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"*Ah Lef ma Case fo God*": Faith and Agency in Sierra Leone's Postwar Reconciliation

Abstract

This article describes a qualitative ethnographic analysis of local experiences of truth-telling in Sierra Leone. Whereas proponents of truth commissions claim that such processes promote postwar reconciliation, this study found that local religious belief impeded such effects. While belief did enhance the local willingness to reconcile, in tandem with postwar insecurity it also promoted a reliance on secondary control mechanisms wherein individuals subjugated their own agency in reconciliation to the power of God. Within this context the man-made processes of the truth commission were experienced by local people as redundant at best and provocative at worst.

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Introduction

Over the past 20 years a significant literature has emerged regarding reconciliation in postwar or transitional states. While many academic disciplines have contributed to this debate, authors such as Kelman (2004), Fisher (2001), and Bar-Tal (2000) have ensured that the practices of reconciliation have been strongly influenced by social psychological theory. As a result, psychology has greatly influenced Truth Commission (TC) processes, in which conflicting individuals and groups are thought to have cathartic experiences of acknowledgment, apology, forgiveness, and assurance (Fisher, 2001). At the same time theological literature has also made a significant mark on these debates. Indeed, among the most ardent supporters of TC processes are authors such as Montville (1993), Lederach (1997, 1999), and Gopin (2001) who underpin their theories of reconciliation with theological conceptions of forgiveness.

However, few of these scholars acknowledge the inherent connection between religious belief and psychological experience. In Sierra Leone, where the everyday insecurity of life leads local individuals to rely on secondary control mechanisms which place God, and not man, at the center of postwar recovery and reconciliation, there is little support for processes of truth-telling. When actually asking local non-elite individuals what the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Sierra Leone (TRC) did for them, it became clear that simple man-made processes were tantamount to blowing in the wind, adding little to what faith in God had already achieved.

War and Reconciliation in Sierra Leone

The war in Sierra Leone began in the spring of 1991 when the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) invaded across the Liberian border in the southeast of the country. Five “causes” of the war are regularly cited. These are: 1) the system of patrimonial government operative prior to the war (Kpundeh, 2004); 2) the scale of impoverishment among the people (Pham, 2007); 3) the

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large number of unemployed and unoccupied youth in the country (Abdullah, 1998); 4) the conflict in neighboring Liberia (Bøås, 2001); and, 5) the presence of large amounts of alluvial diamonds (Gberie, 2005). However, none of the five is of primary importance and none of the five can independently explain the eventual levels of devastation witnessed during the war. As such, although we can point to a number of "causal" factors, pinpointing one proximate cause is very difficult.

However, it is clear that, prior to the invasion in 1991, the All People's Congress (APC) government, which had been in power for 25 years, was failing miserably to meet the most basic responsibilities of government. Much of the national infrastructure was in disrepair, government services such as education, healthcare, and the judicial system were widely non-functional, and the state revenues were being almost completely consumed by rampant corruption. Therefore, although the international community has focused on the role of conflict diamonds in fueling the war, and they were a prominent reason for its longevity, I would agree with Archibald and Richards (2002) that grievances regarding the failure of the state to provide for the most basic needs and rights of the people must be seen as the central initiating cause of the conflict.

It was as a result of such political failures that the RUF could recruit from the disenfranchised and alienated population in the southeast of the country when it invaded in 1991. Indeed, the government proved so inadequate that it took only one year for a coup of young military officers to overthrow the APC. However, from this point on, the war sadly devolved into a series of coups and stalemates, sporadic but extreme violence, and sometimes unimaginable brutality. Smillie, Gberie and Hazleton (2000) report that over the course of the next ten years, between 1992 and 2002, 75,000 people died and, as Richards (1996) describes, soldiers on all sides of the conflict participated in atrocities, including the burning of villages and the

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amputation of fingers and hands. Shepler (2004) and Park (2006) have also described how captured children were used as couriers, bush wives, and combatants, while Williams (2001) notes that victims were often mutilated during "drug-induced atrocities" (p. 15).

At the end of the war, in 2002, the international community created two institutions to provide reconciliation and justice, the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL), and the TRC. The SCSL was designed to try those who bear the greatest responsibility and, as Dougherty (2004) reports, eventually charged just 13 of the highest ranking leaders during the war. The TRC, on the other hand, was thought to provide restorative justice and reconciliation to the masses. As the Commission itself claimed in its final report (2004), the TRC was designed to help the country "find a common ground on which to stand" (p. 3). The affects of the TRC, however, as reported by Shaw (2005, 2007), Kelsall (2005), and Millar (2010, 2011a), have received much criticism and are largely seen to have failed to meet its own stated goals.

