Lubricating the Frictions: Community-Based Peacemaking Processes in the Southern Region of Sierra Leone

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Abstract: This article attempts to explore the utility and agency of community-based peacemaking institutions and approaches in the Southern Region of Sierra Leone. The research paper argues that peacemaking at the community level is historically rooted and has contemporary footnotes for their inclusivity and socio-cultural sensitivity. The researcher further contends that the people in these regions employ community-based approaches and institutions to confront and resolve conflicts, promote peace and reconcile conflicting parties. The research utilized the qualitative approach to data collection including desk review and content analysis of relevant literature, interviewing critical grassroots stakeholders such as traditional leaders, Community Based Organizations, grassroots movements and women and youth groups. The article establishes that indigenous structures available at the community level have proven to be participatory, sensitive to socio-cultural ethos of the local community, closer to the people, familiar with the conflict context and content and appeal more to the greater majority of the people directly affected by the scourges of conflicts. The researcher, however, concedes that times are fast changing, and young women and men are 'infected' by ideas from the outside world and are often no longer willing to subordinate themselves to gerontocratic rule and/or old ways of conducting business. Because of these changing times and the fact that society has significantly evolved over the years, the needs and responses are not necessarily the same. Therefore, community-based organizations can best be placed to play a complementary role to modern-day state peace initiatives and approaches.

Keywords: Peacemaking, Community Based Organizations, Conflict management, Traditional

I. Introduction

This article sets out to examine the vitality and agency of community-based peacemaking in post-war Sierra Leone with a focus on two Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) (the Sulima Fishing Community Development Project (SFCDP) and the Bo Peace and Reconciliation movement (BPRM) in the Southern Region. The research is important because community-based peacemaking serves as a tool/mechanism that help cushion and bolster the enfeebled modern state system and its public institutions destabilized by civil conflicts. It further empowers indigenous institutions and promote grassroots governance and closes the space between the citizens and the state. The study is also critical because community-based structures facilitate the utilization of the space between differing groups and interests to interface especially in polarized societies. The potential to engender the accumulation of social capital, communitarianism and cohesiveness cannot be overstated.

Reconstructing peace in a country that has experienced widespread ruthlessness, brutality and violence for nearly a decade presents more of a challenge than bridging relationships between parties to a conflict (Khosa-Nkatini, 2023; Ademo, 2015;Momoh, 2022). To establish peace and order in war-torn states, there is always the need to overhaul the social, economic, infrastructural, political, and even the psychological conditions that gave birth to the crisis. People have to transition from the mental state of war to the mental state of peace. To achieve

this, one has to address the underlying root causes of the war as a precondition to laying the foundation for sustainable peace. That is, "lubricating the friction" that would enable society to go back to the *status quo ante* of peacetime.In addition, there is the exigency to construct structures and institutions to sustain peace once violence simmers down. To this end, the ingredients required to establish sustainable peace: resources, skills, structures, time and personnelshould be available to the people as a precondition to chart the new path and own the peace.

Traditional and/or grassroots peacemaking posits those methods that have been practiced for an extended period of time and have evolved within a people in a particular society and used as a means of settling disputes (Horowitz, 1985; Zartman, 2000; Deng, 2000). Horowitz (1985), for instance, notes that historically, traditional societies, particularly in Africa, had utilized deep-rooted and entrenched socio-cultural, political and religious approaches and structures to settle disputes. The emphasis had been on unifying and reconciling the conflicting parties and striving to achieve social solidarity, which is vital to the achievement of peace. It means that members of a society share a common concern for the welfare and well-being of each other (Boege, 2006)

In Africa, many indigenous or community-based peacemaking traditions put premium on the importance of reconciling differences that would produce social solidarity and cohesiveness. One such tradition is a world-view called 'ubuntu', which is especially followed by communities in eastern, central and southern Africa (Mitchell 1989). Ubuntu is a Zulu phrase "Umuntungumuntungabantu", which literally means that a person is a person through other people (Khosa 2023). Desmond Tutu had this to say about Ubuntu in 2004: A person is a person through other persons… None of us comes into the world fully formed. We would not know how to think, or walk, or speak, or behave as human beings unless we learned it from other human beings. We need other human beings in order to be human (Quoted in Khosa-Nkatini, 2023). That is, the capacity in an African culture to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, humanity and mutuality in the interests of building and maintaining communities with justice and mutual caring (Khosa-Nkantini, 2023:6; Mitchell, 1989:103).

