Will “Truth” Help “Peace”?
The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Post-Conflict Sierra Leone

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Will “truth” help “peace”? Inspired by this question, this article examines from an anthropological perspective an accountability institution in Sierra Leone, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The institution was established in a country just emerging from the atrocities of an eleven-year war. While such a mechanism for dealing with the past becomes increasingly popular in the international community, this article attempts to address the gap between the anticipated outcomes of the TRC and the actual impact which the TRC has had upon people and society. The methodology is a conceptual and contextual analysis of the institution, with reference not only to academic literature but also to findings from fieldwork. It scrutinizes the problematic links between truth-telling and healing, and between truth-finding and reconciliation. As a whole, this article aims to be an innovative anthropological study by addressing complex issues that have often been neglected in preceding literature on accountability institutions.

Key words: truth, reconciliation, peace, accountability institutions

“Nobody wants to talk to us in this village. They believe we’ve come from the Special Court or the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to arrest the Paramount Chief and his fellows. I have told them again and again we work for the Talking Drum Studio and we are just making a radio program, but nobody trusts us,” said my research assistant, with growing anxiety on his face. I was in Sierra Leone between May and August 2003, conducting interviews with villagers in various communities for a new radio program on post-conflict reconciliation. While I was there, I was continually exposed to people’s mistrust of those two institutions, which struck my anthropological curiosity. This has led me to focus on the two accountability institutions, namely the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SC) and the Truth and

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1 Talking Drum Studio, a non-governmental organization, produces a number of popular radio programs and facilitates cultural events for peace-building in Sierra Leone and Liberia. As a field intern of the organization, the author conducted research on community reconciliation in southern Sierra Leone from May to August in 2003, including focus group discussions and interviews in fifteen villages.

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Reconciliation Commission (TRC). This article critically examines whether the TRC has served its purpose to promote reconciliation as an appropriate means of dealing with the past in post-war Sierra Leone, in light of the on-the-ground situation I observed.

Sierra Leone is now emerging from an eleven-year armed conflict. Both the SC and the TRC have been established in Sierra Leone as a part of post-conflict reconstruction. Sierra Leone is not the only country that has seen the establishment of accountability institutions. Past examples include the International Criminal Tribunals for Rwanda and for the former Yugoslavia, which were established after ethnic conflict, and also the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions set up in post-apartheid South Africa and in independent East Timor. Such efforts must be understood in the context of the globalization of human rights in the post-Cold War era. Human rights advocates and international lawyers support such efforts as a standardized way to address human rights abuses.

While such accountability institutions are increasingly popular, there is almost no anthropological study of war crime tribunals. With regards to truth commissions, only a few pieces of anthropological work can be found, most of them on the South African case. The *Politics of Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa* by Richard Wilson (2001) is a pioneering work which critically examines the discourse of the TRC in the context of nation-building. Fiona Ross conducted fieldwork among South African women who testified before the TRC, and made an insightful analysis of the after-effects of the TRC (Ross 2003). We should also note John BorneMan's (1997) book, *Settling Accounts*, as one of the first attempts by an anthropologist to examine the process of dealing with state violence.

As for Sierra Leone, criticisms of the TRC and the SC have so far been made mostly towards operational problems, such as financial difficulty and lack of trained staff. Despite the negative impact of these institutions upon local people, only a few people have actually questioned the underlying ideas of such institutions. Penfold's article (20 October 2002, *Guardian*) questions the legitimacy of the SC as an institution for peace-building in Sierra Leone. There are two anthropologists who have studied the TRC in Sierra Leone, Rosalind Shaw and Tim Kelsall. Their work has inspired me to a great extent and is frequently cited below.² Hence, this article critically examines the desirability of the TRC in light of the on-the-ground situation, while noting similar problems of the SC.³ It is not the aim of the article to propose a universal way to settle the past in a post-conflict society, as each conflict has its own unique development. Instead, the article explores alternative ways to deal with the past in post-conflict Sierra Leone. As a whole, the article aims to be an innovative study by addressing complex issues that have often been neglected in preceding criticisms of the TRC.

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³ It is due to the limited space that I omit the SC from this article. My Master's dissertation includes extended description and analysis on the SC as well as the TRC (Ito 2005).
Background

A country emerging from violent conflict or from an authoritarian regime often faces questions concerning how to deal with the past. Should the perpetrators be prosecuted? What do these prosecutions actually achieve? When are victims ready to forgive perpetrators? Truth commissions and war crime tribunals have attempted to answer these questions. These commissions and tribunals are generically called accountability institutions in the article.

Some people use the term “transitional justice institutions” rather than “accountability institutions.” However, justice-seeking is only one aspect of the wider process of settling the past and building the future. A society emerging from violence faces a wide range of issues, such as how public memory is built, official versions of the past in textbooks presented, public speeches formulated, and past leaders treated (Forsberg 2001: 59). Questions of accountability always arise from discussions of these issues. Accountability-seeking is thus the primary objective of truth commissions and war crime tribunals, which is why I prefer the term “accountability institutions.”

Sierra Leone became independent from Britain in 1961. Armed conflict broke out in 1991 when the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) invaded eastern and southern Sierra Leone. The RUF, allegedly supported by Charles Taylor, then leader of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia, began fighting to overthrow the All People’s Congress (APC) regime, which had been ruling Sierra Leone since the 1967 election. In 1992, a military coup ousted the then President Joseph Momoh. The coup was executed by junior army officers who were frustrated with a lack of pay and with conditions at the battlefront with RUF rebels. The poorly-equipped soldiers could not stop RUF rebels from proceeding further to the north and west of the country. In 1997, the RUF drove the democratically-elected President Tejan Kabbah into exile.

RUF rebels allegedly committed atrocities on civilians and forcefully conscripted young people. Aggrieved soldiers increasingly connived with the rebels instead of protecting civilians. Under these circumstances, a number of militia groups evolved in rural areas. The largest among them was Kamajor,4 which developed in the southern region, and thus will be often referred to in this article. These militia groups were later politically reorganized and integrated into the Civil Defence Force to support President Kabbah in exile.