Reconciliation: Theory, Practice, and Theology

As argued above, reconciliation practice has been marked by theories emerging from the discipline of psychology. Scholars such as Kelman (2004), Ma'oz (2000, 2004), and Fisher (2001) have largely described reconciliation as an *individual* psychological process, while scholars such as Bar-Tal and Benink (2004) and Nadler and Shnabel (2008) regard reconciliation as a *collective* psychological process, whereby cognitive and emotional understandings of relations between groups are realigned. As Allan and Allan (2000) have described, traumatized individuals are seen to have an "instinctive need to tell their stories," (p. 462-463), and these individual presentations of the "truth" regarding past violations are considered central for individual's psychological healing.

However, this individuated truth-telling, which Freeman (2006) argues has formed the

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foundation of all TCs since the South African experience, is then considered to have collective or national affects (Hamber, 2007). Individual truth-telling is widely seen to be the first step in a collective process. In short, although truth-telling is initially the process by which reconciliation occurs between two individuals, its successful performance, the completion of what Fisher (2001) described as an acknowledgement, apology, forgiveness, assurance cycle, is thought to produce reconciliation on a collective level, between groups.

While much of the reconciliation literature is dominated by psychology, Philpott (2007a) notes that the literature has, quite uniquely among scholarship on war, peace, and security, been open to and influenced by theological debates. Indeed, religious thinkers and leaders, and the conceptions of forgiveness and reconciliation within their faiths, have had a central place in reconciliation theory. Montville (1993) has noted that reconciliation demands both contrition and forgiveness, while Little (2007) argues that reconciliation is “an irreducibly religious undertaking” (p. 21). Clearly these influential scholars of reconciliation, to which we can add Lederach (1997), Gopin (2001), Tutu (1999), Abu-Nimer (1999), Smock (2002), Schirch (2001, 2005), and others, were influenced by their respective theological positions. In addition, Philpott (2007b) notes that, where influential, religious actors regularly support TC processes.

This was certainly the case in Sierra Leone where, as reported by Penfold (2005), the Inter-Religious Council (IRC) had a lead role in encouraging the establishment of the TRC and an influence over many of its later activities. Unfortunately, in no case of which I am aware hve reconciliation scholars acknowledged that these two paradigms, the psychological and the theological, are both ignorant of the inherent interaction between psychology and religious conviction. When we turn to analyzing not what theologians and religious leaders say about reconciliation, as is so evident in the work of Philpott (2007a, 2007b), but the actual beliefs of

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local people on the ground in devastated postwar societies, and the effects of such belief on experiences of trauma, healing, recovery, and reconciliation, it becomes evident that perceptions of self and agency, relative to that regarding God and providence, are, because of the interaction between belief in a higher power and one's own conception of self, significantly different from what these theorists predict, and quite critical regarding the benefits of truth-telling.

Faith, Agency, and the Two-Process Model of Control

The two-process model of control, first described by Rothbaum and Weisz (1982), shows that man attempts to maintain the perception of control through two processes, termed the primary and secondary control mechanisms. Through the primary mechanism he attempts to maintain a perception of control by altering his environment, thus showing himself to have power and agency, and reducing the psychological stress associated with unpredictability. Through the secondary control mechanism, however, he may also try to reduce this stress by, as Morling and Evered (2006) describe, "adjusting the self's preferences or attitudes so that they are congruent with reality" (p. 280). In essence, the two-process model theorizes that individuals in environments that do not allow for control, such as in times of sickness, old age, or war, will realign their internal expectations or interpretations of events to provide themselves control not directly over their physical environment, but over their experience of that environment, and therefore, over their psychological security within that environment.

Laurin, Kay, and Moscovitch (2008) have shown specifically how individuals make psychological adjustments to "defend against the aversive emotional experience of perceiving the social world as random and chaotic" (p. 1559), and they show through experimental data that individuals respond to a loss of personal control (primary mechanism) by increasing belief in the existence of a controlling God (secondary mechanism). In addition, Kay, Gaucher, McGregor,

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and Nash (2010) have recently shown that belief in a controlling God, and religious conviction in general, increases confidence that events, whether good or bad, are not occurring solely by chance, but are controlled by a higher power. As they conclude, belief in a controlling God becomes a particularly attractive "mode of coping" for those who have lost all sense of personal control (p. 38).

