reasons. First, Makeni is relatively easy to access directly from Freetown. Second, the medium size of the town (150,000) means a researcher can avoid becoming overwhelmed by material, but not become limited by it. Third, the diverse demographic composition of the town allows differences between demographic groups (age, gender, religion, ethnicity, education level) to emerge. Fourth, because Makeni was a base of RUF operations near the end of the war, many residents were personally affected by violence and many ex-combatants have remained in the town after the war. There are, therefore, many affected individuals in Makeni and a mix of victims, perpetrators and witnesses.

In addition, Rosalind Shaw conducted much of her research relatively close to this site and has produced important scholarship examining both the dominant local ethnic group (1985, 1996, 2002), and the work of the TRC (2005, 2007). Shaw has been very critical of the TRC's

approach and argues that it conflicted with the local approach of ‘social forgetting,’ which ‘is a cornerstone of established processes of reintegration and healing’ (2005: 1). She believes that the TRC created frictions between local approaches and imposed idealized conception of ‘truth’ as healing (2007). This is counter to the arguments made by peacebuilding theorists within the CR field and so it is important to confirm or refute such findings. For all of these reasons, Makeni was suitable for a detailed study of local experiences of the TRC, and between September 2008 and July 2009 I spent 10 months in the town.

The study included both participant observation and a series of semi-structured interviews. The research followed a grounded theory approach, which is appropriate for these qualitative methodologies and for the generation of ‘theoretical accounts and explanations which conform closely to the situations being observed’ (Turner, 1981: 226-227). Grounded theory is characterized by the constant interplay of data collection and analysis (Goulding, 1998: 51-52). New theory emerges through multiples levels of coding and constant comparative analysis (Hall & Callery, 2001: 257) which is confirmed through additional data collection guided by the earlier analysis, or what is called theoretical sampling (Strauss, 1987: 38-39). Over time, in the interplay between simultaneous sampling, analysis, and theory development, this approach leads to new and locally grounded understandings of social phenomena (Suddaby, 2006: 634).

Upon arrival in Makeni I began conducting participant observation with a number of organizations; a national children’s health non-governmental organization (NGO), the local catholic college, a number of local community and student groups, and a village football team on the outskirts of town. Working at multiple sites allowed me to associate with a number of different groups and investigate a broad array of perspectives. This initial data, together with daily analytical memos (Strauss, 1987: 109-129), provided a breadth of knowledge about Makeni and insights from these various groups allowed me to understand the diversity of local experiences and informed the creation of interview questions for the semi-structured interviews carried out at a later stage.

From December 2008 until March 2009 I conducted formal interviews with 62 residents of Makeni and the surrounding villages. 42 interviews (10 with local political, religious, business, and civil society elites and 32 with local non-elites who had attended the TRC hearing as audience members) were primarily sampled through theoretical sampling (Strauss, 1987: 38-

39), although the first few interviews in each group were selected through snowball sampling. 20 later interviewees were selected through a simple random sampling. This sample was generated by using an online random digit generator to extract addresses from a previously created database of all street addresses in Makeni. At each of these addresses I interviewed the first willing adult. As recently argued by Cohen & Arieli, combining snowball sampling with other sampling methods can overcome many of the problems associated with researching in a sensitive conflict zone (2011: 425-426), and I also found this to be the case.

Interviews were conducted at locations most comfortable for the interviewees and lasted from 20 to 90 minutes, being longer among elites and shortest among those exhausted from a day's work or in the middle of preparing a meal. A constant effort was made to keep interviewees focused on talking about the TRC, or about '*Blow Main*' (the Krio term used to refer to the TRC hearings). To confirm that the interviewee was not confusing the TRC with other postwar projects, such as the SCSL, they were first asked to describe when and where the hearing occurred. In addition, we never asked about whether the process was just, or used the word 'justice,' as these terms were associated with the work and rhetoric of the SCSL. Interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The non-English interviews were translated twice, first by the interpreter and then later by one of two translators. This confirmed the initial translation. All interviewees were also assigned pseudonyms to assure their anonymity. The collected data, from both participant observation and interviews, provided a deep understanding of how local people perceived, understood and evaluated the TRC's public hearings in Makeni. From this data broader lessons about the dynamics of the war, and the experience of otherizing during the war, also became evident. I report now on this specific experience of the war, the experience, or lack thereof, of otherizing.