At the latter stage of the civil war, foreign troops such as the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) and the British Army intervened, but failed to end the war. The RUF and the government of Sierra Leone finally concluded the Lome Peace Agreement in July 1999. The RUF agreed to lay down arms and to transform itself into a political party. While the Peace Agreement was repeatedly violated and violence continued,

4 “Kamajor” means “a hunter” in Mende, the most common vernacular in the southern region. Kamajor is the collective name of the militia group which was the largest component of the CDF, and also the referent for an individual fighter in Kamajor.
demobilization and disarmament of the RUF began in 2000. President KABBAH declared that the war was over in January 2002 when most of the combatants had been demobilized and disarmed.

Stories of the war, particularly those of rebels who had amputated arms and limbs of civilians, made this small country in West Africa become known as "the most atrocious and brutal country in the world" (KAPLAN 1994). When the war was coming to an end, President Tejan KABBAH faced a great challenge: to wipe out the disgrace in order for Sierra Leone to be acknowledged as part of the international community. KABBAH found it important to show that the "new Sierra Leone" respected international human rights. He wrote to UN Secretary General Kofi ANNAN in June 2000 requesting the UN to establish a court to try those who had committed civil war atrocities.

The UN Security Council and the government of Sierra Leone negotiated and signed an agreement in January 2002 to create an independent Special Court (SC). Sponsored by the U.S. government and others, the SC for Sierra Leone came into existence in July 2002 and issued its first indictment in March 2003. The SC would have the power to prosecute persons who bore the greatest responsibility for serious violations of international humanitarian law and Sierra Leonean law committed in the territory of Sierra Leone since 30 November 1996, including those leaders who, in committing such crimes, had threatened the establishment and implementation of the peace process in Sierra Leone (Statute for the SC 2002). "No peace without justice" has become the slogan for the SC.

The SC has so far indicted twelve persons, and the Chief Prosecutor has officially declared that no more indictments will be made. The twelve indictees include leaders and top commanders of all the fighting factions. The indictment of the former national coordinator of the Civil Defence Force, Hinga NORMAN, shocked many Sierra Leoneans. To them, he was a war hero because he was the only minister who fought against a junta for KABBAH's government in exile (BUTCHER 2003).

The legitimacy of the SC has been greatly undermined by NORMAN's indictment. Many believed that his indictment was a plot by KABBAH's government, or, at least, complained that KABBAH "did not protect" this minister who had served him over the last seven years (ICG 2003: 7). According to the Statute of the SC, the SC is independent from the government, as well as from the UN Security Council, and this is why the neutrality of its acts is guaranteed. However, NORMAN's indictment is not seen as a politically neutral action, but as an implementation of government policy, in the eyes of many Sierra Leoneans.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established in Sierra Leone almost at the same time as the SC, which happened to confuse many Sierra Leoneans. Many people in Sierra Leone could not tell the difference between the two institutions. Even those who could tell the difference suspected that the TRC would share its information with the SC (ICG 2003). Many ex-combatants I interviewed strongly held such a suspicion and thus refused to give testimony before the TRC hearings. As I mentioned above, the SC was not well-supported by the general population. Likewise, the TRC encountered the same problem of public suspicion
and misunderstanding. It is against this background that I examine the TRC below.

**Truth and Reconciliation Commission**

A number of authoritarian regimes in non-Western countries have been replaced by elected civilian governments since the 1970s. In most cases, however, accountability for past crimes was heavily constrained by the continued institutional power of old elites. In the context of widespread impunity, international and national human rights organizations lobbied for a small measure of accountability (Wilson 2003: 369). Such efforts bore fruit in truth commissions. Truth commissions were set up to carry out official documentation and history-writing. Roughly twenty such commissions were established between 1974 and today (Tepperman 2002: 129). As truth commissions developed and increased in number, truth-telling came to be regarded as the most significant method to address human rights violations.

A truth and reconciliation commission is an extended version of a truth commission. Its crucial difference from a truth commission is that the former involves a controversial idea that truth-finding will help reconciliation between victims and perpetrators, and hence promote national reconciliation. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission established in post-apartheid South Africa is the most famous, and hence has been studied most. The Sierra Leonean Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was modeled on that of South Africa.

Such a mechanism to deal with the past is increasingly popular in the field of post-conflict reconstruction. Nevertheless, different commissions in different countries have had varied impact on the local community. What succeeded in South Africa may not be successful in Sierra Leone. Hence, it is of great importance to carefully examine the validity of such a mechanism in a particular socio-political context. I will attempt to illustrate the gap between the expected output and the actual effects of the TRC in Sierra Leone.

**The TRC District Hearings**

The establishment of the TRC was proposed during the Lome Peace Talks which were held between the government of Sierra Leone and the RUF in July 1999. The TRC came into existence in Sierra Leone in March 2002 to promote reconciliation through truth-telling. The Truth and Reconciliation Act of 2000 mandated the TRC in Sierra Leone to create "an impartial historical record of violations and abuses of human rights and international humanitarian law related to the armed conflict in Sierra Leone, from the beginning of the conflict in 1991 to the signing of the Lome Peace Agreement," to "address impunity; respond to the needs of victims; promote healing and reconciliation; and prevent a repetition of the violations and abuses suffered."

I shall first provide a plain description of how the TRC district hearings were conducted. Secondly, I will examine assumptions made by TRC advocates with reference to the public hearings in Sierra Leone as well as ethnographic studies on the TRC in South Africa.
The TRC critically suffered from a lack of funds, as well as lack of public support, and had no choice but to cut its budget from $10 million to $4.5 million (ICG 2002: 8). Despite such a difficult start, the Commission managed to travel to all of the twelve districts to conduct district hearings and succeeded in collecting 9,000 witness statements by July 2003 (ICG 2003). The TRC hearings took five days in each district, spending three days for public hearings, one day for closed hearings in which testimonies were heard from children and victims of sexual violence, and a final day for a reconciliation ceremony. Based on the stories collected from citizens by statement-takers during the preparatory phase, the Commission selected a certain number of victims and perpetrators, and asked them to testify at the hearings.