Community-based peacemaking practices continue to exist in Africa, and Sierra Leone is no exception. These practices predate the more than four centuries of the infamous and scandalous slave trade andmore than a century of colonialism. There were community-based mechanisms as well as cultural sources that knit communities and peoples together and upheld the values of peace, acceptability, tolerance and solidarity. These structures were responsible for peace education, confidence-building, peacemaking, peacebuilding, conflict monitoring, conflict prevention, conflict management, and conflict resolution (Ademo, 2015). In very many ways, these mechanisms were effective in responding to community and individual conflicts because they reflected the traditional African socio-cultural ethos and political mindset that put emphasis on living together in peace and harmony. In villages and towns, people would sit together, discuss and brainstorm issues and agree on a common cause in handling community affairs that border on peace, justice and community stability.

In the Eastern and Southern regions of Sierra Leone in particular, this responsibility rests with traditional authorities, power centers[1], youths and women's groups, socio-political groups, faith-based organizations, religious leaders, elders and traditional institutions. These groups play an important role in bringing about harmony and order to the community after disruption by conflict or dispute. They employ various traditional approaches such as mediation, negotiation and adjudication to make peace, resolve conflicts and reconcile conflicting parties.

Zartman (2001) argues that despite the influence of modernization, community-based approaches and structures to peacemaking are still being used in most African countries with the view to keep communities in harmony,

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[1] Power center theory presupposes a situation wherein individuals and or group of individuals have the capacity to influence, legitimize or delegitimize a social order and or a political system positively or negatively.

while imported overlays such as states and currencies are collapsing in conflict around them. The approaches place a lot of importance on reconciling conflicting parties and bringing harmony to the community, as opposed to the individuals in conflict. It is also communitarian[2] in content in that the processes, approaches and mechanisms are expressed and deeply rooted in the community's role as a socialization agent for individuals.

The approach is also less expensive and based on the principle of maintaining relationship (Osaghae, 2000). The intent of this emphasis on relationship is to restore unanimity among disputants and also provide a means of restitution through apology and compensation, especially where damages have been caused to an injured party (Nwolise, 2001). Thus, the goal is based on restitution rather than retribution (Menkhaus 2000). There are always frantic efforts aimed at resolving conflicts and not necessarily pronouncing judgments. This is based on the philosophy of reconciliation and peace settlement between the parties rather than acrimony. The communitarian dispute resolution method is also very effective in deterring future offenders because the offence is usually seen as against the community rather than the individual. For instance, Deng (2000) noted that Africans believe in the concept of communalism because of their belief that the individual is not alone, but under an umbrella of the community. Communities take responsibility for individual mistakes because the individual goes through the process of socialization-from the family to peers; from school in the community to secret societies to community elders; and are exposed to the practices of that community. During this period, the individual instinctively or otherwise imbibes what obtains in the community. As such, efforts are made by the community to rehabilitate rather than exclude wrongdoers who fail to abide by the social norms and the community's *modus operandi*.

