



# SPECIAL REPORT

1200 17th Street NW • Washington, DC 20036 • 202.457.1700 • fax 202.429.6063

## ABOUT THE REPORT

As the international community reflects on the tragedy in Rwanda ten years ago, the question of how societies should attempt to heal the wounds from past virulent conflicts has recently received renewed interest by members of the press, policy, and NGO community around the globe. How effective are truth and reconciliation commissions? How can they build on grassroots practices of reconciliation, reintegration, and healing to develop a new generation of commissions that are more locally effective in dealing with the aftermath of conflicts?

Building on findings from her extensive field research on local practices of reintegration in northern Sierra Leone, and on the district hearings of this country's TRC, Shaw analyzes the contentious relationship among memory, healing, and reconciliation in these contrasting arenas and critically examines the purported therapeutic and conciliatory effects of TRCs.

Rosalind Shaw is Associate Professor and Chair of Anthropology at Tufts University, where she has taught since 1989. She was a Senior Fellow at the United States Institute of Peace during 2003-04 and is currently a Fellow at Harvard University's Carr Center for Human Rights Policy (2004-05). She conducts research and teaches classes on the anthropology of mass violence and reconstruction, social memory, religion, and Africa. She has conducted field research in Sierra Leone since 1977, has published numerous books and articles, and is the author of *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone*, which was a finalist for the 2003 Herskovits Prize for the best scholarly work on Africa.

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SPECIAL REPORT 130

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## CONTENTS

Introduction: Truth Commissions and Memory Practice	2
Conflict, Recovery, and Social Forgetting in Sierra Leone	3
Studying Truth Commissions Ethnographically	5
"Revealing is Healing"?	6
Memory Practices and Sierra Leone's TRC	7
Forgiving and Forgetting	8
Accountability vs. Reintegration	11
Recommendations	12

*Rosalind Shaw*

## Rethinking Truth and Reconciliation Commissions Lessons from Sierra Leone

### Summary

- After an eleven-year civil war that became internationally notorious for mutilation, sexual violence, and the targeting of children, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) began its public hearings in April 2003. Increasingly, truth commissions are regarded as a standard part of conflict resolution "first aid kits."
- Despite pressure from local NGOs and human rights activists for a TRC, there was little popular support for bringing such a commission to Sierra Leone, since most ordinary people preferred a "forgive and forget" approach.
- This response was partly attributable to issues that can arise whenever truth commissions are established or contemplated: fear of retaliation by perpetrators; fear of government reprisals; and concerns arising from the concurrent operation of different transitional justice mechanisms (in this case, the TRC and the Special Court for Sierra Leone).
- But in addition to these issues, the widespread appeal of a "forgive and forget" approach derived from local strategies of recovery and reintegration that were never seriously addressed in Sierra Leone's TRC.
- Sierra Leone's TRC, like South Africa's, valorized a particular kind of memory practice: "truth telling," the public recounting of memories of violence. This valorization, however, is based on problematic assumptions about the purportedly universal benefits of verbally remembering violence.
- Ideas concerning the conciliatory and therapeutic efficacy of truth telling are the product of a Western culture of memory deriving from North American and European historical processes. Nations, however, do not have psyches that can be healed. Nor can it be assumed that truth telling is healing on a personal level: truth commissions do not constitute therapy.
- In northern Sierra Leone, social forgetting is a cornerstone of established processes of reintegration and healing for child and adult ex-combatants. Speaking of the war in public often undermines these processes, and many believe it encourages violence.

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- In Sierra Leone's TRC, however, sensitization materials and commissioners' speeches promoted the healing and reconciliatory powers of verbal remembering, often explicitly discounting local understandings of healing and reconciliation in terms of social forgetting.
- People in both urban and rural locations were divided about the TRC, and in several communities people collectively agreed not to give statements.
- Before a truth commission or TRC is initiated in a particular setting, it is important to establish whether such an exercise has popular support—not only among local NGOs but also among ordinary survivors.
- Truth commission reports can provide crucial frameworks for debates about violence and repression, and can foster the development of stable national institutions. Sierra Leone's Truth and Reconciliation Report offers this framework. But where there is no popular support for a truth commission, we need to find alternative ways of producing such reports.
- Where a truth commission or TRC is initiated, it will be more effective if it builds upon established practices of healing and social coexistence. If we discount or ignore such processes, we may jeopardize any form of social recovery.