The Commission focused on human rights violations including massacre, amputation, child abuse, rape, and so forth. It aimed at revealing the system of command in each fighting faction that was allegedly responsible for such atrocities towards civilians. It was a great challenge for the Commission to find out, by gathering individual stories, how systematically such atrocities had been undertaken.

Each public hearing was conducted by a Leader of Evidence and three commissioners. Witnesses were accompanied by an interpreter, who translated Krio5 or any vernacular into English and vice versa, and by a counselor, who supposedly rendered help to a witness when he or she had difficulty in speaking. The format of a hearing was that an uninterrupted witness statement was followed by cross-examination by commissioners. When a perpetrator gave a statement, the Leader of Evidence asked if he or she wanted to apologize at the reconciliation ceremony. Whether to take part in the ceremony or not depended on an individual will.

The reconciliation ceremony on the final day usually took place in the presence of persons representing the chiefdoms concerned, such as chiefs, elders, and religious leaders. A district officer representing the government also observed the ceremony. Following Christian and Muslim prayers, each perpetrator was invited to confess and apologize. Then, he or she shook hands with community leaders, and they blessed him or her in return. Lastly, ceremonial leaders conducted a ritual of libation, which symbolically purified the community.

As we shall see below, advocates of the TRC believed that public hearings would promote reconciliation between perpetrators and the community which was attacked by them. Moreover, the advocates believed that the TRC as a whole would contribute to national reconciliation. On the other hand, many ordinary Sierra Leoneans express their doubt about the need for the TRC, saying that Sierra Leoneans can simply forgive and forget (ICG 2002: 3). Others say that the TRC can serve no purpose because it has no power to punish. Having these local opinions in mind, I will examine first the relations between truth and healing and between truth and reconciliation and, secondly, the idea of national reconciliation.

5 Krio is a kind of pidgin English which is widely spoken as a lingua franca in Sierra Leone.
Truth and Healing: A Problematic Link

Come and say, "I am ready to talk" ...so that you have the psychological peace of mind... Why do you hide from yourself? You have the greatest opportunity this week: the opportunity to be healed: the opportunity to reconcile with yourself: the opportunity to reconcile with your neighbor and with the community. The opportunity to be reunited, to be reintegrated, to help repair our shattered cities and communities... Reveal truth today for peace... (KELSALL n.d.)

The TRC hearing in Tonkolili District, Sierra Leone, began with this statement by Reverend Joseph HUMPER, Chair of the Commission. It includes two important ideas that form the basis for the TRC. One is that the TRC provides opportunities to be healed, and the second is that the TRC affords opportunities for reconciliation. I will first examine the alleged causal relationship between truth-telling and healing.

A number of scholars support the idea that truth-telling helps healing. Among them is Martha MINOW, a professor at Harvard Law School, who highlights the therapeutic dimensions of truth commissions:

A truth commission could help individuals who testify to locate their experiences within the larger setting of political violence. Coming to know that one's suffering is not solely a private experience, best forgotten, but instead an indictment of a social cataclysm, can permit individuals to move beyond trauma, hopelessness, numbness, and preoccupation with loss and injury. (MINOW 2000: 244)

MINOW assumes that a truth commission can help a victim move beyond trauma and hopelessness. Advocates of truth commissions claim that a victim's psychological needs are better served by truth commissions than by trials. They believe that truth commission officials help witnesses effuse their emotions by listening sympathetically, acknowledging the wrongs committed and restoring the dignity of victims (MINOW 2000: 57).

With regard to Sierra Leone, KELSALL (n.d.), who observed a public hearing in Tonkolili District in northern Sierra Leone, did not find such effusive emotions among witnesses during the testimony. He observed that witness testimony was largely dry and no witness became emotional. Many victims, KELSALL assumed, came to testify to stake a claim for reparations against the TRC and/or the government. I found a similar situation in the public hearings in Pujehun: victim witnesses remained calm throughout the testimony and made a plea for material assistance in a monotonous voice. The following is a verbatim dialogue between a commissioner and a witness who was abused and displaced by rebels:

C: What is your health condition now after all the incidents including the fire?
W: I am sick, feeling pain all over my body, and I feel as if they have just wounded me.
C: You mentioned in your written statement that you had epilepsy and had only one child among five who took care of you. Have you had any counseling since you suffered so much from the war? You seem to need a counselor.
W: What type of person are you talking about?
C: I mean somebody that counsel you, ease your mind and help you to go about your daily life calmly because you seem to be irritable.
W: I have a question. I want to know if there is going to be any assistance for me after all the atrocities I suffered. I mean medical assistance. I want to know if I can get any assistance because rebels burned down my house and I am now displaced.
C: What form of assistance?
W: I want the commission to build a house for me.
C: We are sorry that it is not our mandate to build houses for individual witnesses. We do not have resource to build houses for the victims.
W: I have small child who is very sick. We need food and clothing. I want material assistance from the commission.
C: We are again very sorry that we cannot afford any material assistance. Any more questions or recommendations for the Commission?

Almost all the victim witnesses I saw asked what the Commission could do for them in terms of material assistance. The Commission merely dismissed such requests, saying it had no capacity to do anything. I found that some witnesses were badly disappointed to know that the Commission would not meet their expectations, which had risen very high in the process of statement-taking and testimony. It is totally understandable that material needs are urgent to the majority of people, who are struggling hard to rise from the destruction caused by the war. While discussions on healing and reconciliation tend to focus on psychological needs, material needs should not be taken as a secondary issue. In fact, economic recovery is crucially important to enable victims to move beyond loss and hopelessness.