In Sierra Leone, violence became the hallmark of the people's mindsets and *modus vivendi* during the violent conflict in the 1990s.Revenge and retribution became an easily available option for settling scores at both local and national levels. As such, it became one of the significant issues that needed urgent redress. Dennis Bright, the former Minister of Youths and Sports, imaginatively describes the state of play then: "The rebellion has…provided room for all types of dissatisfaction and grievances. It has absorbed the energies of a neglected and extremely violent youth population, which during its long period of enforced idleness, had been taking regular doses of Rambo, Schwarzenegger and Jackie Chan" (Bright, 2000, p. 23). Transforming a violently abused youthful population into a productive work force in post-war Sierra Leone required the country to go back to the basics. That is, putting youths within the matrix of the overall development paradigm and trajectory wherein dependence on external aid and humanitarian assistance, though needed to jump-start development programs in post-war situations, must not be seen as a long-term remedy to transform youth from the state of despair and violence into a productive work force. Available local resources, structures and institutions that emphasize civic responsibility, communitarianism and development, and provide deep value-laden motivations and needs should be reworked to address the current situation.

The international community, particularly the UN, was overwhelmingly preoccupied with the tasks of responding to the needs of the victims of conflicts, and dealing with the perpetrators of violence than with providing support for organizations engaged in locally-based conflict management and peacemaking in war-torn countries. The UN response to most conflicts raging in Africa was sporadic and spontaneous rather than sustained (Smock, 1997). The UN regime preferred short-term peace-keeping roles in Africa's crises because its manpower, logistical and financial resources were thinly spread around the globe. Though its peace-keeping missions had been successful to a certain extent in some countries (Mozambique in 1993 and Sierra Leone in 1999), its general mandate was circumscribed by resolutions emanating from the Security Council of which

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[2] Communitarianism emphasizes the connection between the individual and the community. Its overriding philosophy is based on the belief that a person's social identity and personality are largely molded by community relationships, with a smaller degree of development being placed on individualism.

none of the war-torn countries were members. Conflict-ridden countries' input was not only absent but also the resolutions did not reflect the crucial realities existing on the ground (Smock, 1997).

There is little doubt that the establishments of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the Special Court for Sierra Leonein 2000 were aimed at healing the trauma, removing the emotional and mental scars inflicted on individuals and groups, and prosecuting those who "bear the greatest responsibility for crimes committed against humanity" during the ten-year war in Sierra Leone (TRC Report 2004). While the two institutions had a critical role to play in post-war reconstruction, their responsibilities were ad hoc, short-lived and clearly constructed with mandates from outside. The host country, usually in a very weak and vulnerable position, lacked the political leverage and moral ground to question prescriptions put forward by the international community and could not distinguish between the legal justifications for establishing the institution from the political realities existing on the ground.[3] More often than not, it was the legal aspect and the individual rights or wrongs that were emphasized instead of the broad community-oriented reconciliation process that puts a premium on shared responsibility for both the crime committed and for the solution. While it can be argued that the two institutions were significantly important in bringing 'peace' and 'justice,' the vexing question was who and what indigenous institutions managed the process after the expiration of the terms of reference of the TRC and the Special Court?

It became more urgent and imperative, therefore, that there was the need to rediscover indigenous institutions that have both the capacity and the moral high-ground to address locally-bound conflicts (Zartman 2000). Community-based organizations are endogenous institutions that are locally suited to understand and diagnose the root causes of the conflict in the first place, and are better positioned to proffer strategies and methods to resolving them. The local organizations know about the conflict and its environment; they know the actors, their demands and motivations; they know the spoilers; and they are part of the stakeholders in any peacefully managed process (Osaghae, 2000). They are also in a position to develop strategies to further institutional effectiveness that can facilitate and sustain the transition from violent conflict to sustainable peace. They have the capacity, if they are provided with the resources and skills, to build walls that inhibit regular societal conflict from regressing into conflict…they can identify the origins of the conflict and the spoilers and work with them in transforming their attitudes from violence to harmony (Nwolise, 2000).

However, it must be admitted that while popular and civil participation in conflict prevention mechanisms does offer hope of transforming conflict situations, they require international financial and material support for success in their endeavors (Smock, 1997). War dislocates and even disorients most community-based associations because most of its members are violently uprooted from their communities. Their resettlement and reintegration into normal community life is punctuated and made difficult by the very destructive nature of the conflict (Osaghae, 2000). It is not uncommon that during the marauding civil conflict in Sierra Leone, arsonists burnt down villages and towns; families were violently uprooted and separated; there was a break down of social order; and basic essentials like food, shelter and clothing became luxury items. Such conditions were unfavorable for the survival and resuscitation of community-based organizations. But once they got off the ground, they were poised to engage and challenge the issues of designing the approaches, and building structures, institutions and the human connection to manage community affairs. Communities always found a way oflubricating or oiling the friction through reconciliation, negotiation and mediation in society.