### **'Our brothers who went to the bush': The lack of otherizing in Sierra Leone**

Before going to Sierra Leone my grounding in the CR literature cited above had prepared me to find a population divided along national, ethnic, religious, or racial lines, or at least a great amount of animosity between two identity groups forged during the conflict. In addition, my experience in Northern Ireland, which I visited often as a child raised in Dublin by a father from west Belfast, and more recently as an adult regularly visiting family in Belfast, is of an urban

landscape divided by physical as well as social barriers. In Belfast, Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods are divided physically and distinguished by the ‘symbols of local community identity’ (Sluka, 1996: 385), ‘flags, anthems, murals, badges, bunting and graffiti’ (Sluka, 1996: 381). In such settings symbols act as ‘public manifestation of group identity’ (Brown & MacGinty, 2003: 84) and physical segregation adds to the otherizing effects of conflict (Leonard, 2010: 333). The work of scholars such as Mehta and Chatterji describe similar identifications and divisions in Indian cities (2001), CR theory would predict a number of potential identity divisions in response to the war in Sierra Leone.

Traditional CR theory would predict divisions between identity groups that were pertinent prior to the war, divisions between the predominant ethnic groups for example, or between identity groups forged during the war, such as between members of the RUF and members of the Sierra Leonean Army (SLA). But neither of these identity group divisions were evident in Makeni. Instead, as one of Stovel’s interviewees argued, the war was ‘Temnes against Temnes, Limbas fight[ing] against Limbas. Krios fighting against Krios’ (Stovel 2008: 314), and the divisions between fighting forces were diluted by the ‘Sobel’ phenomenon where armed individuals were ‘soldiers by day, and rebels by night’ (Keen, 2003: 82; Keen, 2005; Hoffman, 2007: 403; Stovel, 2008: 309). In essence, neither of these expected divisions were relevant for local people in Makeni.

More to the point, these divisions were distinctly not what the TRC was attempting to overcome. As the introduction to the TRC’s own report explicitly argues, the two groups to be reconciled were the victims and the perpetrators. This would be accomplished, according to the report, ‘by creating a climate which fosters constructive interchange between victims and perpetrators’ in order ‘to respond to the needs of the victims, to promote healing and reconciliation and to prevent a repetition of the violations and abuses suffered’ (TRC, 2004: 24), and this is what the public hearings were designed to accomplish. However, I found little evidence, among Makeni residents, of a relationship of animosity and hatred, of in-group/out-group identities, between victims and perpetrators in the postwar environment.

Indeed, as the title of this article indicates, ‘those who did the bad’ were often referred to as ‘brothers,’ not enemies. There seemed to be, quite contrary to CR and peacebuilding theory, which assumes a dehumanization of members of an out-group (Staub & Bar-Tal, 2003; 720-

721), an explicit non-demonization of the perpetrators of the violence. For example, Osman, an unemployed teacher in Makeni, described the perpetrators as ‘those guys, our friends, who got themselves involved during the war, those RUF, SLA guys.’ As opposed to seeing the former combatants as members of a hated ‘other’ Osman clearly brings together, in one group, the RUF and the Sierra Leonean Army soldiers and calls them all ‘our friends;’ refusing to demonize any particular group. Similarly, Amadu, a local area chief on the eastern side of Makeni, hoped that programs in addition to the TRC would come to ‘ensure that we come together with our brothers who perpetrated the atrocities,’ and Mohammed, a 32 year old Fullah trader, felt that ‘our brothers that went to the bush’ needed encouragement and support after the war. He also argued that ‘we are all brothers so we have to forget.’