Here remains a question whether KELSAII, noting the absence of emotional testimonies in Tonkolili, believes healing is taking place if a witness effuses his/her feelings during his/her testimony. It is worth looking at some ethnographic studies on the after-effects of testifying before the TRC in South Africa, as crying witnesses are typical of the public hearings there.

For instance, Fiona ROSS opposes the idea that truth-telling promotes healing. Some of her interviewees told ROSS that they felt that the public testimonial form at the hearings was "undignified," exposing testifiers to the risk of public humiliation as they broke with established conventions of silence and blame (ROSS 2003: 329). Some of those who testified were angry at the fact that their testimonies were circulated in public and were used by others without their consent. Though media coverage of the TRC in South Africa was much greater than that in Sierra Leone, ROSS's findings raise questions about assumed links between voice and dignity, and between self and story-telling. Priscilla HAYNER (2001: 144), who also studies the South African TRC, has found that fifty to sixty percent of those who testified before the TRC had a negative reaction afterwards.

Judging from the voices of some witnesses in Sierra Leone and from the research findings in South Africa, one cannot establish a causal relationship between truth-telling and healing. Moreover, giving testimony may sometimes hurt victims' feelings. The TRC has to admit the simple fact that truth-telling does not automatically lead to healing. It also needs to pay attention to the diverse effects of truth-finding upon individuals in the community concerned.
Truth and Reconciliation: Another Problematic Link

Secondly, the idea that the TRC affords opportunities for reconciliation needs to be critically examined. During my research, I noted how few people attended the public hearings in the three districts I visited. The number in the audience was as small as twenty, at one point on the second day in Pujahun. Given that it was the busiest season for farming, such a small audience was partly understandable. Even so, I must admit that many people I interviewed outside were not even interested in attending the hearings. One of my informants asked, "What is the point of listening to the stories of victims I already know?" This is the critical point which prompts us to rethink what kind of roles people in Sierra Leone expected of the TRC.

The International Crisis Group (2003: 12) writes that “the surprising indifference shown by much of the population to the TRC raises doubts as to whether the hearings served one of their main purposes: to develop understanding of what happened and so lead to healing and reconciliation.” However, there seem to be more questions to be answered before this question is asked. Though being critical to the effectiveness of the TRC hearings, the International Crisis Group shares the view with TRC advocates that it is Sierra Leoneans’ lack of understanding of what happened that hinders reconciliation among themselves. It has not questioned whether or not Sierra Leoneans actually lack an understanding of what happened during that time. Strikingly enough, most of my informants were aware of what had happened to their neighbors during the war, despite the fact that they had been displaced and had lost touch with their neighbors. The International Crisis Group has not questioned, either, whether truth-finding will actually help reconciliation.

Having these questions in mind, I would like to discuss how necessary truth-finding is for reconciliation to be made between a victim and a perpetrator. The following verbatim testimony was made by a victim at the public hearing in Mattrujong in southern Sierra Leone:

We were at Kotuma village. Then, Kamajor attacked us. I went to my mother's house. My mother encouraged me to eat because I was pregnant, but I could not eat because I was confused. After Kamajor looted many houses and burned them, the town chief gathered Kamajor because they had done wrong. Kamajor said it was correct that they had gone bad but they should be allowed to get rid of those whom they were running after. The town chief told them that he would gather those people in two days. Kamajor left our village for the town, but we did not know some of them were hiding. On my way back home, one of the Kamajors came and asked my name. I told him my name. Another came and asked my name. I am now going to tell you the name of the person who fired at me. The person is called X and is staying in Tungi. X asked me whether I knew his name. After I said yes, he asked me from where I knew him. I said I knew him from Tungi. He asked me where I grew up. I told him that I married in Guinea. He asked me whether I was here during the war. I said no. Then, he asked me whether I knew the rules in that place, Kamajor rules. I said no. He did not tell me the rules then. By then, there was a law that you should not hit a Kamajor with a broom. Then he tried to shoot me. While I was trying to escape, he shot at my right foot. Then they shot my child at his right foot. My mother went to report the matter. My child and I were sent to a hospital in Mattrujong. (11 July, 2003: Mattrujong)
Then the witness was asked some questions by a commissioner and answered as follows:

C: I did not understand why they shot at you and your child. Did you break any of their rules?
W: My child went against their rule.
C: What did your child do?
W: He rubbed the broom on them and they wounded him.
C: When did this happen? In which year?
W: After they fired at me.
C: No, I mean in which year this incident happened to you.
W: Two years ago.
C: So, your child was three years old at that time.
W: No, he is now big and is now five years old.
C: So, they shot at you because your child took a broom and slapped it against one of the Kamajors?
W: No.
C: No?
W: I was fired at before my child brought the bloom on the Kamajor.
C: So, why did they fire at you?
W: For one bag of rice.
C: What happened to the bag of rice? Explain us a bit.
W: One of the Kamajors ate a bag of rice. After that, the other Kamajors became annoyed with him. So, they went in a group to see the Paramount Chief. So, they had that trouble among themselves. So they left here and were going to meet him at Yobeku. Seeing the group of Kamajors, the person whom they were running after left Yobeku. Then, Kamajor said, "Because the person we have come for ran away, we are going to hurt the others remaining here." Then, they met me on my way to my father's house. I was unfortunate to fall beaten. Now I am amputated.
C: Were you the only person that was fired at by the Kamajor at that time?
W: They attempted to kill another Kamajor, but the cartridge fell on the ground. They didn't kill any other person.
C: I am yet to know why they actually shot at you because you were not part of the story of the bag of rice. Do you know any reason?
W: I didn't do anything to them.
C: Do you wish to ask X why he fired at you and your child?
W: No, but I want to ask you a question. I want to know what kind of assistance I can get. At my age, I am amputated and have no one to take care of me.
C: Unfortunately, we are not able to provide any assistance to individual witnesses. But we are going to submit our report including your testimony and then the parliament will debate on it so that the government will decide what to do for the victims. This is our position.
W: Uh... (11 July, 2003: Mattrujong)

We can clearly see that the commissioner was getting confused while trying hard to re-order the sequencing of the witness's story. I observed that it was largely because the commissioner and the witness did not have common objectives at this hearing. The former's primary concern was the reason why the Kamajor shot the latter and her child. However, the witness did not want to ask the perpetrator. She felt that it was none of her business. She
rather tried to emphasize the fact that she and her child were shot and disabled, which is probably why she omitted the story of the bag of rice in the first place. More than the reason why she was shot, she needed material assistance to reconstruct her life after the war. At any rate, the role of truth-finding appears to be of little importance to her.