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[3] For instance, the government of President Tejan Kabbah failed to protect its own fighting force from prosecution by the Special Court for Sierra Leone even when the government had won the war against the RUF. In most wars fought at national and international levels, the winners often determine post-war arrangements. However, in Sierra Leone, the Special Court was given unlimited powers to arrest anyone deemed to have committed atrocities against humanity whether from among government fighting force like the Kamajor militia or from the RUF. The arrest and subsequent death in prison of Chief Hinga Norman, the CDF Coordinator, has still not been well received by many Sierra Leoneans.

II. Methodology

The researcher employed the qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. Desk research and content analysis of available literature formed part of the data collection process. The study reviewed the available literature that comprised knowledge products, scholarly works, published and unpublished reports on peacemaking, conflict management and reconciliation in Sierra Leone. The desk notes helped to facilitate the triangulation of data collected from the various sources, which culminated in the development of findings and conclusions.

Additionally, the researcher conducted key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) by engaging local elites, youths, women and traditional leaders in the regions under review. These interviews and group discussions were quintessentially critical in bringing out the role played by grassroots actors/structures in the management of local conflict and building peace in the regions under review. The KIIs and FGDs also provided data that enabled the researcher to triangulate information gathered. Two community-based organizations were targeted: the Sulima Fishing Community Development Project (SFCDP) and the Bo Peace and Reconciliation movement (BPRM). A total of fifty key local stakeholders were interviewed during the data collection process. The results are presented below.

III. Results/Findings

Grassroots Structures in Peacemaking

A. The Sulima Fishing Community Development Project

The immediate post-war Sierra Leone experienced the emergence of locally constituted peace-building and conflict management organizations with extraordinary vitality to utilize community resources, knowledge and skills in peacemaking. One such group was the Sulima Fishing Community Development Project (SFCDP),which was established in the SoroGbemaChiefdom in the PujehunDistrict in March 1998. The activities of the group included,*inter alia*,regular public consultations on peace issues, facilitated dialogue between former members of RUF and pro-government militia, and the setting up of a chiefdom-based peace monitoring system and grievance committee.[4] The peace initiatives undertaken by the community-based outfit are worth elaboration.

Soro Gbema chiefdom has a long history of politically motivated violence. Adjacent to the southwest Liberian border, the chiefdom experienced the notorious *Ndogboyusoi*massacre[5] in 1982 when election manipulations and armed intervention triggered a conflict between candidates of the then ruling All People's Congress (APC) and their arch-rivals, the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) . Referred to as the dress-rehearsal of the rebel war, the *Ndogboyusoi*crisis fomented wide-scale brutality and violence that claimed many lives and destruction of property. The conflict bred hate, animosity and rancor that polarized supporters of the two main political parties—the SLPP and the APC. When the RUF struck in 1991, many youths of the chiefdom saw it as an opportunity to settle scores. Thus, while some enlisted in the RUF, others joined the counter-insurgency force, the Kamajor militia that fought alongside government troops. The motive was simple: to gain revenge. As a

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[4] See "Building Mechanisms for Conflict Resolution in South-East Sierra Leone: The Sulima Fishing Community Development Project," Paper presented by John Massaquio at the First Conference on All African Principles of Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation, Addis Ababa, November 1999.