Karimu, a 36 year old Temne farmer who had a very negative opinion about the work of the TRC in general, described how the Christian ministers in Makeni preached about the perpetrators, calling ‘for our brothers to come out of the bush, for us to have one word. And for us that they met, we embraced them in that kind of way.’ The local paramount chief described how, after the war, residents of Makeni ‘should love each other, we should work together as brothers and sisters, so that together we build a peaceful Sierra Leone.’

Overall, my interviewees described ongoing relations with ex-combatants as collegial, or at least cooperative. It was widely felt that forgiveness had been the first step and that the goal now was simply to move forward. Saidu, an elementary school headmaster in a village north of Makeni, explains his approach to these young men as that of a good neighbor, an accepting partner in the community. As he says, ‘we have to call them up, we live together, you see? We have several of them who are just passing up and down. We continue to do goodness to them.’ Amadu, similarly stated:

If people forget and accept what has been done to them and bear with it, there is not going to be any other war I believe, because the people that perpetrated this act on us we now live together and work in common.

Likewise, Sallamatu argued that it is necessary to encourage those who fought. She said:

*Our brothers that went to the bush*, to encourage them again so that things will go forward, because if you say you do bad things again to them it would have been another problem. So you just need to leave them so that peace will come.

In each of these statements we see a willingness to accept back into the community and to live with, even work side by side with, ‘those who did bad things.’ Never did I hear anyone identify the perpetrators as a separate, demonized group, some ethnic or religious “other” that could be pointed out, put aside, and identified as the enemy. The general term ‘rebels’ was used when describing events perpetrated by the RUF, and the term soldiers was used when describing violent actions committed by the Sierra Leone Army (SLA). But again, there was never the intonation that these men formed a separate identity group, only that they had taken particular actions. This is similar to how Vigh describes ‘brotherly war’ in Guinea-Bissau, where he quotes a Senegalese officer as saying ‘We are brothers, this war has no reason to be. It is just because there is nothing to do about it, but we are brothers’ (2006: 73).

In the case of Makeni, there are a number of reasons my interviewees did not exhibit otherizing tendencies in the form expected in CR theory. There are certainly cultural and religious reasons (Millar, 2011b), and, as residents of Makeni often repeat, Sierra Leoneans are quick to forgive. However, it is also clear that the dynamics of the Sierra Leonean war do not resemble those of the classic intractable conflicts in response to which CR theory and practice have developed. In Makeni there are no neighborhoods dominated by one identity group, walled off from another. There are no flags, bunting, or murals identifying closed off enclaves, and the underlying dynamics of the war did not promote the reification of wartime in-group/out-group identities based on national, ethnic, religious, or racial distinctions. Although we cannot prove the lack of a need for reconciliation, my interviewees themselves exhibited few ‘otherizing’ tendencies, which indicates a lack of an otherizing dynamic. Based on this evidence I argue that this war can be seen as *post-identity*.

### **Post-identity war**

Like many contemporary wars in Sub-Saharan Africa, the war in Sierra Leone was not fought between two militarized identity groups clearly waging a battle for control of the systems of governance. Instead it is one of a growing number of contemporary wars exhibiting a dynamic unlike those conflicts which form the central case studies in CR literature. What exactly the dynamics of these wars are is still in question, but over the past 20 years a number of theories, both academic and popular, have attempted to come to grips with this new reality (Kaplan, 1994;

Duffield, 1998; Kaldor, 2006, 2010; Keen, 2006; Ruzza, 2007). Some of these depictions seem more accurate than others, but each is an effort to explain what has appeared to be a sea change in the very structure of violent conflict. Common among them is the struggle to characterize war outside the control of states, but within and across their borders, which target civilian populations, resist negotiated agreement, and appear to be waged for economic gain. Each attempts to come to grips with a world in which post-WWII predictability has been destabilized by the contraction of the state.