Truth-finding was central to the Truth Commissions in Chile, Guatemala, Argentina and El Salvador. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Sierra Leone followed their steps and thus focused on truth-finding. Nevertheless, the political context in which the Sierra Leonean TRC operates is quite different from that of the Truth Commissions in Latin American countries. In the latter, repressive governments during the 1970s and 1980s committed political violence, particularly abductions and death-squad killings. Such forms of state violence were secretly committed and therefore deniable. The Truth Commissions there thus held great responsibility in finding truth at the macro political level.

In contrast, in Sierra Leone, violence was often committed rather openly among neighbors against one another, and thus it was not anonymous. Therefore, the TRC should not have taken it as its primary task to disclose what happened during the war. A greater challenge for the TRC was how it could possibly help people overcome the loss and live together with former enemies when necessary. However, not only was it unable to provide material assistance, it was also not equipped to deal with any individual issues and to work on reconciliation at the grassroots level. For instance, X, who allegedly shot the witness and her child, was not invited to the hearing. The absence of a perpetrator at a hearing will be discussed more in the next section.

In summary, it is hard to say that the TRC has offered opportunities for healing and reconciliation. The idea that the TRC would promote healing and reconciliation was based on highly questionable links between truth and healing/reconciliation. The findings from the district hearings indicate that the policy-making of accountability institutions should not be based on invalid assumptions, but on careful analysis of primary needs at the grassroots level.

The Myth of National Reconciliation

As far as the TRC is concerned, reconciliation is not only a matter for individuals. It also involves “national reconciliation.” “National reconciliation” is a relatively new idea which has just emerged in the context of the transition of authoritative regimes to liberal democracy (WILSON 2003: 368). Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in South Africa, Sierra Leone and East Timor involve an aspect of national reconciliation which was not included in the truth commissions. This is where the ideological power of truth-finding was harnessed to the project of instilling public moral values and constructing a new, shared vision of the nation (WILSON 2003: 369). It is worth looking closely at underlying problems involved in the very idea of national reconciliation.

Richard WILSON, an anthropologist who studies the politics of the South African TRC, critically observes:
[W]hether in South Africa or in Latin America or elsewhere, political and religious elites used a remarkably similar language of reconciliation, and their discourse was characterized by the following features: the construction of a new notion of the national self and psyche, the use of organic models of nation, the use of metaphors of illness and health and the creation of formulations of the common good which exclude retribution and encourage forgiveness. (WILSON 2003: 370)

Some of these discursive forms can be clearly found in the writing of Archbishop Desmond TUTU, Chairperson of the TRC in South Africa:

Social harmony is for us the *summum bonum* – the greatest good. Anything that subverts or undermines this sought-after good is to be avoided like the plague. Anger, resentment, lust for revenge ... are corrosive of this good. (TUTU 1999: 35)

WILSON is deeply concerned that these discursive forms are features of nationalist discourse, in which the focus is not as much on individuals as on the nation-state. Idiosyncratic and unique individual psyches disappear into the melting pot of a new, official “collective memory” (WILSON 2003: 370).

The discourse of national reconciliation obscures the subject of reconciliation. A question such as “who reconciles with whom?” disappears in the grand narrative of national reconciliation. However, some victims strongly feel that presence of the perpetrators at a hearing is crucial for reconciliation to be made. The following is a dialogue between a witness whose ear was cut off by a Kamajor and the commissioner at the public hearing in Mattrujong in southern Sierra Leone:

W: I read in the newspaper that you would put the two parties together and make unity between them after investigating their matter. But there is no case as such here. The only thing I want to say here is that, as far as a black man is concerned, if he does anything bad to you and if he doesn’t receive any punishment because of his bad way, tomorrow he will be the same, saying that there was nothing [that] came out of it after I did it. I am a bit confused because when you are talking about somebody that has done something wrong to you, it is better to have the person at present. But all the persons I talked about are not present here today. I want to ask the commission what best it can do.

C: The chances are very small that we can find out and bring the perpetrators before you. But we will do our best. (11 July, 2003: Mattrujong)

In most cases, the TRC failed to identify and bring the appointed perpetrators before the victims. The victims were only left disappointed. As for a perpetrator who gave his/her testimony at a public hearing and admitted his/her guilt, he/she was invited to a reconciliation ceremony on the final day. During the ceremony, he/she apologized to the community as a whole, not to a particular victim, and begged a pardon from traditional and religious leaders. The following is a statement given by one of the top commanders of Kamajor at another public hearing:

C: Even if you were not there, you had a command responsibility as the Deputy National Taskforce Commander. So, what will you be telling the people?
W: My name is ... When this war came, I joined the movement because I found many old and sick people who could not go and fight. We were young men, but when the big men died, we had to go and fight. I am not talking only for Kamajor but for all the fighters who took up arms during this war. If we had beaten you up, pushed you, squeezed your hands, and talked you harshly, it was because of the war. We do not do that when there is no war. We used to obey you. Please. A cow cannot fear its mother. We are still appealing to you. A leopard cannot fear its mother. Please. I and my brothers and those who suffered from the atrocities we committed, may we meet before Allah. Please forgive us. We shall never repeat that. This is on behalf of all the Kamajors.