[5] The Ndogboryusui massacre was clearly the first organized and orchestrated guerrilla warfare in modern Sierra Leone. The incident was sparked off by the gruesome murder of a young teacher, Mr. Kemokai. He was murdered in the aftermath of a post-election violence by the ruling APC party against which he had protested although he was a member. For a detailed analysis of the Ndogboyusui violence, see Mohamed M. Bangura, Sierra Leone and the Legacy of Failed Leadership: Essays from Asylum, (Maryland: African Renaissance Books, 2003).

consequence, the rebel war accentuated the already-volatile situation as the two opposing camps inflicted untold brutalities on each other..

SFCDP peace initiatives focused on mitigating and resolving conflicts, promoting educational and recreational activities, engendering social cohesion, and containing the Civil Defense Force (CDF) that had capitalized on its position in the absence of civil authority to harass and maltreat innocent civilians, while assisting in the reintegration of ex-combatants within the wider community. Aware of the deep-seated animosity and the wanton destruction visited on the chiefdom, the project focused mainly on community peace-building initiatives and worked with chiefs, chiefdom authorities and stakeholders in the conflict. Its major focus was training and organizing workshops that targeted chiefs, youths, women, and ex-combatants and addressed issues like collective and individual rights, civic responsibilities, capacity-building and citizens' rights, responsibilities and obligations to the country. More importantly, its agenda was to change people's' hostile and violent mindsets and perceptions to community harmony and to build bridges that fostered peaceful relationships.

A phenomenal achievement of SFCDP was the settlement of the leadership crisis in the Wai section of the SoroGbemaChiefdom in 1999. Wai has twelve villages that are divided by the Makpele River. Wai, the chiefdom headquarters, is situated on the east side of the river, and had control over political leadership position in the section. Customarily, the Feika ruling house controlled the political leadership, while the Kawas served as religious leaders. By implication, the six villages on the west side had been politically excluded. During the war, the politically excluded and marginalized Kawa family assumed leadership positions in displaced and refugee camps, which put them in a reasonably advantageous position to evaluate their leadership potentials and qualities. After the war, they vowed to overturn the long-standing political arrangement and, therefore, advocated inclusionary participation in the political hierarchy of their section and chiefdom.

While the Feikas tried to tighten their grip on the political offices they had once monopolized, the Kawas pushed and agitated for a power-sharing mechanism in which the two ruling families rotate the position of chieftaincy. This was not received well by the Feikas. As a result, the relationship between the two families further ruptured and deteriorated. The grievance committee, Koranic teachers and peace monitors immediately intervened in 1999. Using their skills of dialogue and persuasion, they prevailed on the two families to work out an understanding in which no one family had a monopoly over political power in SoroGbema chiefdom. A post-conflict power-sharing model was put in place. The amicable settlement of this difficult local political situation brought relief to the chiefdom people who were split between the two families. And since then, the SoroGhema Chiefdom has remained relatively stable and peaceful.

However, the SFCDP faced an external threat from the district administration, which had been prevented from raising revenues accrued from fines and summons. With the absence of the local court, the main engine for revenue collection in the district, and with the presence of peace monitors who provide free services in mediating and arbitrating disputes at the local level, the district administration was losing a substantial amount of money it would have raised from fines, summons and taxes.

B.   The Bo Peace and Reconciliation Movement

Another community-based organization established to build on individual, family and group relationships in post-war Sierra Leone was the Bo Peace and Reconciliation Movement (BPRM), established in Bo District in 1997 in order to manage and settle conflicts and to reconcile the incompatibilities, perceptions and attitudes of people emerging from the ten-year war. The BPRM's main objective was to ensure the implementation of the 1999 Lome Peace Accord by training "Peace Monitors" most times youths, who were tasked with the responsibility to travel to local communities, to observe, document and settle conflicts among individuals, within families, and between communities and to bridge their differences. They occasionally reported to the Field Coordinators on conflicts that posed a threat to the security of individuals and the communities, and those