Particular to the case of Sierra Leone, anthropological literature, from authors such as Shaw (2002) and Ferme (2001) has described the centrality of invisible forces and concealed powers to local understandings and explanations of events. Murphy (1980), for example, described the power and prominence of secret societies in what he called the "Poro cluster" of West Africa, and elsewhere described the hidden and secret powers located and accessed only in the forest, the "hidden domain of secret ritual and clandestine meetings" (Murphy, 1990, p. 27). Bledsoe (1984) described how controlling access to knowledge of powerful secrets allow the secret societies to control potent political forces, which Murphy (1998) described as the most feared and powerful force in the cosmology of local people.

Whereas most of the literature regarding such powers focuses on elements of "traditional" or pre-Abrahamic spiritual beliefs, the local cultural propensity to endow invisible forces with the power to affect everyday lived reality is mirrored in the conception of God's interaction with the world. Indeed, to many in Makeni, God is often perceived as the primary mover of everyday events. In the context of the war, and the prevailing insecurity and unpredictability of the postwar period, this element of local culture was only further enhanced. I will argue below that this can be seen as a resort to secondary control mechanisms, which significantly affected individual's conception of man's control in the world, and thereby

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hindered the ability of man-made processes such as truth-telling performances to have significant affects in the insecure and inherently unpredictable postwar environment.

Method

Between August of 2008 and July of 2009 I spent ten months conducting ethnographic research in Sierra Leone, primarily in and around the rural northern town of Makeni. The primary purpose of this research was to explore in further detail the apparent disconnect between theories of reconciliation within the conflict resolution literature, which predict cathartic affects in response to truth-telling, and the negative findings regarding the impact of the TRC hearings in Sierra Leone previously reported by anthropologists (Kelsall, 2005; Shaw, 2005). The project was, therefore, designed to use ethnographic methods to investigate the relevance of this conflict resolution theory, to assess that theory from an insider's perspective, and to use the results to further develop that theory. For this purpose, I conducted participant observation among a variety of local organizations and a series of 62 semi-structured interviews with residents of the town and its surrounding villages.

Participant Observation

This project utilized multiple sites for participant observation, including a local children's health NGO where I volunteered for three months, the local Catholic college, where I taught a course in research methods, a small village outside Makeni where I played on the local football team, and a number of small volunteer organizations, including a group of students and a group of polio victims, which I helped with a number of projects. These various sites allowed me to interact and associate with a number of different groups and a broad array of different perspectives. It also allowed me to understand my interviews within the diversity of struggles in the postwar period. Throughout my time in each of these sites I constantly kept field notes which

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were later entered into Atlas.ti as analytical memos and later used to triangulate with data collected in other sites or from the interview process. From the people I met at these various sites, therefore, I learned about the day to day struggles of making do in Makeni, and how the international community's projects are interpreted and experienced by diverse groups.

Although this project was a direct effort to use ethnographic methods to understand local experiences of the TRC's truth-telling process I cannot claim to have experienced what local people experience in the postwar period. It is difficult to compare my experience in Makeni to that of local people. For one thing it would be incorrect to say that all local people live in one way or another. I would instead say that I lived better than most people, in that I had a compound with my own well and slept in a house with only three occupants and mosquito nets on the windows, but I lived worse than many others in that I had no electricity, no television or radio, and no one to cook my meals, which would be common in many Sierra Leonean homes, particularly among those employed by the government or a large non-governmental organization (NGOs). In some ways my standard of living in Makeni could be compared to that of a local elite, although my way of life would not be.

Throughout the following sections I use the terms "elite" and "non-elite" to describe a clear dividing line I perceived in the population of Makeni. Before proceeding it will be best to clarify what is meant by this. I use the term "elite" as shorthand for the educated English-speaking minority of (primarily) males who dominate the economic and political power in Sierra Leone. In comparison, I use the term "non-elite" to refer to the relatively less educated, primarily non-English speaking majority; those farmers, market women, petty traders, unemployed residents of Makeni and the surrounding villages who have little to no direct input into the economic and political context in which they live. The distinction between the two groups can

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best be seen in a quote from one of my interviewees who once described the prominent attendees of the TRC hearings as "those who hold the town," which I would interpret as local elites.

There could potentially have been other ways to divide the population of Makeni – between Christians and Muslims, between men and women, between elders and youth, between Temne and Mende – but none of these categories proved to have any analytic significance in experiences of or opinions regarding the truth-telling processes of the TRC. On the other hand, and as I have written elsewhere (Millar, 2010), those I have chosen to define as elites were almost uniform in their positive evaluations of the TRC's public truth-telling process, while those I define as non-elites were almost uniform in their negative, or at best dismissive, opinion of the process. There was clear association between membership in one of these two groups and reported experiences of truth-telling. It is for this reason that these terms are used.