C: Thank you for your apology on behalf of all the Kamajors. Do you have ...

(23 June, 2003: Pujahun)

After listening to this statement, I interviewed a man who was flogged by Kamajor during the war and asked him how he found the statement. He said, “Well, it is good that this man has apologized as a Kamajor leader.” I further asked, “What do you think of those who mistreated you during the war?” Then, he answered, “I cannot say I forgive them. The two things are different.” Though I was eager to ask him what he wanted to do with regard to those who harmed him, I hesitated because I did not want to raise his hopes by asking such a question and end up disappointing him.

Reconciliation between individuals in the sense of victim-offender mediation has not been attempted in Sierra Leone, South Africa, Chile, or other countries where truth commissions consciously pursued national reconciliation. It is also problematic that TRCs in South Africa and in Sierra Leone are disconnected with any means to pursue retributive justice, given that many victims are left disgruntled. Psychologizing the nation can be an ideology for subordinating diverse individual needs to the political expediency of national unity and reconciliation (HAMBER and WILSON 2002: 36).

GUTMANN and THOMPSON (cited in ROTBERG 2000: 9) assert that reconciliation becomes an illiberal aim if an entire society is expected to embrace one comprehensive moral approach. It could also be undemocratic, they argue, for disharmony is a desirable attribute of a healthy democracy. While a Truth and Reconciliation Commission is praised as a new mechanism to address human rights violations, it may serve the interests of nationalistic elites at the expense of individual needs.

How to Deal with the Past

Dealing with Root Causes of the War: Towards Sustainable Peace

Peace may mean more than mere absence of violence. Peace in a maximalist sense includes the sustainability of non-violence. One of the tasks of the TRC is to “prevent a repetition of the violations and abuses suffered.” Many doubt that the TRC of Sierra Leone has effectively carried out this task and feel it should have done more than collecting the bare facts of atrocities committed during the war. It is also widely feared that another war will come about
because the root causes of the previous war have not been properly dealt with. That being so, how can an accountability institution deal with the root causes of the war and help prevent another conflict?

First, an accountability institution needs to collect different opinions about the root causes of the war, both from scholars and from ordinary people who experienced the war. The war in Sierra Leone is often described in the media as a “diamond conflict.” The Chief Prosecutor of the SC, David Crane, sees economic interest, supposedly affected by this, as the primary incentive that drove many people into fighting (ICG 2003).

However, regional experts claim that while economic interest certainly fueled the war, it was not its sole cause. Though different experts take different approaches, many of them have in common certain policy recommendations for conflict prevention (RENO 1995, RICHARDS 1996, BANGURA 1997, FANTHORPE 2001). For instance, RENO, RICHARDS, and BANGURA share the view that post-colonial economic decline and disenfranchisement of the local population triggered the war in Sierra Leone. Based on this, conflict-prevention policy should include political reforms at both the national and the local levels, and reinforcement of the governance and accountability of political offices.

How can an accountability institution deal with such a structural problem? Neither the SC nor the TRC has dealt with the structural or historical causes of the war. Both institutions failed to address the domestic accountability crisis. The SC attempted to hold the war leaders accountable mainly to the international community. As shown above, the TRC was mostly concerned with the bare facts about individual abuses. Therefore, there is a need for another institution which aims to provide structural and historical accounts, to integrate individual experiences of violence into a wider analysis of the causes and motivations of political violence. Given their limited capacity for collecting information, it would be useful for the accountability institutions to refer to interview materials and historical analyses provided by regional experts.

**Responding to Diverse Needs in Post-Conflict Society**

The TRC has attempted to integrate ritual practices and traditional authority into its process to promote reconciliation. KELSAI (n.d.) found in Tonkolili that the reconciliation ceremony on the final day was more successful than the preceding hearings. He noted that the ceremony involved emotional responses from perpetrators and brought some sense of relief to the audience, in contrast to the “dry” hearings. What made the ceremony successful, he assumes, was the solemnity of the traditional ritual and the psychological pressure which the perpetrators felt from the community. He goes on to surmise that the truth-telling component of the public hearings might have been more successful if they had been more heavily invested with oath-taking and cursing, which are central to most traditional practices of conflict resolution.

SHAW (2002: 268) notes that local communities, in cooperation with NGOs, are reworking
practices of divination and sacrifice to compose ritual processes for the cleansing, healing, and reintegration of young ex-combatants. For instance, it is reported that the Christian Children's Fund has successfully collaborated with traditional healers to facilitate purification rituals in northern Sierra Leone for outcast girls who were raped by rebels during the war.6

While these efforts are remarkable, one should not easily assume that these traditional ritual practices are the best way to settle the past in Sierra Leone, as such practices heavily rely on religious leaders, some of whom often abuse their authority. A good number of Muslim leaders and traditional herbalists in the southern region became involved in the Kamajor movement as initiators who initiated young men into "Kamajor society." Those initiators were highly respected for their skills in making fighters "bullet-proof," and charged the latter a high fee for that service. As the Kamajor movement greatly developed in scale and became integrated into the Civil Defence Force to assist President KABAH's government in exile, initiators gained political influence in their villages. I found during my research that some of them abused their authority over their initiates and harmed civilians. I also found that many initiators felt disgraced by KABAH's government because it did not appreciate their contribution during the war. In short, one cannot easily expect them to play important roles in promoting reconciliation, as they themselves need to be reconciled with their community and with the government.

Likewise, we cannot easily assume that traditional authority can help to promote reconciliation in its community, because it was one of the major components of deteriorating social relationships before and during the conflict, in other words, youths confronted with elders and chiefs. One can find such social fragmentation and generation conflict in the post-conflict society. For example, chiefs and elders have authority to settle disputes that have happened within their territory (GITTINS 1987: 55). Many villagers, however, consider customary justice "expensive, unpredictable and open to bribery" (ARCHIBALD and RICHARDS 2002: 344). In particular, many youths complain that chiefs and elders manipulate the local justice system against youths. During my research, it was widely reported that quite often, young men were heavily fined for sleeping with wives of local leaders and ended up leaving their villages because they could not pay such a heavy fine. In fact, a good number of young men allegedly joined the RUF after being ostracized by local leaders.