## Introduction: Truth Commissions and Memory Practices

In July 2002, six months after Sierra Leone's eleven-year-long civil war was officially over, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was inaugurated. "Truth hurts," announced the TRC's posters and leaflets, "but war hurts more." Radio and television skits and jingles in Sierra Leone's lingua franca, Krio, urged listeners to "come blow your mind; come clear your chest," to "make peace sidon na Salone" ("sit down in Sierra Leone"). *Blow mind*—the release of thoughts and feelings—was the Krio expression used to convey to a Sierra Leonean audience the practice of truth telling in the TRC hearings. As described in the Truth and Reconciliation Act of 2000, truth telling was to be the primary means by which the TRC pursued the five goals of its mandate: "to create an impartial historical record of violations and abuses . . . , to address impunity, to respond to the needs of the victims, to promote healing and reconciliation and to prevent a repetition of the violations and abuses suffered." In so doing, the TRC would help rebuild the nation: "Sierra Leone, yes Sierra Leone, can arise again!" declared the chair of the Commission, Bishop Joseph Humper, at the closing ceremony of the TRC's Bombali district hearings in May, 2003.

Sierra Leone's TRC, like South Africa's, thereby valorized a particular kind of memory practice: "truth telling," the public recounting of memories of violence. This valorization, however, is based on deeply problematic assumptions about the purportedly universal benefits of the verbal recounting of past violence. We therefore need to reexamine ideas about the conciliatory and healing efficacy of this form of memory.

Increasingly, truth commissions such as Sierra Leone's are regarded as a standard part of conflict-resolution "first aid." Such commissions and the truth telling that characterizes them became an especially significant weapon against human rights abuses in the 1970s and 1980s, most notably during the Reagan era. During this period certain repressive Latin American regimes that were U.S. allies knew that if they wished to retain U.S. support, they could not use overt forms of violence. Instead, they developed deniable forms of repression and violence, such as disappearances and death squads (as Aryeh Neier, among others, has noted). Truth telling thus became a tool used against covert, state-sponsored crimes to reveal clandestine violence, to establish the accountability of political and military leaders, and to publicly acknowledge the previously silenced stories of victims. In such contexts, the public recounting of memories of violence was a redemptive process.

Outside these contexts of covert, state-sponsored violence, however, how effective is truth telling, in and of itself? After a genocide, for example, truth may not be an adequate response, especially in cases such as Rwanda and Darfur, where no attempt was made to

conceal the killing in the first place. After a civil war in which neighbors killed neighbors, moreover, truth telling involves a much different politics of memory. Because social memory is a process (and always a contested and debated one) rather than a specific and fixed set of facts, it is, as Michael Ignatieff has observed, deeply problematic for a national commission to produce a single “impartial” historical record—a definitive national memory—and to expect it to command agreement and heal social divisions. Truth telling may be able to recontextualize debates about the violence, by demonstrating, for example, that atrocities were committed by each side, or by confirming that a genocide took place. But here truth commissions become arenas for contested truths rather than sites of redemption, and the capacity of truth telling to establish accountability, foster reconciliation, and thereby provide post-conflict “first aid” is far from straightforward.

Different regions and localities, moreover, have their own memory practices and often their own techniques of social recovery that may have developed during the course of their own history. How do these practices intersect with public truth telling during a truth commission? While there is considerable discussion of how different transitional justice processes—in particular truth commissions and war crimes tribunals—interact with each other, the question of how transitional justice mechanisms interrelate with local practices is missing from this discussion. In Sierra Leone, this question was especially important, since the imperative to remember violence during the TRC was at odds with widespread local techniques of healing and reintegration, which are based on the *social forgetting* of violence.

***After a civil war in which neighbors killed neighbors, truth telling involves a much different politics of memory.***

## **Conflict, Recovery, and Social Forgetting in Sierra Leone**

Sierra Leone’s TRC followed an eleven-year civil war (1991–2002) that became internationally notorious for particular forms of violence. Amputation became a “signature” atrocity of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels and the former Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC) junta, the pro-government Civil Defence Forces (CDF) committed mutilation and ethnic/regional violence, and troops of the Monitoring Observer Group of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOMOG), carried out numerous summary executions of civilians. Women and young girls were subjected to rape and forced marriage, and children and youth of both genders were abducted, conscripted, and often compelled to commit acts of killing, mutilation, rape, and abduction.