Ruzza describes modern conceptions of war, those which adhered in the past century, as intricately related to the concept and centrality of the state (2007: 3). In this conception the state controlled a monopoly of violence within its borders, every inch of land was controlled by some state, and states alone could legitimately wage war. As much as this was a ‘mental reduction’ (Ruzza, 2007: 4), it was, and remains, a powerful one (see Strachan, 2006). However, as the power of the state has eroded throughout the developing world, both as a response to governance failures within individual states (Rotberg, 2002), and to the implementation of structural adjustment programs in the 1980’s and the new conditionality of development aid after the Cold War (Duffield, 1998), there has been an erosion of the statist system. All of these theories attempt to respond to this change.

The earliest responses reacted to seemingly ethnic conflicts which had, it was thought, been held in check by the superpower rivalry of the Cold War (Gurr, 2000: 53; Sambanis, 2001: 263). Kaplan’s *The Coming Anarchy* certainly fits this mold (1994), but so too does Kaldor’s ‘new war’ theory, which assumes that these wars are waged by groups representing a ‘new identity politics’ arising ‘out of the disintegration or erosion of modern state structures’ (2006: 81). Centering her argument on the new salience of ‘identity politics in contrast to the geo-political or ideological goals of earlier wars’ (2006: 7), Kaldor argued that these new wars aim to generate ‘fear and hatred,’ and thus, a large proportion of violence is targeted towards individuals (2006: 8). However, Kaldor’s view of these new wars is still focused on the politics of the state structure. To Kaldor ‘[t]he political goals of the new wars are about the claim to power on the basis of seemingly traditional identities’ (2006: 72). Even in her more recent work, Kaldor has argued that war is ‘an act of violence involving two or more organized groups framed in political terms’ (2010: 274). Ruzza too, while claiming to be describing post-Westphalian

wars, is nonetheless still relying on a statist conception of war as political, and is thus still falling into the 'modern assumptions' of more traditional thinkers (2007: 4).

However, by the end of the 1990s, theories had already emerged which refuted the importance of 'ethnic identity' in the initiation of contemporary war. Gurr showed that the occurrence of new ethnic wars was already on the decline by the mid 1990s (2000: 52), and Mueller argued that even the conflicts in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia were more a product of 'elite-encouraged rampages of opportunistic and often drunken thugs' than they were collective identity driven events (2000: 69). In response, theories free of assumptions about identity and politics have emerged. Such theories more radically characterize contemporary war, and, I believe, more accurately apply to the case of Sierra Leone.

Mark Duffield has been at the forefront of a move to define 'post-modern conflict[s]' (1998) as political projects which 'no longer seek or even need to establish territorial, bureaucratic or consent based political authority in the traditional sense' (1998: 76). He argues that many theories which see intra-state conflict as war are 'tied to a traditional and outmoded view of the nation-state' (1998: 97). In contrast, Duffield sees these political projects as reflecting geo-economic realities in which 'gray zones of international commercial activity' promote cooperation and mutual support between private commercial interests and warlords on the global periphery' (1998: 83-84). In such a context, as described by Sawyer 'states with personalized or ganster-rulers adopt successful strategies in navigating the global order' (2004: 448), and the privatization of markets, the globalization of production and consumption of products, and the contraction of the state, have provided a certain context of anarchy within which economic and military entrepreneurs, perhaps what Kaldor called 'new adventurers' (2006: 79), are the dominant force. As Reno has argued, in Africa most potential revolutionaries 'end up trying to gain as much utility from the existing political society as possible' (2002: 839). If and when utility is gained through force or the recruitment of private armies, then this occurs.

In such contexts, simplistic political motivations, or the idea of war being waged for the power to govern, are both naïve and dangerous, as they allow us to be satisfied with a simplistic conception of the actual motivations of actors. In this new conception, we must see contemporary conflict as a system with economic *and* political functions (Keen, 2006), in addition to Coser's social functions. Although a number of authors have critiqued these 'new

war' or 'post-modern conflict' theories, generally arguing that they overemphasize the distinctions between pre-Cold War and post-Cold War conflict (Berdal, 2003, 2011; Kalyvas, 2001), these theories clearly provide CR with an initial foundation upon which to conceive of non-identity centric conflict. For this reason, as Sierra Leone has become somewhat of a 'poster child for these theories of post-modern war' (Humphreys & Weinstein, 2008: 439), so this conflict can also contribute significantly to our understanding of why CR theories of otherizing are not truly applicable in such cases.