Anthony GITTINS (1987: 54), the author of Mende Religion, argues that in Mende culture "individualism is subordinated to the common good and the person of authority." In contrast, ARCHIBALD and RICHARDS (2002) insist that individualism and local ideas about justice and rights are rapidly evolving in contemporary Sierra Leonean society, while the patron-client relationship has declined. Richard FANTHORPE (2001: 385) supports their view: the most pressing political issues for many people in contemporary Africa are not which "strong man" to

6 The Christian Children's Fund's community reintegration program for abducted and sexually-abused girls works with communities to help them understand what has happened to the girls. The program reintegration the girls into their communities by incorporating traditional healing practices with modern psychosocial interventions (http://www.christianchildrensfund.org/where_we_work/sierra_leone.aspx?id=244, downloaded on Sep. 1, 2004).
support, but how one should go about securing basic rights to land, living space, and legal protection.

FANTHORPE attributes the origins of the war in Sierra Leone to the historical processes of youth-marginalization in chieftain politics and argues that thorough modernization of Sierra Leone’s local government system is an essential prerequisite for any lasting peace. That being so, an application of traditional ritual practices to accountability institutions requires a careful examination of the power relations among different social groups in the community concerned.

Alternatives

The TRC in Sierra Leone has undertaken public hearings in a quasi-judicial style without having sufficient discussion on what should be taken as truth or how it could seek such truth. KELSALL (n.d.) found that the commissioners were only concerned with clarifying bare facts. When sitting in a public hearing in Bonthe District in southern Sierra Leone, I felt as if it were a cross-examination at a law court. The following is a verbatim dialogue at the hearing in Bonthe between the commissioners and a witness who allegedly joined the war as a Kamajor. The first commissioner is an American:

C: Is it true that Kamajors destroyed property of civilians?
W: Yes.
C: Can that be justified in order to save human life?
W: Those who did it can answer that.
C: Well, you were a Kamajor and you said Kamajors did it. So, can you answer that?
W: ... 
C: Were you involved in destroying property?
W: No, I was not involved though I was a Kamajor.
C: Were people in your command involved?
W: It is difficult to establish that those who I supervised were the ones who were involved in atrocities, because I was not the overall boss.
C: But you agreed Kamajors destroyed properties, didn't you?
W: I did agree, but I was not involved and was not a boss, either.
C: You did not do it because you thought it was wrong?
W: Yes [sic].7 (12 July, 2003: Bonthe)

At this point, the witness seemed terribly daunted by the foreign commissioner. I found the way the commissioner phrased his questions so interrogative that the witness ended up emphasizing his irrelevance to Kamajor's evil-doing rather than feeling the need to reconcile with the community. Then, another commissioner, who was a Sierra Leonean, came in:

C: We again want to remind you that you are not in court. I may be wrong, but I see you getting scared a bit. Feel free to answer questions. It is important for truth to be established and for reconciliation to be made. But your information will be used confidentially only for this commission. Let me start questions again. You joined the Kamajor movement to

7 The official translator of the hearing interpreted the witness's reply as "Yes," but apparently she meant to answer, "You are right."
defend yourself and your people. You were later promoted to a logistic and commanding officer. While you were a logistic officer, did your fighters harm any women or children in the process of fighting?

W: I got the position only when everything went under control.

C: While you were a senior logistic officer, did you have any form of rules with regard to protection of civilians in the process of fighting with rebels?

W: I was only in charge of food. I had no rules to tell the fighters. 

C: What was the purpose of the Operation Black December that was ordered by Chief Hinga Norman?

W: It was to block all the foods coming down to soldiers.

C: In 1999, you were sent to Freetown to fight against rebels. Can you briefly explain about it? Please don’t feel guilty for what you are speaking here. Again, the commission is not related to any other organizations including the SC. Did you kill people at all?

W: No.

C: During the five years of fighting as a Kamajor, you did not kill a single person?

W: No.

C: So, should I call you a lazy Kamajor?

W: (Laughter) My role was only to provide food for soldiers. (12 July, 2003: Bonthe)

Due to a humorous question from the commissioner, the witness seemed a little bit more relaxed at this point. Still, he was not convinced of confidentiality in spite of repeated reminders from the commissioner. Then, another commissioner, who was a Belgian, started questions:

C: Did you have any rules with regard to how to deal with civilians who were suspected of conniving with rebels or soldiers?

W: There were rules.

C: How did you recognize civilians who were conniving with rebels or soldiers?

W: By their behaviors.

C: What will you say if a civilian comes here and says that he was mistreated by you?

W: War cannot be fought with ease. But I could not remember doing any atrocities to civilians. We were trying to protect them.

C: Then, why did several delegations of civilians come from Bonthe Island to ask Kamajors not to go there?

W: It was elders who did not want Kamajors to come, but they could not stop all of us coming to Bonthe.

C: Let me read a part of your written statement which you gave to our statement-takers. “I may have done something evil to my people while exercising my duty as a Kamajor. I am willing at all times to offer my sincere apology to whomever I may have done wrong.” So, can you tell us anything that you want to apologize for?

W: I cannot remember.

C: Even if you cannot remember, do you think you might have caused any harm to any people during those difficult years?

W: ...

C: Please go ahead. What was the answer?

W: ... (12 July, 2003: Bonthe)

The third commissioner tried to lead the witness to apologize, but failed, apparently because the witness was scared to admit his guilt. Judging from the dialogue, the commis-
sioners gave priority over many other tasks to the creation of an impartial historical record of the conflict. The harder the commissioners tried to seek objective truth, the less they understood the motivation, feelings and thoughts of each witness.