*Closing ceremony at Sierra Leone’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Moyamba district hearings, June 13, 2003.*



To bring an end to these forms of violence, the 1999 Lome Peace Accord gave a blanket amnesty to all combatants in exchange for demobilization and peace. Yet this amnesty meant a complete lack of accountability for the massive human rights abuses of the war. Local and international human rights advocates therefore pressed for a Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission, which was scaled back to a TRC. Coordinated by the UN's Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), with assistance from consultants with the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) in New York, the TRC started to collect statements in late 2002 and held public hearings in Freetown and in the twelve districts of Sierra Leone from April to August 2003.

***Despite pressure for a TRC from local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and human rights activists, there was little popular support for bringing the Commission to Sierra Leone, since most people favored the “forgive and forget” approach.***

Despite pressure for a TRC from local NGOs and human rights activists, there was little popular support for bringing the Commission to Sierra Leone, since most people favored instead a “forgive and forget” approach. As one official involved in Sierra Leone's TRC put it, “In Sierra Leone, initially, people were not interested in what happened and didn't happen. They just wanted peace. But there was a very strong vocal minority that thought that people needed to talk about what happened.” For the best of motives, then, there was a further, unspoken goal of the TRC: to transform a population that preferred to heal through forgetting into truth-telling subjects who would, after adequate sensitization, recognize their “need” to talk about the violence.

But why did so many people want to “forgive and forget” rather than to talk about what happened? In Sierra Leone this was partly due to issues that we can anticipate in many of the situations in which truth commissions are established: fear of retaliation by perpetrators; fear of government reprisals; and concerns arising from the concurrent operation of different transitional justice mechanisms (in this case, the TRC and the Special Court for Sierra Leone). Yet in addition to these three predictable issues, a fourth and crucial issue was neither recognized nor addressed by the Commission and the international community. This is Sierra Leone's deeper historical legacy of violence and its linkage to the development of grassroots practices of social recovery. I will outline each of these issues below.

First, the Special Court for Sierra Leone is the tribunal currently prosecuting those who bear the greatest responsibility for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Because of administrative delays, the TRC's statement-taking phase and hearings phase coincided with the Special Court's indictments in the first half of 2003, resulting in widespread ex-combatant fears that the TRC could be a covert conduit for the Special Court. While some in the field of transitional justice—including the Special Court itself and even a former commissioner of the TRC—argue that Sierra Leone represents a successful “experiment” demonstrating that different forms of transitional justice can operate concurrently, this conclusion bears little or no relationship to the reality on the ground. Although a 2002 study conducted for the TRC (and including TRC “sensitization” processes) found that ex-combatants expressed support for the TRC, and although a number of ex-combatants in some areas apparently approached the TRC on their own initiative and asked to testify, neither of these ex-combatant responses adequately reflects the range of ex-combatant (or even civilian) perspectives outside the Commission's gaze. In every district in which I conducted research during the TRC hearings in 2003 (Port Loko, Bombali, Kambia, Tonkolili, and Moyamba), ex-combatants were almost universally fearful of the TRC, suspecting that information they gave to the Commission would find its way to the Special Court. As a result of such fears, ex-combatants in some areas drove TRC statement-takers away, and in all the towns in which I attended district hearings, ex-combatants went into hiding when the TRC hearings arrived. Ex-combatant participation was low in all of the district hearings I attended, and one of the district hearings (Port Loko) was unable to obtain any ex-combatant testimonies at all.

Ex-combatant fears about the passage of information from the TRC to the Special Court in fact appear to have been partly justified. This is not because of any deliberate intent, but because of leakages that may be inevitable when two forms of transitional justice operate concurrently. For example, some former TRC employees are allegedly serving as witnesses for the prosecution in the Special Court, while others have found jobs with the Special Court. One former TRC employee was discovered leaving the home of an ex-combatant commander while working for the Special Court—a contact he had

developed while employed by the Commission. The Special Court has apologized for this incident, but it is likely that other incidents have gone unreported.

Second, in a fragile security situation, and without any means of protecting for those who testified before the TRC, many civilians feared retaliation by ex-combatants. In particular, large numbers of ex-combatants have been inducted into the Sierra Leone army. The specter of rogue soldiers in the early years of the civil war (who became known as “sobels”—soldier-rebels—due to their collaboration with the RUF rebels) and after the AFRC coup in 1997 made revenge attacks a frightening possibility for victims asked to give statements to the TRC. “It’s better to suffer once than to suffer twice,” I was often told.