The Sierra Leonean war has been linked to the failure of the state and to the complete breakdown in the government's control of organized violence (Keen, 2005; Kandeh, 1999; Fanthorpe, 2001). There was generally little pattern to the violence of the war, forced recruitment into the armed groups, or targeting of civilians. Fanthorpe describes how many Civil Defense Force (CDF) fighters 'treated their initiation as a private license to extort money from civilians at road checkpoints' (2001: 365), and Keen notes that 'pitched battles in the war were relatively rare,' but 'those that did occur were often over diamond areas' (2003: 67). The 'lumpenyouth' described by Abdullah (1998) and Rashid (2004) fought in all of the armed groups, not aligning with one particular side in the conflict. The war was not fought over control of the structures of governance, nor for reasons of national, ethnic, religious, or racial identity, and for many of these youth the violence was both a disastrous imposition and an opportunity; for empowerment, for revolution, for freedom, and at some point, for accumulation.

Dominant theories of reconciliation assume consistent alignment between identity, participation in the conflict, and the experience of violence, such that victims on all sides identify perpetrators as members of the out-group, the 'other.' This was not clearly the case in Sierra Leone because there was little pattern to the violence, or even recruitment into the armed groups. It is true that some of the worst atrocities of the war were targeted disproportionately towards women (Zack-Williams, 1999: 156) and also that inter-generational animosities drove much of the violence (Fanthorpe, 2001; Peters and Richards, 2007), and it could be argued, therefore, that victims were regularly of a different gender (female) or generation (elder) to the perpetrators (young males). In this way, gender or generation based identity groups may be in need of reconciliation in the postwar period. However, although these divisions may be pertinent and in need of some form of healing, they are not in any way synonymous with identity as it is

understood within CR theory, and indeed postwar animosity between genders or generations would themselves require a new theoretical basis within CR literature before pertinent interventions could be designed and administered. This is because some amount of temporal continuity is inherent to the current concept of identity within CR. The idea of intergenerational transmission of ‘chosen traumas’ (Volkan, 2001) within CR assume that an ‘identity’ group is by definition multi-generational and inclusive of both genders. In this sense, reconceptualizing postwar group animosity as inter-gender or inter-generational conflict requires exactly the kind of post-identity shift in CR theory that I am calling for.

As it was, the violence perpetrated on civilians in Sierra Leone was largely experienced as random because the perpetrators were not of one identity group as it is usually defined. Their acts of violence did not lead to the reification of the kinds of identity groups usually theorized in CR literature. As such, in this case the consistent divisions expected never coalesced. If the actor committing atrocities against you is always shifting and changing, always becoming something else, it is difficult for that actor to become a reified ‘other.’ In opposition to wars fought against consistent and easily identifiable enemies, *contemporary wars of this kind do not lend themselves to easily identifiable and consistent patterns over time, and for this reason the very structure of such conflicts militates against the development of in-group/out-group dichotomies.*

Although Paul Richards has claimed that the RUF was an ideological movement (1996; see also Peters & Richards, 2007), there seems to have been little holdover of this ideology after the war. Similar to Vigh’s description of the war in Guinea-Bissau, where “people are generally able to situate the acts of war and restrict them to the situation of war” (2006: 211), there seems to have been no conversion of *ideology into identity*, or of *actor into ‘other.’* The problems with the TRC for Sierra Leone, therefore, can be traced at least partially to the underlying dynamics of the war, and the violence it engendered. Because these dynamics are mirrored in a significant subset of contemporary violent conflicts, we must recognize the possibility that many of these wars may be seen as post-identity, and potentially also inhospitable to the application of CR practices designed specifically to respond to identity based intractable conflicts.