In contrast, the interview records of Krijn Peters and Paul Richards in Why We Fight (1998: 194-5) are richer in subjective description of individual experiences. Comparing the above dialogues at the TRC hearing with the interviews in Peters and Richards, one notices that distance between the two parties in conversation is critical. As long as commissioners were antagonistic to a witness, the latter would never unlock his heart. Being closer to the informant, Peters and Richards, on the other hand, succeeded in inducing the informant to describe his feelings and motivations. How, then, were Peters and Richards able to get closer to their informant? The way Peters and Richards phrased their questions was not interrogative or accusing, but rather sympathetic. They were more concerned about how the informant felt and why he did what he did when committing atrocities than about details of his misdeeds.

Following this, I suggest that accountability institutions should redefine truth in a wider sense so that it could possibly include subjective narratives, as the subjective narratives of individual perpetrators might be able to give us deeper insights into the conflict. For instance, it is often assumed that child combatants are forcibly conscripted and made to fight against their will, but some child ex-combatants, like the informant above, liked fighting and enjoyed the freedom and power to harm people. This kind of information brings us a different picture of the conflict and thus provides us with different implications for post-conflict reconstruction.

Secondly, accountability institutions should recognize that truth is not fixed. While asking questions, the third commissioner claimed that truth had been established by the written statement of the witness. In contrast, the witness maintained that he no longer remembered doing atrocities to civilians. It is more realistic to see truth as a site for contestation (Ferme 2001: 7). From this perspective, truth is being always shaped in response to changing circumstances, just as the past is invented or redefined by individuals to fit the present (Pennebaker 1997: 6). In this case, the dialogue would have developed in a quite different way if the commissioners had asked the witness why he no longer wanted to apologize and whether his relationships or his social status had changed since he gave his written statement.

If truth is put into such perspectives, one may recognize a need for accountability institutions to create spaces for public debate. In Sierra Leone, the TRC did not provide opportunities for ordinary people to express their own opinions and ideas with regard to why the war happened and how it continued. The TRC feels that it is its mission to make an analysis of what happened and why it happened:

The Commission is going to record all the different types of suffering experienced during the conflict. The Commission is also expected to find out why all these went on during the conflict so that the country will be able to map out a way forward, so that there will be no more war like that in the future, and that all the different communities over the country will improve.

(Quoted from Chairperson of the TRC hearing in Matrujong on 11 July, 2003)
I argue, however, that it is not the TRC, but those who experienced the war and will continue to live in Sierra Leone, that will have to find a way forward through public debate. Having seen the extraordinary enthusiasm of many Sierra Leoneans towards making their voices heard on radio, I strongly feel a great need for public spaces where ordinary people can freely discuss what caused the war and what should be done to prevent another war.

I found, through interviews, that people held different perceptions about what constituted social reintegration. As far as I have observed, those who are benefiting from the status quo – mainly traditional leaders – tend to consider a return to the pre-war state of their society as social reintegration. In their perception, they see youths and women as source of labor for reconstruction activities. On the other hand, women and youths tend to focus more on social issues and stress a need to revisit the basic unit of family life and social values in order to critically evaluate what is happening at that level in the social reintegration process. According to one of the youths whom I interviewed, there is no socio-political space wide enough to accommodate dissension or divergent views in his community. Those who are not part of the leadership are not invited when the government consults with communities. After the conflict, young people now perceive an additional role for themselves – watching the leadership to ensure its accountability.

If they see truth as a site for contestation, then accountability institutions may be able to create “an open dissensus, through which individuals will be enabled to seek new forms of affiliation” (BoNEMAN 2002: 301). They do not aim to obtain public consensus on the past, but rather attempt to create a basis for accommodating different opinions and conflicting ideas.

Settling the past is a present project. Accountability institutions should not assume that they are dealing with the past as a fixed object. They are dealing with a past which is always being shaped and which is of great significance to the present of those who have undergone violence and suffering. The issues of social justice and individualism are not newly-emerging issues in Sierra Leonean society. They are highly relevant to what happened during the war. Moreover, they reflect what has not been settled or reconciled among people and hence need to be integrated into the wider process of settling the past. Settling the past is such an enormous project that the current TRC can do very little. However, creating space for public debates is an essential part of the process, and I believe that it is one of the crucial roles for accountability institutions.

Conclusion

The primary methodology of this article has been a theoretical analysis of the concepts and hypotheses that are applied by accountability institutions. It is obvious that these concepts and hypotheses form the basis for the ideologies of international law and human rights and
therefore do not reflect the actual intentions of various actors, such as the Sierra Leonean government, and Western donors and policy-makers. The Sierra Leonean government called for the establishment of the SC, not only for holding war criminals accountable to international humanitarian law; the government needed the international community to share the burden of trying the RUF top leader, and also was urged to show that the government was seriously committed to international law and human rights. Western donors, for their part, have their own agenda to disseminate liberal democracy to the world but may not necessarily be so concerned with the consequences of such policy in individual countries.

Nevertheless, recognizing the gap between political ideologies and actual intentions does not mean that we do not need to pay attention to the former. This is because political ideologies, no matter how false, facilitate a certain policy and a certain way in which aid is spent. Moreover, any action following such a policy significantly impacts upon local communities. It is therefore of great importance to analyze political ideologies and disclose how they work in a local context.

Anthropologists have yet to make any significant contribution in this field. This is ironic because those institutions have more or less affected the lives of the people among whom not a few anthropologists have been studying. It is ironic also because many anthropologists have been interested in such mechanisms of dealing with the past as collective memory and story-telling. Interfaces between accountability institutions and local communities raise a number of issues that are surely interesting to anthropologists. Among those issues are different interpretations of violence, validity of the Western trauma-healing to victims of war crimes in non-Western countries, and local responses to growing human rights discourse. My article therefore has aimed at constituting an innovative anthropological study of accountability institutions.

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