Third, although the government has not been particularly supportive of the TRC, there were strong concerns among both Sierra Leoneans and international experts that the TRC’s national commissioners were too close to the ruling Sierra Leone Peoples’ Party (SLPP) government. The TRC Chairman, for example, supported Sierra Leone’s President Kabbah when he refused to apologize for the war on behalf of the state, and on another occasion the Chairman thanked the pro-government militia, the Civil Defence Forces (CDF), for having “defended the country.” The founder of the CDF was, in fact, a government minister—Hinga Norman—who is currently on trial in the Special Court for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Concerns about TRC-government links are strong in the North of the country, given that the government (inaccurately) perceives the war and the RUF rebels as “northern”: President Kabbah stated in a speech that the North should apologize to the South and East for the war, thus ascribing collective guilt to an entire region. The October 2004 TRC Report, which concludes that the corruption, poverty, and lack of human rights that gave rise to the war are still present under the current government, should help to assuage some of these concerns. But at the time of the TRC statement-taking and hearings phases in 2003, these concerns were the cause of considerable anxiety about the TRC.

In contrast to these issues, which are widely recognized (in different guises) as potential problems for truth commissions, the relevance of established strategies of recovery and reintegration was never seriously addressed in Sierra Leone’s TRC. These strategies, which are part of the legacy of an earlier history of violence in Sierra Leone, involve techniques of social forgetting that are linked to the widespread appeal to “forgiving and forgetting.” Before moving to a discussion of these techniques, however, I will first make clear how I have arrived at an evaluation that contrasts with other characterizations of Sierra Leone’s TRC as a success.

## Studying Truth Commissions Ethnographically

In order to examine how the TRC worked on the ground, and how it intersected (or not) with local practices of reintegration and social recovery, I carried out an ethnographic study of four of the twelve TRC district hearings. From May to July 2003, I observed the hearings and interviewed participants in the towns of Makeni (Bombali District), Kambia (Kambia District), and Magburaka (Tonkolili District) in northern Sierra Leone, and in Moyamba (Moyamba District) in the South. I also studied audiotape recordings of the hearings in a fifth district—Port Loko—which had been held in late April 2003. For the preceding two years, in 2001 and 2002 respectively, I had conducted research on post-conflict healing among war-affected youth in a Pentecostal church in Freetown, and (in conjunction with the child protection organization Caritas Makeni) on local practices through which child ex-combatants are reintegrated in parts of northern Sierra Leone. Finally, I conducted follow-up research on the TRC in Makeni and other parts of Bombali District in July and August 2004.

Much of what we hear about the successes and shortcomings of truth commissions are either written from within such commissions, or concern points of law or practical matters of intersection with the government and other organizations. Ethnography, however, which mainly consists of extended periods of participant observation and informal interviews, is the most appropriate approach if we want to examine how transitional justice mechanisms actually work in practice for ordinary people. Quantitative survey techniques—get in,

extract information, get out—are notoriously problematic in contexts in which people are emerging from mass violence and have historical reasons not to trust any exercise that resembles official information gathering.

A further reason for the appropriateness of ethnographic field research is that it gives us access to a very different body of knowledge from that accessible to someone who examines and evaluates a truth commission from within. In order to find out how Sierra Leone's TRC worked on the ground, I needed to go outside as well as inside the Commission. I had to look beyond the physical space of the hearings and the success stories reported in press releases; to spend time in towns in which hearings were not taking place, to talk to people in areas to which statement takers had never come, or from which they had been driven—as well as those in which they were welcomed. Thus during the TRC hearings I carried out additional field research in the town of Lunsar and in two villages in Port Loko District and Bombali District. Within the hearings themselves, moreover, it is not only what takes place at the front of the hall that is important. I sat at the back of the hearings as well as at the front, in order to see who came and went; and talked to people who hovered *outside* the hearings without going in—as well as to audience members who sat inside throughout the day.

A final reason for using ethnography is that it entails our spending time with ordinary people and listening to them on *their* terms—not through the medium of our survey forms, or in our sensitization workshops, or through local NGOs. This is particularly important given that for the international community, the local voice or the voice of civil society is increasingly assumed to mean that of local NGOs. However good the local NGOs are—and those in Sierra Leone's NGOs in fact played a crucial role, at great personal risk, during the conflict—this presumption effectively marginalizes and excludes the majority who do not speak the international language of NGOs, human rights, and humanitarian assistance.