Semi-Structured Interviews

From December 2008 until March 2009 I conducted formal interviews with 62 residents of Makeni and the surrounding villages. Twelve of these interviewees were local elites, the Mayor, the Bishop, the Paramount Chief, the District Chief Imam, and a handful of business and civil society leaders. 30 interviewees were selected through snowball sampling of audience members, local people outside of the elite circle who had attended the hearings but had not participated as truth-tellers, and 20 interviewees were selected through a random sampling generated by using an online random digit generator to extract addresses from a previously created database of all street addresses in Makeni. I then interviewed the first willing adult at each of those randomly chosen addresses.

Each of the interviews was conducted at a location most comfortable for the interviewee and they lasted anywhere from 20 minutes to 90 minutes, being longer among elites and shortest

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among those exhausted at the end of the day or in the middle of work or household chores. A constant effort was made to keep interviewees focused on talking about the TRC, or about "*Blow Main*" (the Krio term for the TRC hearings). At the beginning of an interview each interviewee was asked to describe when and where the TRC hearing occurred, which allowed us to confirm that they were talking indeed about the hearing. In addition, we never asked about whether the process was just, or used the word "justice," as these terms were connected to the procedures of the Special Court. Instead, questions were asked about "what should have been done?" "what would you have recommended be done?" and "how would you have spent this money?" Such questions avoided confusion between the two postwar transitional justice processes but still investigated the core issue, what local people felt should have been done after the war.

In order to directly investigate local memories and experiences of the truth-telling process, each attendee was asked to describe it – what they remembered, what was happening when, who was involved, how the audience reacted, etc. – and then follow up questions returned to these memories and investigated how they felt about the process at the time, after the hearing, and today. They were asked what they talked to their friends about after the event, and what local people were saying about what had occurred. On the other hand, non-attendees were asked questions to explore why they had chosen not to attend, whether they had listened on the radio, and whether they would like to have attended. Their responses to these initial questions then led to follow up questions which further explored their opinions of the process.

All of the interviews were recorded with the help of a small unobtrusive digital recorder, and each non-English interview was translated first by the interpreter and then again by a second translator with whom I sat to confirm the initial translation and to further explore the nuances of the language used in each response. Of these interviewees 42 were male and just 20 were female,

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33 were Temne, six were Limba, six were Loko, four were Mende, and the rest were a selection of the 12 other ethnic groups in Sierra Leone, with a few interviewees also being of mixed ethnic identification. The majority, 43, were Muslim and the rest were Christian, and their average age was approximately 39. Unfortunately the age of two interviewees was not collected, but of the 60 for whom their age is known 26 were youth, understood locally to be younger than 35, 25 were between 35 and 54, and just nine were 55 or older. All together there were more than 700 pages of transcripts which were analyzed with the assistance of Atlas.ti, both while I was in Makeni and after I returned to the U.S. in July 2009. The collected data from both methods provided great insight into how local people experienced the truth-telling process of the TRC and the relevance of this process for their ongoing recovery and reconciliation.

Findings

As Little (2007) has noted, although Sierra Leone is characterized by religious diversity and large communities of both Christians and Muslim, as are most West African states, the war itself was not fought over religious beliefs, or between religiously identified communities. However, it became evident early in my research that religion had greatly impacted local evaluations of the TRC and its ability to help people to forgive or to reconcile after the war. Paradoxically, what emerged from my research was that the religious faith of individuals in and around Makeni, whether Muslim or Christian, dominated their understandings of forgiveness and reconciliation, and promoted their acceptance of perpetrators and their willingness to renounce vengeance and retaliation after the war. On the other hand, at the same time, the very strength of religious conviction in Makeni, the tangible power of God as an influence in people's lives, undermined the power of a mere man-made process such as the TRC to facilitate recovery. As a

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result, although religious thinkers and leaders overwhelmingly support the TC model of reconciliation, local believers experienced it as a provocation and imposition in their lives.