that required the input of the National Coordinator and the chiefs. The success story of the BPRM abound. It was successful in reconciling differences emanating from suspicion and mistrust. In the town of Koribondo, for instance, a well-known soldier in the community was enlisted in the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) military junta in 1997 and wrecked havoc on his community. When ECOMOG overthrew the AFRC regime in 1998, the soldier fled to the north of the country for safety. After the Peace Accord, he attempted to return to his mother-land, but his people could not accept him. When BPRM heard of the incident, 15 peace monitors were immediately dispatched to Koribondo. A town meeting was convened and together with the chiefs, who were also advisers to BPRM, the ex-soldier was asked to accept culpability, apologize for his actions, and to pay a fine with the view to reestablish his new relationship. At the community town hall, and after preforming the ritual ceremonies of appeasing the gods (through sacrifices to stop the wrath of God from harming his people), the people embraced the once fugitive ex-soldier and received him back into the community fold.

As a grassroots organization, the BPRM operated on a very tight budget and, therefore, had low financial and material incentives for the peace monitors who were expected to be field workers. Recognizing the need to entice youths to become peace monitors and to retain those already trained, the National Coordinator emphasized the collaborative work they undertook with chiefs. The movement had, for example, relied on locally available resources and community leaders such as chiefs to provide board and food to peace monitors when peace monitors visited their townships or chiefdoms. In his estimation, the chiefs were very cooperative because it was seen as a communitarian initiative that would bring lasting and enduring peace to the community. This helped the BPRM to achieve its objectives.

One interesting and forward-looking phenomenon that emerged in the aftermath of the war was the coordination and cooperation forged between and among local organizations, local authorities and the external agencies for both development and humanitarian assistance. The peace monitors worked collaboratively with chiefs and other NGOs with similar goals and objectives. For instance, in July 1999, they met with the Chiefdom Council Development Committee chaired by the Paramount Chief to discuss and share their experiences and problems encountered in their activities, and to evaluate the impact of their work on community reconciliation and integration.[6] Similarly, they met with the Council of Churches of Sierra Leone (CCSL) and an international NGO known as Conciliation Resources in December 2000 to coordinate their efforts, to share ideas and to examine other models of building peace in communities. Effective communication evolved, which helped to avoid duplication of activities and reduce infighting and competition for external resources.

IV.   Conclusion

This research has proven that community-based or grassroots peacemaking methods and approaches, are not only rooted in historical footnotes but also have evolved as effective instruments for resolving conflicts and settling disputes. The emphasis of these methods has consistently been on unifying and reconciling conflicting parties, with a focus on achieving social solidarity—a vital component for the attainment of lasting peace. These approaches seek to establish a common ground, placing a premium on the importance of communitarianism, social solidarity and cohesiveness.

Today, these indigenous institutions and practices remain vibrant, playing an integral role in the socio-political and cultural well-being of communities in the Southern region and other parts of Sierra Leone. Functioning as cultural bedrocks, they weave communities and peoples together, upholding values such as peace, acceptability, tolerance, and solidarity. Extensive research demonstrates that community-based structures, approaches, and methods persist as key drivers of peace education, confidence-building, conflict monitoring, and conflict prevention and the local level.

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[6] Ibid., p. 8.

In many ways, these mechanisms have proven highly effective in responding to both community and individual conflicts. They reflect traditional African socio-cultural ethos and political mindsets, placing a strong emphasis on living together in peace and harmony. In villages and towns, people convene, engage in discussions, and collectively address issues, reaching agreements that contribute to the handling of community affairs related to peace, justice, and overall community stability.

The researcher also notes that times are fast changing, and young women and men are 'infected' by ideas from the outside world and are often no longer willing to subordinate themselves to gerontocratic rule and/or old ways of conducting business. Of course, the severity of this problem depends on the specific circumstances in the given community: in communities where young men and women also have a say in community affairs or where custom is adaptable, the situation is more relaxed than in rigidly patriarchal or gerontocratic circumstances. Because of these changing times and the fact that society has significantly evolved over the years, the needs and responses are not necessarily the same. The author concedes that community-based organizations, therefore, can best be placed to play a complementary role to modern-day state peace initiatives and approaches. This, without doubt, would produce an optimal effect for today's Sierra Leone.

Statement and Declarations

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