

Panel 49. The politics of healing and justice in post-conflict societies: Global discourses and local realities

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Contested inclusions:

**Reflections on participatory approaches to “peace building”
in Liberia**

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Introduction

In the “international community” the assumption is shared that in fragile war-torn societies external actors should make concerted efforts to reconcile and regenerate them in ways that will inhibit relapses into violence (Duffield 2005; Pugh 2000). Donor policies and projects are informed by a “new humanitarianism” and a conception of “liberal peace” involving profound social transformation with ameliorative and harmonising measures. A consensus seems to exist in the international community to reinforce viz. build, *inter alia*, civil and representative institutions in post-conflict countries (Duffield 2005: 8-12). Formal institutions are generally considered to have little capacity and low legitimacy in “no-peace/no war” situations. State-centred notions of security are perceived to involve the risk of imposing illegitimate and non-sustainable changes, therefore informal institutions are emphasized and local “ownership” of both structures and processes is to be ensured. The participation of “civil society” in various “peace building”¹ endeavours is to be facilitated by the donor agencies. It seems that international standard procedures of training, sensitization, civic education, reconciliation prescribe the inclusion of “representatives” of certain socio-political categories such as women and youth, sometimes by quota. In addition, “local authorities” and “traditional leaders” are included, (a) in recognition of their crucial roles as promoters of viz. resisters to change at the local level, and (b) because they are assumed to be the carriers of “Traditional Forms of Reconciliation”, apparently codified by the acronym “TFR” in the donor community (see, for example, Duworko and UNDP 2005), and considered as “important building blocks for a peaceful post-conflict order” (Andersen 2006: 3).² “Traditional” institutions have been extensively considered in the theory and practice of peace building, reconciliation and reintegration, as they are assumed to have retained regulatory powers that the state has lost in the course of wars (Zartmann 2000).

¹ The term *peace building* came into use in the United Nations system at the beginning of the 1990s (Boutros-Ghali’s Agenda for Peace) and has since been adopted by aid agencies. The concept has been applied in various discursive ways, signifying a range of activities that go beyond crisis intervention such as reconstruction and building of governance structures and institutions as well as the transformation of relationships in post-war societies.

² See also “Traditional Justice Mechanisms” (TJMs) as objects of research (IDEA 2007).

A paradox is created as external actors are assumed to command superior techniques for dealing with peaceful change and human rights issues – Western models (assumed to be universal) of conflict resolution or transformation travel across the continent; multilateral organisations and international NGOs fund the “training of trainers”, peace building manuals, media broadcasts etc. with a wealth of novel concepts, discourse and methods derived from the participation and good governance paradigms. It is one of the challenges of my research project to explore the manifestations of these contradictory currents.

This paper explores the practices and implications of the “workshop culture” that has emerged in Liberia in the course of a devastating civil war. Another dimension may thus be added to the debates on the intricacies and fallacies of the paradigm of participation (Cooke and Kothari 2001) and on the inclusion of “civil society” groups in the policies and practices of peace building.

The setting

The Liberian civil war, which has been considered the seat of fire in this warn-torn part of Africa, continued for a period of 14 years; it claimed the lives of 150.000 up to 250.000 people (estimates differ) and displaced nearly half the country’s population of an estimated 2.5 million. After a *Comprehensive Peace Agreement* had finally been signed and Charles Taylor had left the country in 2003, the international community developed an ambition to rebuild Liberia, prevent it from relapsing into violent conflict and to turn it into a respectable country with an operative government. A peace keeping force, United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), was deployed all over the country. In 2004 the armed factions were disarmed and demobilized and parallel donor structures have expanded since (UN agencies, the European Commission, bilateral partners and international NGOs) in order to rebuild and to reorganize the country. But even during the years of the war, a number of international and national NGOs were active particularly in the west and north of the country that are relatively accessible by road from the capital Monrovia. – A piece of local ‘wisdom’: ”When the war came, development came”.

This region, which I call Liberia's "catchment area" of foreign aid, happens to coincide with the so-called "Poro complex" of secret societies. It has historically been marked by the pervasive influence of secret societies in all spheres of life, esp. the mutually exclusive secret societies of the *Poro* (for men) and *Sande* (for women), which is, however, politically less influential than the men's society. Some of the historical functions ascribed to the Poro are the (trans-ethnic) organization of war and trade, harmonizing lineage rivalries, constituting a cross-cutting institution which balanced secular leadership, social control and jurisdiction, the creation of social conformity and institutional security. Leaders of secret societies, called *zoes*, were invariably elder members of the ruling lineage; they claimed to have esoteric knowledge of medicines, spiritual powers to control hidden forces of the forest (manifested e.g. in the secret *Poro* mask, colloquially labeled "devil"), to mediate between the supernatural world and the community, and to control various other domains considered important to social life and the community's survival. Initiation into the societies was compulsory for all boys and girls (Murphy 1980; Schröder 1988). One ethnic group, however, was exempt from secret society membership and activities, the traders called Mandingo, who had migrated to the area of Liberia from neighboring Guinea and settled among the indigenous groups over a period of four centuries. In general, the Mandingo, the majority of whom are Muslim today, were classified as "strangers", denied membership in the *Poro* and were largely excluded from their communities' political affairs.