### **Conclusion: A post-identity theory of reconciliation**

A central element of otherizing theory is that victims of organized violence have a collective 'other' to project their hate and anger upon. In Northern Ireland or Israel/Palestine, to choose two very prominent examples within the conflict resolution (CR) literature, the very dynamics of the conflicts are presumed to promote the projection of personal animosity not upon a known personalized perpetrator, but on a collective out-group. The out-group becomes the source of evil, the in-group the victimized collective. Within such an identity based conception of conflict, the violence perpetrated on the individual is disconnected from the individual perpetrator who has committed the violence, and, as such, there is a need in the post-conflict period for intergroup reconciliation.

Post-identity conflict, although not quite corresponding to Kaldor's conception of 'new war' (2006, 2010) or to Duffield's 'post-modern conflict' (1998), nonetheless describes conflicts driven by economic motives within complicated and shifting global markets, by violence entrepreneurs regularly targeting civilian populations without the ultimate goal of gaining the power to govern. Most distinctly, it describes conflicts in which distinctions between identity groups are not the primary divisions, either during or after the war. CR processes emerging from theories of conflict assuming prevalent 'in-group/out-group' animosity may be inapplicable in such cases.

The data presented above did not emerge from a project specifically designed to test the theory I have developed in this article. However, given the prominent shift in the dynamics of contemporary violence, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, and the failure thus far for CR to develop successful interventions in such settings, it is my hope that this initial article will spur additional research into the dynamics of post-identity conflict and the implications for CR theory and practice. For my own part I have a handful of recommendations.

First, truth commission (TC) advocates must recognize the potential negative impacts of their practice in post-identity conflicts. In such processes, where people are explicitly identified as 'victims,' 'witnesses,' or 'perpetrators,' the very process of reconciliation may define new postwar identities, reifying, not in conflict but in the post-conflict, particular competing identities. Second, in order to know when to administer these kinds of projects, we must therefore commit to comprehensive evaluation of needs, projects, and outcomes. There must be A) a good faith and well funded effort to understand the underlying dynamics of war and the

experiences of people on the ground prior to the administration of postwar peacebuilding processes, B) the integration of evaluation with project administration throughout the life cycle of peacebuilding projects, and C) the continuation of evaluations post-project, in order to fully understand local experiences, impacts, and outcomes.

Third, we must immediately start to focus peacebuilding efforts on *least harm* projects. If we do not understand fully the dynamics of a particular war or the experience of local people, we must be more careful in our spending of limited resources and local good will. We must be more conscious of the potential of peacebuilding projects to create or reify postwar conflict identities. Whether such groups existed prior to or during the war or not, the massive amounts of resources often poured into postwar environments mean that our efforts can themselves create identity groups, classes, and constituencies that may later be mobilized for future conflict.

Fourth, we must critically analyze the shared foundations of CR literature from multiple perspectives. We must recognize that ongoing shifts in the underlying dynamics of contemporary conflict must be taken account of in our theories and, in turn, those evolving theories must inform our practice. The changes we have seen in the very nature of warfare in the past 30 years should be, in themselves, a call for new theory and greater care in our administration of projects. Fifth, as an international community of academics, practitioners, and policy makers we in the CR community must be *more humble in our approach*, and doing so demands that we pay more attention to the contexts of the wars in which we choose to intervene, to the affects of our interventions, and to the supposed beneficiaries of our interventions. Only a focus on greater evaluation and local experiences of our interventions can allow us to do this.

And finally, there must be an effort to expand our definitions of peacebuilding and reconciliation away from processes solely designed to undermine in-group/out-group dichotomies through facilitated contacts, intergroup dialogues, and TCs. Much as Bloomfield calls for 'a broader peacebuilding framework' (2006: 16), we must incorporate political and economic reform processes, construction of new state infrastructures, and the provision of social services, into our theories of postwar recovery. Many cases of conflict today are still either identity driven or identity generating, but it will always be difficult to dissect and understand these dynamics and to know what conflict requires a TC and in what conflict it will be provocative or simply a waste of time. However, unlike TCs, which do have the potential to have

a negative impact after a post-identity conflict, many structural measures which will have positive psychosocial affects do not carry the same negative potential. Peacebuilding processes in conflicts that may be post-identity conflicts should focus their efforts, therefore, on these *least harm* projects.

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