The power of this international language and of the models it offers were central to the process through which a TRC was brought to Sierra Leone despite the lack of popular support. In the next section, I examine the rhetoric and ideological underpinnings that make truth commissions in general and TRCs in particular such compelling models of redemption and closure to Western or Western-influenced audiences.

## “Revealing is Healing”?

In South Africa's TRC, the slogan “revealing is healing” crystallized ideas about the healing and conciliatory power of verbal memories of violence and abuses that were promoted in that commission. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Chair of the TRC, set forth these ideas in the Commission's final report:

There were others who urged that the past should be forgotten—glibly declaring that we should ‘let bygones be bygones’. This option was rightly rejected because such amnesia would have resulted in further victimisation of victims by denying their awful experiences... The other reason amnesia simply will not do is that the past refuses to lie down quietly. It has an uncanny habit of returning to haunt one. “Those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it” are the words emblazoned at the entrance to the museum in the former concentration camp of Dachau. They are words we would do well to keep ever in mind. However painful the experience, the wounds of the past must not be allowed to fester. They must be opened. They must be cleansed. And balm must be poured on them so they can heal. This is not to be obsessed with the past. It is to take care that the past is properly dealt with for the sake of the future.

Through this metaphor of the injured body whose festering wounds can heal only by being painfully re-opened and cleansed through truth telling, Tutu represents the TRC as a therapeutic process. Whether this TRC therapy works at a personal or a national level, however, is left undefined, thereby enabling these levels to be conflated.

What, however, is national healing? The idea of healing a nation that is wounded or traumatized is primarily nation-building rhetoric that anthropomorphizes the nation as a feeling, suffering entity, as Brandon Hamber and Richard Wilson have noted. This notion derives from nineteenth-century models of society as akin to an organism that can be healthy or sick. Such biological models for societies have, however, long been discredited. While mass violence certainly disrupts and transforms social institutions and practices, it is not valid to conceptualize these changes in terms of a damaged collective national psyche that can be healed through a cathartic process of truth telling.

Nor can it be assumed that truth telling in a truth commission is necessarily healing on a personal level. Some people do feel a great deal of relief and satisfaction when they testify, especially in situations of covert state violence, when abuses toward victims have been denied and people's experiences of suffering have not been accorded reality. But even here we should not assume that testifying is a cathartic and healing experience: in 1997, the *New York Times* reported that the Trauma Center for Victims of Violence and Torture in Cape Town found that some 60% of those who testified in South Africa's TRC felt worse after testifying. A truth commission is not therapy.

Underlying the very concept of truth telling as bringing about healing and reconciliation are ideas of the efficacy of recounting verbal memories of violence and trauma. These ideas are the product of a culture of memory that arose from specific historical processes in North America and Europe, originating, perhaps, in the redemptive significance of confession in the church, and developing more recently through Freud's ideas about repressed memories, the psychiatric construction of the increasingly dominant concept of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and its treatment through verbal processing, and the place of the Holocaust as the paradigmatic modern atrocity that must be remembered in order to prevent recurrence. Through these developments, the explicit verbal recounting of past violence and suffering has been cast as a preeminently liberating mode of memory. Alternative and incommensurable understandings of the healing powers of *forgetting* have long coexisted in North America and Europe, crystallized in the expression "forgive and forget" and in the etymology of the term "amnesty," which derives from the Greek term *amnestia*, "to forget." But such understandings have been displaced and discredited through the expanding dominance of a memory culture that authorizes remembering over forgetting.

In other parts of the world, where different memory practices have developed through different histories, these memory practices may again compete with globalized forms of remembering that are imported and promoted through such arenas as Western psychotherapy and truth commissions. In parts of Mozambique, for example, rural communities incorporated ex-combatants and healed those affected by the war through spirit mediumship, which externalizes past violence through ritual, as Alcinda Honwana has reported. Psychosocial programs that encouraged people to remember and talk the violence out were not effective, since verbally recounting memories of the violence opens one up to spiritual attack. A TRC, moreover, was overwhelmingly rejected by both rural and urban Mozambicans as a process that would undermine rather than foster reconciliation.

Such popular rejection of truth commissions and Western psychotherapy is rare, however. Both Western psychotherapy and truth commissions are imbued with the authority of Western science, liberal models of social and political change, and the political economy of humanitarian assistance. The case of Sierra Leone demonstrates, however, that even when a truth commission is demanded and embraced by local NGOs, its failure to take seriously and to build upon local practices of healing and reintegration can undermine its effectiveness.