The Power of Faith in Makeni

Throughout my time in Makeni I met many religious people. Some claimed to be Christian, and some claimed to be Muslim, but not one of them seemed to care which of the two faiths I identified with. Now this does not mean that my religious beliefs did not matter, it simply means that it was taken for granted that I did believe in God, and nobody much cared about the additional details. To be an atheist is not an option in Makeni. Indeed, the idea seemed confusing and threatening to any Sierra Leoneans with whom I broached the subject. They seemed amazed that a world without God could even be countenanced, similar to my own amazement at their belief in the power of secret society elders to bring people back from the dead. In my conception of the world, death is permanent and magic is an interesting cultural artifact, not something to induce serious fear. In their conception of the world, however, hidden and powerful forces, witches, devils, and God, are significant and important actors in the world in which we live. To people in Makeni, such invisible actors make choices, determine fates, and effect change. As such, it is God's hand that provides the *chop* (food), his will that determines the fate of man. Indeed, many interviewees expressed the opinion that God was the primary cause of the war itself. For example, Amadu, a local area chief on the southern side of Makeni, stated:

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

The District Chief Imam, who's largest Mosque is in Makeni, stated quite clearly that:

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> Anything that God has made to be a destiny to you there is no way except that it has to happen. If you see a rebel comes, he comes and cut off your hands or he comes and kills you, *it is God almighty that agrees*. Like when we were here in Makeni … the place where they ran to, it was there they went and died. Some, where they went to, is where they amputated them, you see? *Those things all, it is God Almighty.*

The reverse of this belief, of course, is that God is also seen as the source of the peace. Many interviewees told us that peace came only by way of God. Fata, a 61 year old man, believed that "it was due to the prayers and the hand that was put by God that makes the war come to an end." And Rukoh, a 35 year old Temne woman who worked as a trader said, "it is not those people who came and finished this fight [the TRC], it is God and the prayers that they were praying." Alpha, a 32 year old farmer, stated that "this peace, it was brought by God for us," and Aminata, a 28 year old housewife in Makeni, stated that "even this, our war, it was God that put an end to it, it was nothing else, it was God who touches the hearts of the rebels that made them to stop."

In this way, God was seen as both the source of the war and the source of its termination. I would not interpret this as some interviewees seeing God as a malevolent force bringing war and others seeing him as a benevolent force bringing peace, but as a belief in the omnipotence of God; whether for good or bad doesn't really matter. I interpret these responses, therefore, as a rather pure form of faith. We heard time and time again from interviewees the statement "*ah lef ma case fo God*" (I have left my case for God). For example, according to Yeabu, forgiveness means, "Let me don't go and talk about it again. *Let me leave him to the almighty*." And Karimu, a 36 year old Temne man working as a farmer, believed that to forgive means:

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> You should drop all that has been done to you. You need not to go around talking about it or neither do anything about it anymore. You need not to talk that such and such was done to me by that man. *When you forgive you need to bear and leave everything to God*.

It was repeated constantly in informal conversations, as well as in formal interviews, that people "can only bear up." A close friend of mine at the local NGO with whom I volunteered during my time in Makeni, told me often, when he talked about his problems with money, corruption within the NGO, particular cases of poverty or illness, or Sierra Leone's problems after the war, that people in Makeni "can only bear up". Wrapped up in this short statement is the understanding that the world is a hard place in which to live, that each individual is unable to do much to change it, and that God is the only salvation available.

Faith and Forgiveness in Makeni

This powerful form of faith in God was an avenue by which Makeni residents progressed towards the place where greater reconciliation became possible. When we asked interviewees how people were able to forgive those who had done bad things in the war, we were often told that there was no other option but to forgive. When I asked how he could forgive the men who had injured him, Douda, an elderly male amputee, stated:

> Well I can forgive completely because for human beings, when they done such to you, I will not be able to fight. *Only God will fight for us*. God will give us our daily bread, God will give us in a way that we shall live for a long time so we can forget.

Later in this interview, when my research assistant asked Douda what he would do if the people who had done this to him returned and were thirsty, he replied:

> I will give him water … I believe I have a genuine heart for that. If you do something bad to me, *I will leave my case with God* to fight for me.

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To many people in and around Makeni man must forgive, because man is forgiven by God. Aminata, quoted already above, believed that this was the case, and stated it quite eloquently. As she said:

> God who made us humans, when we do bad things we pray and ask for forgiveness. He will forgive you, so we also, when our fellow humans do bad things to us and we are asked to forgive them, *we need to forgive them.*

This was the local interpretation of religious responsibility as it applies to forgiveness. Most residents of Makeni seemed to agree that they were required to forgive, not in fear of God, but because, as Aminata stated, "God forgives us." Unisa, a 44 year old Muslim man, stated:

> Forgiveness is about forgiving the sins of others, and God said that for as long as we offend him and he forgives us our sins so if others offend us *we also need to forgive*.

This religious influence is evident throughout my interviews and it indicates the extent to which God was the reason for local's willingness to forgive after the war. God is the prime motivator of forgiveness. To my interviewees in Makeni, there seemed to be no other option but to heed the word of God, no matter to which formal religion they belonged.