For complex historical reasons, the Mandingo were both prominent victims and perpetrators in the civil conflict. In some locations, a circle of violence was created by mutual desecrations or destruction of spiritual locations, i.e. mosques and secret *poro* groves. The majority of the Mandingo were driven into exile (Højbjerg 2004; Sawyer 2005). After the formal peace agreement was reached, ethnic tensions have persisted (e.g. outbreaks of violence in Nimba County). Since 2004 many Mandingos have come back to resume their previous activities but have been prevented from reclaiming their property and denied access to market places and farm land by the "indigenous" people that had driven them away. The war provided an opportunity for members of these groups to fill the void of commercial activity that the absence of the Mandingos had created. They are in direct competition with the Mandingos and invoke their "customary" right to the land,

market spots and housing space to use the spots formerly owned by Mandingos. The issue of land is the key factor of the interethnic tensions. The most prominent lines of conflict divide various groups in the north (Gio, Mano) and northwest (Loma) of the country from the Mandingo.

Various observers maintain that Liberia's peace remains fragile as long as this conflict persists. Reconciliation between the Mandingos and the groups of the Loma and the Gio/and Mano has been considered as "one of the most important postconflict challenges" (Sawyer 2005: 63) in Liberia.

"Workshop culture"

The most popular medium of peace building intervention are workshops that address, apart from "reconciliation" as such, topics like "gender mainstreaming", "good governance", or "youth leadership". They are implemented by local NGOs on behalf of international agencies. The workshops are usually facilitated by Liberians trained in participatory methods. They may last three to ten days and are usually conducted in urban or semi-urban environments. Participatory methods and, it seems to me, a common stratification of workshop participants aiming at the inclusion of representatives from all social subgroups, i.e. local authorities, women and youth, are employed throughout.

In general, the "workshop culture" that has emerged in Liberia from the years of the war furnishes economic, political and symbolic resources to those invited viz. selected to participate. In Liberia "workshops" are instrumentalized by local actors in different ways (see also Smith 2003 for parallel dynamics in Nigeria):

1. Participation in workshops is highly appreciated by the participants as a way of "getting some small-small things". Regular food and comfortable shelter are provided for several days, in most cases generous "sitting fees" (up to 25 US\$/day) are granted to the participants, and the "reimbursements" of transportation costs are a welcome source of income for those who choose to walk to the venues (sometimes for days). Like in other countries, this has led to the formation of a new stratum of "workshop professionals" composed of the educated and internationally experienced members of various

organisations and communities. But local authorities and leaders of various groups, most of them illiterate, also enjoy these benefits to an increasing degree.

2. Participation in workshops is also sought after, because new knowledge and ideas, intellectual stimulation, new ways of communication and enjoyment of coveted technologies (video presentations) are provided. In addition, participation in workshops is a source of prestige (As reported, illiterate people invited by the NGO are sometimes reluctant to participate for fear of being shamed as “country” people in an arena that is perceived to be “civilized”).

3. Whereas the categories of prospective participants are defined by the NGO, the selection of individual participants is largely left to “the communities”. In practice the invitation letters are directed to local chiefs. These authorities can build or strengthen their networks of patronage by assigning privileges of workshop participation to (potential) clients (another case of the famous “elite capture” in other arenas of the development business).³

NGOs have, unintentionally, often sidelined the Mandingos in various kinds of training that do *not* specifically address ethnic reconciliation. Against the backdrop of ethnic conflict in many communities, Mandingos are generally excluded from the benefits of the “workshop economy” and from local mechanisms of patronage. Where the selection of participants is left to “the communities” – the fictitious character of this concept has variously been deconstructed - , in effect to their chiefs or other leaders, Mandingos tend to be excluded. The question deserves to be investigated whether project resources furnished to non-Mandingo patrons indirectly reinforce local imbalances of power between the contesting ethnic parties and neutralize intended effects of reconciliation workshops.

³ See also Smith (2003) about the creation of “wealth in people” through the allocation of project resources.