## Memory Practices and Sierra Leone's TRC

In Sierra Leone's TRC, truth telling—the recounting of verbally discursive personal memories of violence, abuse, and torture—was promoted as the only path to reconciliation, healing, and peace. Before the hearings began, TRC workshops in Freetown and provincial

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towns used “sensitization materials” that presented the TRC’s message in printed words and pictures. Leaflets included drawings of burning villages, followed by drawings of ex-combatants testifying in front of stern civilians, with the captions “*Memba wetin don bi*” (“Remember what has been”); “*Mek wi tok tru fo joyn an*” (“Let’s tell the truth and join hands”); and “*TRC fo wan Salon*” (“TRC for one Sierra Leone”). Posters on the walls in both the workshops and the hearings bore such messages as “Truth hurts, but war hurts more,” “Truth today! Peaceful Sierra Leone Tomorrow,” and “Blo Maind to TRC en ge Pis” (“Blow mind to the TRC and get peace”). These messages inculcated the model of healing and reconciliation through the memory practice of truth telling, and located the nation’s capacity for a peaceful future in this practice.

These messages were often reinforced by the speeches at the opening ceremonies of the hearings themselves. Healing through forgetting, according to these messages, is not “true” healing; only remembering through truth telling would enable personal and national healing. A recurring image was Archbishop Tutu’s metaphor of truth telling as the re-opening and cleansing of festering wounds, which would lead to real healing. During the opening ceremony of the Kambia district hearings in Kambia town in June 2003, for example, Bishop Joseph Humper, Chairman of the TRC, stated:

Why do we come and open the wounds again? Why do we come and recall the past? We have to reopen the wounds because they have not healed. Superficial healing will allow the wounds to explode again. We have to revisit the events so that we can heal properly.

In the testimonies that followed the opening ceremonies, those testifying were often given “cues” that certain things they did—venting their anger, recounting their memories publicly—would bring about healing, and would be good for the health of the nation. Through such messages, the commissioners and others in the TRC sought not only to fulfill the TRC’s mandate to create an “impartial historical record,” address impunity, and promote healing and reconciliation. They also sought, more implicitly, to bring about an ideological or cultural transformation by turning a population who, for the most part, sought to forget, into truth-telling, nation-building subjects.

Among certain constituencies and groups, the TRC’s message of explicit verbal remembering as a means of nation building did, in fact, resonate in powerful ways. These included, in particular, church leaders and congregations, educated youth, and those in local NGOs: it was activists from local NGOs, after all, who sought to bring a TRC to Sierra Leone. Chiefs and local government officials in the provinces, however, had little choice but to give public support to the TRC’s internationally backed rhetoric of nation building, although in many cases their absence from the TRC hearings indicated a different disposition. Almost all of those who testified at the TRC’s public hearings, moreover, ended their testimony with appeals for economic assistance, suggesting that many of them had testified in the belief that this would give them access to such assistance. In the context of a war-torn country at the bottom of the UN’s Human Development Index, and one that has recently undergone a massive process of UN-ization and NGO-ization, the new language and memory practices of the TRC constitutes a dominant form of knowledge whose power is linked to the political economy of international peacemaking and humanitarian assistance.

Most people I asked during my research over four consecutive years, however, were very divided about the TRC and truth telling. Almost without exception, people wanted “to forget,” even if such forgetting eluded them, often urging “let’s forgive and forget.” Some, intriguingly, were able to synthesize the TRC message of remembering with this prevailing understanding of healing and reconciliation as forgetting. But for others—including victims—the TRC was often an obstacle to healing and reconciliation. For some communities, such as a large village in which I worked in 2003 and 2004 that had held church ceremonies to reintegrate ex-combatants, the TRC disrupted their own practices of reconciliation. Sometimes whole communities agreed not to give statements or to give statements that withheld information that they thought might be damaging to the ex-combatant children



of their neighbors. People thereby sought to protect their communities and their relationships from the potentially damaging consequences of publicly remembering violence.