At this point it may seem as though these findings are consistent with the claims of the reconciliation literature emerging from theological thought. However, what has not yet been explained is that the vast majority of these local believers did not support the work of the TRC. Although there was some acceptance and positive experience of the TRC as a reconciliatory mechanisms by local elites, as I have reported elsewhere (Millar, 2010, 2011a, 2001b), none of the non-elite locals I interviewed, and very few of my colleagues and friends in Makeni, considered the public truth-telling process of the TRC to have played a positive role in facilitating reconciliation. What needs further explanation, therefore, is the evident friction

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between what international and local religious leaders, thinkers, and actors believe a TC does, and how the local faithful experience them.

Faith and Agency in Makeni

One of the primary sources of this friction is the assumption that the mechanism of truth-telling within a TRC is inherently supported by religious conceptions of forgiveness. Quite to the contrary, in Makeni religious conceptions of forgiveness undermined the truth-telling process. Although much of the sensitization of the TRC about the importance of peace and forgiveness was perfectly acceptable to local people and reflective of the dominant local religious conceptions, it had also been accepted long before the TRC arrived. As reported by Sallamatu, an older Muslim woman, it was her Imam and not the TRC who said that:

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

Similarly Fata, the 61 year old man quoted above, described his priest as having told him that:

> Well they were comparing with our savior Jesus Christ. He dies for our sins and we that committed the sins killed him. But at the time Jesus was on the cross he said that they should forgive us for the sin. So they usually give those examples when the priest preach in the church, and he also said that all of us are sinners and if you commit a sin know that you want God to forgive you, so *you also need to learn to forgive others.*

In this way local religious leaders had been the primary foundation for local people's convictions that God expected them to forgive, and that the only justice will come through God. But this had all been accomplished long before the TRC arrived. As a result, in coming to Sierra Leone, a country impoverished by years of mismanagement and an 11 year civil war, and asking

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people to tell their stories of pain but offering little in return, the TRC was seen not as a place to go to facilitate forgiveness and reconciliation, but as a provocation. When asked what she had heard others say about the TRC immediately upon leaving the old town hall on the day of the hearing, Hanna, a 29 year old housewife in Makeni who had attended the hearings, stated that:

> We usually discussed how the TRC only came to add wounds to people. They just came to awaken people's wounds because if a certain thing is past and maybe you just remain as you are it will be better for you, but recalling the past, it can be more dangerous.

Hanna continued, and argued that the TRC came:

> when the problem had happened for a very long time and you came in just a single day for me to start back and unveil all what has happened, just like I said before, you are *coming to add pepper in my wound.*

Similarly Tamba, a 35 year old farmer in Kamabai, a town about 20 miles to the north of Makeni, argued, when asked if the TRC helped people to forget the war:

> No, it will not help them to forget … if I am on the way to forget about it and you bring the person in front of me it is like you don't want to settle between us.

In this way, although the TRC seemingly embodied the most central tenets of religious conceptions of reconciliation, it failed to assist the postwar recovery of local religious adherents. This is not because of a theological disconnect, but a practical one. Locals in Makeni would agree with many theologians that God is the bringer of peace and the pathway to forgiveness and reconciliation. They simply don't see what a TRC could be adding to that process. Indeed, it might be that Western thinkers simply cannot accept such a pure form of faith. Tutu, Lederach or Gopin, as religious men, still believe they should be acting in the world. Indeed all three are influential not primarily as theorists, but as practitioners. They believe that their actions have

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influence. They believe that their world can be acted upon and will bend, to some extent, to their will. The purer form of religious faith, the turn to a more fatalistic conception of religion that I observed in Makeni, moves man away from the center of action, limits his agency in his own reality, and demands that we rethink processes of postwar reconciliation.

Discussion

Overreliance on Theories of Primary Control

In the reconciliation literature, both psychological and theological, the lived reality of postwar environments, and the manner in which that reality intervenes and affects conceptions of agency, goes unacknowledged. Religious theorists of reconciliation and proponents of the TC model conceive of a particular kind of individual with a particular kind of relationship to his or her physical and social surroundings: One not grounded in an analysis of how locals themselves see their relationship to the world. As a result, the complex interaction between religious belief and psychological states, the conception of selves within any given context, remains unexplored. And, as a result, we apply external conceptions of what selves are to our models of reconciliation, assuming the in all places and all times, man needs what we scholars, practitioners, and policy makers think he should need.