Contested inclusion 1: “youth” in reconciliation workshops

Reconciliation workshops that address the Mandingo conflict are reported to employ participatory methods such as mixed working groups, arrangements of mutual meals (even mutual cooking), encouragement and facilitation to vent grievances on all sides, to confess transgressions, to show remorse and apologize⁴, often framed by prayers (Muslim and Christian), ceremonial speeches or rituals, to formulate mutual commitments and even “plans of action”. Workshops encourage exchanges of views and information as well as of feelings that are usually retained; this is generally taken to be a “healing mechanism”.

However, the presence of “youth”, representatives of which are routinely invited by the NGOs, may in fact impede open communication considered so crucial for the success of these interventions.

Reportedly, at one workshop a major issue was that while other tribes expressed remorse and had apologised for their transgressions and discrimination the Mandingos did not. One participant voiced the view: “We feel we have been betrayed by the Mandingos: we exposed ourselves by admitting the wrong we had done and expressing remorse. They did not. This means they are not open to us. Also they can use our confession as a weapon against us”. It turned out the Mandingo were willing to admit many crimes by their people, but not in public and in the presence of individuals considered as juniors. The Mandingos present were elders and tribal leaders, the other participants were not leaders and had the status of “youth”. Confession would have been possible only in the presence of elders of the same or of superior rank. In this context the confession of “truth” was not contested because of the virtues of social forgetting so often put forward in debates on

⁴ The apparently universal popularity of public confessions in reconciliation events may be due to the role of the church in reconciliation theories and practice. Note the prominence of Catholic bishops in TRCs around the world, see also Shaw (2005) about the TRC in Sierra Leone.

Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (for example, cf. Shaw 2005), but rather because of the status issue.⁵

Status as a crucial constraint to the sharing of information that is perceived as either sensitive or exclusive seems to be unrecognized by the donor community. Interventions by workshops assume the independent individual in the western sense, that takes individual decisions on the basis of information, which is freely shared in the workshop process (see also Smith 2003).

Contested inclusion 2: “traditional authorities” as beneficiaries of external and internal intervention

In recent years Liberian society of the west and north seems to have become divided over the role of the secret societies. In many parts of that region initiation into the societies was disrupted by the war, and reportedly there are many rural communities in which *Poros* and *Sandes* have been dormant or defunct (the *Sande* not to the same degree). *Zoes* were in exile or had been killed, or parents lacked the resources required for the initiation of their children (Richards et al. 2005). Also there are reports of a lack of trust in the virtues of *zoes* where these are perceived to have been without the power to protect their communities (see also findings by J. Smith-Höhn on the perception of the *Poros* as a security risk, presented in Bloomington in March 2007).

Many urban youths, in particular those in schools, are no longer interested in becoming initiated into the *Poros* and *Sandes* and would refuse to be forced. Urban parents are generally less inclined than before the war to send their children to these so-called “bush schools”. International actors and some NGO activists are critical of the *Sande* society on account of their practice of circumcising girls during initiation.

However, the sodalities’ apparent loss of function, legitimacy and power – as reflected in the narratives of urban residents and NGO activists – are counteracted by a variety of

⁵ The same kind of social constraint has been observed in the work of the TRCs in Sierra Leone and Liberia, where elders were reluctant to confess in the presence of youth (personal communication with D. M., Monrovia, 14.3.07)

actors interested in their instrumentalisation and/or revitalization. A revival or re-legitimization of the secret societies by what may be termed an unholy alliance can be observed: efforts of internal actors, i.e. elders, politicians seeking presidential office and the Liberian government, seem to be compounded by external actors, i.e. certain international organisations.

The national media, the donor community and many Liberians seem to agree on the essential problems of Liberian society today: increasing prostitution, crimes and domestic violence, the deviance of former fighters and the lack of regulatory institutions. This is discursively linked up by rural elders with a lack of respect on the part of the youth, their lack of moral values and their refusal to support and labour for their elders. According to them (and to *zoes* returning from exile) the weakening of the *Sande* and *Poro* societies has resulted in a loss of traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution, socialisation and integration. A range of authors have indicated that “some Liberians think the sodalities may have a part to play in restoring community discipline, and in the ritual reintegration of ex-combatants (cf. (Richards et al. 2005: 65).