## Forgiving and Forgetting

Sierra Leoneans, then, did not wait for the TRC before working to rebuild their lives and social communities. While the reintegration of ex-combatants was (and is still) problematic in many areas, people in different parts of the country developed and adapted techniques of healing, reintegration, and reconciliation, often with input from NGOs and religious groups, but also on their own initiative. This is a part of West Africa in which people have learned to improvise their own techniques of social recovery after conflict. In my earlier research in Sierra Leone from 1977 to 1992, I traced the social and cultural consequences of four centuries of warfare and raiding generated by the Atlantic slave trade, the nineteenth-century “legitimate” trade, and the imposition of colonial rule. Although these centuries of violence had a profound impact on social and cultural forms, people also had a long historical experience of reintegrating combatants, reworking relationships, and rebuilding moral communities. They are doing so again today.

When I returned to Sierra Leone toward the end of the war in June 2001 at the start of my research project on grassroots practices of healing and reconciliation, I found people and communities engaged in a variety of processes of social recovery. As far as I could tell, people *had* been talking about the violence when the violence was present, but once it stopped, healing took place through practices of social forgetting. Social forgetting is a different process from individual forgetting, in that people still have personal memories of the violence. But speaking of the violence—especially in public—was (and is) viewed as encouraging its return, calling it forth when it is still very close and might at any moment erupt again. People in the northern Sierra Leonean communities in which I conducted research discussed the war within their families and inside their houses, but often reminded each other not to “pull it outside” and thereby risk endowing it with reality. Some were concerned that “pulling it outside” would exacerbate social tensions and make it more likely that violence would resume, while others felt that doing so could also summon forth the violence in a more spiritual sense. In both senses, social forgetting is a refusal to reproduce the violence by talking about it publicly.

During my 2002 field research I found, for example, that social forgetting has been a cornerstone of techniques of reintegration and healing for child and adult ex-combatants in northern Sierra Leone. In Temne-speaking areas, when child ex-combatants were returned to their home communities after demobilization, their family members adapted or created rituals to “cool the heart” of the child. “Cooling the heart” reversed the work of the combatant groups that had made the child into a fighter, restoring the child’s relationship with God and the ancestors—and thereby also with the family and community—through prayer, the application of consecrated water, and small offerings. In some rural communities, religious leaders introduced group rituals or church ceremonies for returning combatants (both child and adult) involving confession, prayers, and offerings, in which the whole community participated. Because having and maintaining a “cool heart” requires a transformation of social identity, ex-combatants were discouraged from publicly talking about the war after these rituals, and reciprocally community members were enjoined not to call child or adult ex-combatants “rebels” or other combatant labels, not to ask ex-combatants about their past actions, and not to discuss the war in public after rituals of reintegration. This was not merely a top-down directive from leaders: most people I asked in these and other communities—including child ex-combatants—said that they wished “to forget” the war and to get on with their lives. Such a process of social forgetting “unmakes” past violence and “remakes” ex-combatants as new social persons. It is not a panacea, but rather a practice that enables and sustains ongoing processes of healing and social recovery.

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## Accountability vs. Reintegration

Do local techniques of post-conflict healing, reconciliation, and reintegration resolve the need for justice and accountability? Here, I would argue, a distinction should be drawn between the need to make states and leaders accountable for mass violence on the one hand, and the treatment of rank-and-file perpetrators on the other. If most survivors of the violence want some form of retributive justice against the latter, then a truth commission or TRC is unlikely to be an adequate response. But in Sierra Leone, as in Mozambique, most survivors wanted reintegration and peace. Here, a truth commission—especially one with public hearings—was popularly felt to be a destructive process.

When I asked survivors of the violence in the northern Sierra Leonean communities in which I worked what form of justice they wished to see, some did speak of the need for retributive justice: *“We you do bad ting na road, na bad ting den go pay you”* (“When you do a bad thing on the road, it’s with a bad thing they will pay you”). But an overwhelming majority responded “I have no power; I leave my case to God.” If encouraged to think about what they would want if *they* had power, most then replied “If I had power, I would still leave my case to God, for the sake of peace,” deferring to divine justice and viewing punishment and retaliation alike as escalating rather than ending the cycle of violence. For this last reason, most victims of the war whom I interviewed in 2003 and 2004 were concerned about the potential for retaliatory violence following the arrest and indictment of leaders from different combatant groups for war crimes by the Special Court for Sierra Leone. The Special Court’s decision to limit prosecution to those who bore “the greatest responsibility” for war crimes and crimes against humanity, however, met with popular approval in the communities in which I conducted research. “It was the big, big ones who sent the children to do bad things,” I was told again and again when I asked about this.