Unfortunately, as Western conceptions of the power of God in our daily lives have been diluted by enlightenment era conceptions of our own agency in our world, we have lost the ability to conceive of a form of faith that leaves little room for the agency of individuals in the work of postwar recovery and reconciliation. The modern self has increasingly been conceived as existing, as Siegel (2005) claimed, in “isolation and separation from the world” (p. 43), and reconciliation theorists, themselves primarily socialized and educated within the Western

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tradition, conceive of individuals and experiences of agency within this paradigm. Unfortunately, this conception is not consonant with local conceptions among my interviewees in Makeni.

As described by Achebe (2010), psychology as a discipline has been somewhat preoccupied with theories of personal control, or the influence of man on his environment. According to Peterson, Maier, and Seligman (1993), in the 1960's such agentic conceptions of man's impact on the world were rare, whereas by the 1990's this approach had become hegemonic. It is here that problems arise however. As we, as a culture, have proceeded to ever more frequently conceive of man as the ultimate actor not only within, but also upon, his environment, we have come to project our own conceptions of self, and self-efficacy and control, upon people embedded in divergent social and cultural settings, even while studies by authors such as Weisz, Rothbaum, and Blackburn (1984), Morling and Evered (2006), and Achebe (2010) have shown clearly diverging conceptions of control and agency in non-Western cultures.

Whereas in the Western world we see ourselves as the drivers of our destiny, as the holders of our own fate, in Makeni this conception of personal autonomy was, if not entirely absent, then much tempered. Local cultural idioms support not only the existence and everyday power of God, but that of witches, devils, and spirits. These beliefs are rarely doubted among residents of Makeni. They are the local reality and the tendency to submit individual agency to the power of invisible forces underpins and supports the local propensity to see God as a driving force in their lives. This has a great impact then on local experiences of the TRC. It affects local's conceptions of forgiveness and reconciliation because it imposes on the individuals' role in those processes. If God brought the violence, preordained or planned for the death of a loved one, or the amputation of an arm, who are we as men to blame the individuals chosen as God's tools? We have no more role in this process than they had in the violence.

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The Two-Process Model and the Failure of Truth-Telling in Makeni

However, this does not mean that the local belief in God's omnipotence did not support local's ability to forgive. Indeed, faith in God was central to people's ability to forgive after the war. For many in Makeni who are, even today, disempowered by poverty and unemployment, belief in God is the only avenue they have for recovery, and they fall back on their faith when there are no other options. These findings lend significant support to the two-process model of control and the theory that man resorts to secondary control mechanisms when unpredictability and insecurity are dominant characteristics of his local environment.

The very performance of truth-telling, of collective memory formation that the TRC was engaged in, was assuming the presence and participation of a particular kind of self, autonomous and independent, and with a desire to shape and model his or her surroundings through the presentation of their particular truth. But my interviewees in Makeni did not see themselves as having such powers over their environment. The very unpredictability and insecurity of the wartime and postwar period have resulted in individuals relying primarily on secondary control mechanisms, as opposed to primary control. Within this context expectations and perceptions of control are ceded to the power of an omnipotent God, thus relieving individuals of the stress of always attempting to control a world that clearly does not respond to their desires. Residents of Makeni conceive of their role as to forgive and to continue to live with those who committed harmful acts during the war, but reconciliation is not something they are active agents in. It is, instead, something given over to God. The Western composed and largely externally imposed practices of truth-telling embodied in the Sierra Leonean TRC failed to acknowledge the variability of conceptions of agency and control, and, therefore, failed to be meaningful to those selves dominant in the local environment.

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Much of the reconciliation literature places far too much faith in accepted norms, and assumes that the world experiences reality as theorists would delineate it. Philpott (2007a), for example, spends significant time reviewing the statements of theologians regarding the etymology of words in Greek, Latin, Hebrew and Arabic. Words which allow those theologians to redefine concepts such as reconciliation, forgiveness, or justice to best reflect contemporary religious conceptions of these complex social experiences. These definitions are considered "creative," even if not representative of any actual experiences in transitional situations (p. 21). This parallels the similar operations within the liberal human rights tradition of transitional justice, highlighted by authors such as Leebaw (2003, 2008), Mendeloff (2004), Pupavac (2004), and Shaw (2005), which similarly define concepts within liberal conceptions of reality rarely accurately reflective of transitional situations and local people's needs, and which many have therefore found to be deficient as foundations for transitional policy.