- With a view to regain control over deviant youths many older members of western Liberia’s rural society seem to be convinced of the socializing value of the sodalities and support any efforts to revive their initiation camps called “bush schools”.
- During election campaigns some contestants for the Presidency courted (bribed) *Poro* and *Sande* leaders to direct the votes of their society’s members, to enhance their constituencies. President Johnson-Sirleaf cooperated with the *Sande* society in particular and made promises of gender-specific benefits. The secret societies are also instrumentalized by politicians striving to consolidate their power. In turn society leaders reportedly try to embrace members of the government by inviting them to become high-ranking “members”.
- The Ministry of Internal Affairs and the donors have included the *zoes* in all important reconciliation workshops, e.g. in Nimba County. The *zoes* are taken to be the representatives of the “traditional religions”, which have to match the representatives of the two conflicting religions, i.e. the Muslim and Christian

communities. In the same line, power has been granted to *zoes* in the Liberian TRC process: A “Traditional Advisory Council to the TRC” was established with support from the government.

- Some NGOs (Everyday Gandhis, LCIP funded by UNDP) have bought the idea that the secret societies, in particular the *Poros*, constitute a crucial factor in the re-establishment of order in Liberia’s unstable communities. Accordingly, society leaders have received resources to reconstruct *zoe* houses, *Poros* shelters and to conduct public rituals of “cleansing” and reconciliation.

These NGOs do not seem to be aware of some possible implications of their interference. There are many contestable and contested aspects of the inclusion of Liberian “traditional leaders” in peace building projects, some of which I want to illuminate here.

It needs to be mentioned that the secret societies were crucial institutions enabling elders and local elites to accumulate resources and concentrate power. During extensive compulsory initiation periods, including circumcision of both girls and boys, the *zoes* could extort considerable amounts of fees and labour services from senior relatives of the initiates and, in the case of girls, from prospective husbands. The overriding but hidden motive of many a ‘traditionalist’s’ discourse on the value of the sodalities therefore seems to lie in their opportunity to (re-) create a viable source of income. This is supported by the short duration of the purportedly important institution of socialisation, which used to last for months and even years in the past. As reported, some of the “bush schools” have been reduced to a week or even less. This is debated among Liberians; for example, the disciplining function of this kind of initiation is seriously questioned by some elder women hoping that increased independence of female youth will be countered by the revival of the *Sande* “bush schools” with a view to regaining control over girls.

Concerning the *Sande* society, the NGOs contribute to revival of the contested practice of girls’ circumcision (female genital mutilation – FGM). Not only international agencies but also Monrovia-based women’s organizations consider the *Sande* as harmful and are critical of any interventions, such as building of houses for *zoes*, that contribute to stabilizing their position. However, they recognize the importance of the “traditional culture” and abstain from interfering in any direct manner.

The government, too, seems to be walking on a tightrope. Its affirmative action to promote women's human rights appears to be highly selective. While publicly demanding women's human rights on the 'frontstage', in particular by intensive support to the new "rape law", the President has had, on the 'backstage', to support gerontocratic structures that are not only interested in curbing the independence of young females but also to continue with FGM, in order to win and consolidate political support. In contrast to other African countries, FGM is hardly mentioned in Liberia's media.

Conclusion

Evidence emerging of my fieldwork indicates that blueprint policies and procedures applied in the organization of workshops may be counterproductive both to the civic education project and to the project of reconciling ethnic conflict parties. The selection of workshop participants may be too inclusive (the presence of youths inhibits the discussion of critical topics reserved to elders to be effective) or too exclusive (due to standard stratification of participant categories a critical minority, the Mandingos, are not represented/enjoying the multiple benefits of Liberia's "workshop culture").

The *zoes* seem to be riding on the ticket of international ideology that regards "traditional" institutions as important factors in processes of reconciliation and reintegration. In this way contested secret society leaders may have regained power at a faster rate than they would otherwise have done.

Contestations of the inclusion of "youth" in pivotal events and of privileging traditional leaders raise the question: Are legitimacy and trust, which are considered so important in the reconstruction of war-torn societies, still anchored on the principle of seniority?

A final note on the "success" of reconciliation workshops. Their impact is of course hard to assess. "Success stories" related by NGOs attest to cases of setting up peace committees in communities, clearing paths that connect ethnic villages or quarters, re-opening a market to Mandingos etc.. The crucial land issue, however, seems to be out of the reach of the NGOs power. Moreover, there seem to be some dangers in the actual implementation. Due to a lack of careful preparation and supervision – which, it should be noted, is not always due to a lack of will or knowledge but to a lack of resources such as time and personnel - NGOs may miss to invite important elders or fail to insist on the

inclusion of legitimate representatives in their absence. These authorities may boycott the decisions that were painstakingly reached by the actual participants during long sessions. Also, as reported, NGOs may involuntarily fuel conflict if their intervention is only superficial and/or short. Facilitating the voicing of grievances on all sides may take days, and there may be a lack of time or follow-up to facilitate the actual reconciliation process that should ensue. Merely speaking in public about things that have been covered up, according to a fragile and perhaps implicit social consensus, is likely to trigger hostile emotions.

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