For those northern Sierra Leoneans whose communities include rank-and-file ex-combatant “children” (which in the latter expression connotes junior status rather than age), public accountability for past actions usually becomes less important than present behavior. Most of these civilians, both in my interviews and in conversation with each other, regarded ex-combatants’ capacities to maintain moral relationships in the present as of far greater import than settling accounts from the past. On the surface, this appears to run counter to the fact that people turned out in large numbers to listen to perpetrators’ apologies in the TRC’s district hearings. But what was important to the audience in these apologies were indications of sincere regret, through, for example, the actions of kneeling and prostrating, and the presence of emotion in the voice. None of the apologies I heard in the four district hearings I attended corresponded to the “ideal type” of apology described in the transitional justice literature, namely the unequivocal verbal acknowledgement of specific wrongdoing. Yet the audience reactions were usually positive as long as the speaker was viewed as displaying a “cool heart.” As with the reintegration of ex-combatants in rural communities, most civilians—including victims—were more concerned about the internal transformation of the rank-and-file ex-combatants in their midst (and their concomitant capacity for present and future relationships in the community) than with seeking explicit verbal accountability for past actions.

Sierra Leone’s TRC, then, was operating in an environment in which alternative practices of reintegration, reconciliation, and social recovery were already established in many locations. Although the integration and reintegration of ex-combatants remains problematic, with large numbers of former fighters remaining in the towns in which they were demobilized, unable or unwilling to return to their former homes, many people in urban locations—both ex-combatants and civilians—nevertheless share in the cultural understandings of healing and reconciliation that these practices enacted. While ex-combatant numbers in urban locations are too high, and authority structures too fractured, for the techniques of integration and healing to operate in the same way as they do in rural communities, both civilians and ex-combatants again understand reconciliation and healing

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An online edition of this report can be found at our website ([www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org)), together with additional information on the subject.

in terms of social forgetting. Here, then, was an opportunity for Sierra Leone's Truth and Reconciliation Commission to facilitate reconciliation—at least in the urban District capitals in which it held hearings.

## Recommendations

There will always be a need to document mass violence and human rights abuses through first-hand accounts. And under certain conditions—notably after periods of covert state violence—truth commissions can be an important means of establishing state accountability, and may sometimes be profoundly empowering to those who were silenced. But before a truth commission or TRC is initiated in a particular setting, it is essential to establish whether such an exercise would have popular support—not just among local political leaders and NGOs, but also, and crucially, among ordinary survivors. Truth commission reports can provide an important moral and historical frame for debates about periods of violence and state repression—as does Sierra Leone's Truth and Reconciliation Report—and can foster the development of stable national institutions that provide post-conflict legitimacy. But in situations in which victims view a truth commission as either counterproductive or inadequate, we need to consider other means of producing such reports. Much of Sierra Leone's Truth and Reconciliation Report was in any case based upon private written statements.

Where a TRC is initiated, it will be more effective if it builds upon established practices of healing and reconciliation. In Sierra Leone, the TRC set itself in opposition to widespread local practices of social reconstruction as forgetting by valorizing verbally discursive remembering as the only road to reconciliation and peace. Building on these practices of social recovery would have required exploring what ordinary people understood by their calls to “forgive and forget,” investigating which processes and conditions are perceived to enable such forgetting, examining the techniques of healing, reconciliation, and reintegration already in place, and adapting the Commission accordingly. Sierra Leone's TRC would have been differently received had it been more explicitly framed as a process that would enable people to put the past behind them, and if it had been built upon widely established understandings rather than comprising a campaign to change attitudes about “forgiving and forgetting.”

“Established,” it should be emphasized, means neither traditional nor homogeneous. It is important to examine, through ethnographic rather than quantitative survey methods, the range of practices of conflict resolution and reconciliation that people and communities are adapting and retooling *now*. But in so doing we need to beware of introducing compromised practices of “customary law,” or of authorizing a static and unitary “tradition.” Outside Sierra Leone and Mozambique, this examination of grassroots forms may involve an engagement with processes very different from those of social forgetting. But if we discount such processes as in any way less important than processes of national rebuilding, we may undermine social recovery rather than facilitate it. It is time to question whether TRCs should be taken for granted as part of post-conflict packages. Instead, we should develop sensitivities to grassroots practices and build on these if we are to have meaningful post-conflict reconstruction.

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**United States  
Institute of Peace**

1200 17th Street NW  
Washington, DC 20036