Both of these traditions, the psychological and the theological, must realize that life lived within a pattern of human insecurity, and within a conceptual world dominated by invisible forces and otherworldly powers, does not provide for a wholly agentic individualism. Indeed, in what Paul Richards (2005) called a "violent forest world" (p. 125) insecurity produces a reliance on faith that the West might best identify with religious fatalism. There is rarely a significant role among the disempowered in Sierra Leone for individual actions towards forgiveness, reconciliation, or justice. God is the mover and ultimate arbiter, and man's actions are not seen to have much power to change that. In contrast, religious theorists of reconciliation assume the ability of man to affect outcomes; to *acknowledge* truth, to *offer* apology, to *provide* forgiveness, to *impose* justice, to *build* peace. The projects and processes we impose on our world, the small machinations of men, do not provide the average citizen in Makeni with any real power or

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influence over their lives. The life the average Sierra Leonean has lived up to the point of our imposing such processes, do not prepare him or her to take part as an empowered individual.

Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

Theories of reconciliation are one of the few sites where disciplines such as law, Psychology, and political science come face to face with theological arguments and the practices of religious leaders. The interaction of ideas and beliefs about forgiveness, reconciliation and justice has produced an eclectic set of theories and, as yet, a great amount of disagreement about what exactly reconciliation is and how it should be achieved. Perhaps more problematically, we have also failed to examine our own normative approaches to processes thought to be reconciliatory. There is nothing inherently wrong with any particular approach to reconciliation and forgiveness, but we must remember to interrogate the processes we theorize to be helpful as we, the academics or practitioners involved in the field of transitional justice and postwar peacebuilding, are not applying our processes to ourselves, we are applying them to others.

The primary finding presented in this paper is that, although religious proponents of the TC model of reconciliation hold to theological convictions that often mirror those of the local people in Makeni, the actual practice of the TRC was not experienced as a reconciliatory process. No thick books of theology, psychology, or philosophy can capture the experience of life in postwar Makeni. No theological nor philosophical justifications for particular practices of reconciliation, whether truth-telling processes or any other, can accurately predict the experience of those processes among local people. We must stop assuming that Christians in Belfast will be similar to Christians in Colombia or that Muslims in Sarajevo will resemble Muslims in Freetown. The assumption that theology will dictate the relevance of a particular practice of reconciliation assumes the similar experience of religiosity and religious selves across diverse

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settings. But both Christians and Muslims differ greatly from place to place and from time period to time period and, importantly, the experience of self formed in tandem with conceptions of one's theology, will invariably also differ.

In Makeni both Christians and Muslims believe wholeheartedly in the power of a witch gun to kill a man with bullets made of water or a grain of sand. They believe that secret society big men can cut a man's penis off and reattach it minutes later. They believe that divination is a practical way to discover who stole a neighbor's radio, and they believe that devils inhabit the bush and can and will penetrate the body if it is not given the proper ritual protections. These are not beliefs predicted in Christian or Muslim theology, they are local cultural artifacts which manifest the lived disempowerment of life in Sierra Leone. Shaw (2002) equates such hidden powers and invisible forces with the violent past of Sierra Leone. She argues that the countries violent past is remembered not within texts, but within the local beliefs regarding spirits, divination, witchcraft, and postcolonial politicians. I would extend this argument and propose that the ongoing violence in Sierra Leone today, the disempowerment and structural inequalities of day to day life in Makeni, emerge in local's psychology as a fatalistic faith in the power of God and the disempowerment of man which led, unfortunately, to the inability of man-made processes such as the TRC to provide much in the way of reconciliation.

The primary recommendations that emerge, therefore, are that those of us working in the fields of peacebuilding, transitional justice, or conflict resolution, begin to take local realities seriously, incorporate ethnographic methods of analysis and evaluation into our project planning and budgeting, and recognize that elites in developing countries, whether economic, political, or religious, rarely represent in opinion and belief the people they purportedly represent in policy and public administration.

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In addition, psychologists and religious scholars working in the field of reconciliation must recognize the interaction of the phenomena they each study. Man is not everywhere the same, nor does he everywhere experience himself in the world in the same manner. Culturally ingrained beliefs about the diverse array of powers in our world, both corporeal and spiritual, inform our conceptions of ourselves, our agency, and our ability to impact the world. For psychologists, and particularly psychologists of peacebuilding, to ignore the diverse forms of individualism in the world, is to risk applying as practitioners potentially adverse processes in delicate postwar environments, and, in short, to cause more harm than good.

As a result, more effort must be given to pre-project planning and to understanding the context within which our interventions are imposed and then to understanding the non-elite local experiences of our interventions. To date, far too much attention is paid to the opinions of local or regional elites and the planners and administrators of intervention projects, with little evaluation conducted among the supposed beneficiaries of our peacebuilding and reconciliation processes. We must realize that true evaluations of our projects demand such evaluations, and we must begin now to use ethnographic methodologies to produce them.

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