

Muslim and Christian Leaders Working Together: Building Reconciliation in the Sierra Leone Conflict

by

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Abstract

This article examines the work of the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone (IRCSL) from an interreligious peace-building perspective. The study shows the importance of the personal motivation and commitment of religious leaders in peace-building. Thus, churches and mosques have the capacity to motivate and mobilize people into peace-building and reconciliation. Also, traditional African cleansing and healing rituals has enabled community-building among Islamic and Christian practices, demonstration that organized religions is a channel for people at the grass roots level, and a tool for national reconciliation. The results of this study argue that Muslims and Christians have common values and common ground which they can use in the midst of conflict to mediate peace.

Keywords: peace-building, civil war, Muslim-Christian, reconciliation, Sierra Leone.

Introduction

Sierra Leone struggled through a decade of turmoil and gruesome atrocities perpetrated by warlords, but today peace has emerged from the ashes of war. This article explores how Muslim and Christian leaders worked together and formed the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone (IRCSL) during the civil war. My ongoing interest to Sierra Leone began in 1998 when I worked for a few months as youth coordinator in Freetown. This study is based on interviews conducted in 2013, documents of IRCSL, and my personal observations. To protect the identity of the participants, I have mentioned few details of their backgrounds, apart from my main informants, the founding members of the IRCSL: Sheikh Abu Bakarr Conteh and Reverend Moses B. Khanu. I traveled to different parts of the country to conduct the interviews: the capital city Freetown, as well as up country to Makeni, Bo, Nonkoba and the Lunsar area. The field work was funded by a grant from the Nordic Africa Institute (NAI) in Uppsala.

According to recent comparative study of religion there are elements and traditions in Islam and Christianity that support peace-building and reconciliation (Abu-Nimer 2003/2001; Appleby 2000; Johnson & Sampson 1994; Lederach 1995). Religions are often involved in conflicts, and interest is growing in the role of religions in peace-building. The importance of interreligious work for peace has been obvious in the conflicts of Northern Ireland, the former Yugoslavia and the Middle East. Religious leaders may bring a spiritual dimension and create a sense of commitment to peace-building efforts (Abu-Nimer 2001, 685–687).

Faith-based peace building is possible when actors are committed to their own religions but also understand and respect other traditions. The challenge for religious actors in peace building is to build common ground between religious traditions (Johnston & Cox 2003, Portaankorva 2014). Non-violent conflict transformation through dialogue and reconciliation are central to peace building efforts. Personal motivations as well as commitment to peace building and reconciliation across religious boundaries are important to religious leaders (Appleby 2000). Reverend Moses Khanu comes from an Islamic background and has a good understanding of Islamic culture, thus, his words show respect for his ancestors:

It is not difficult in Sierra Leone as we look at the background of the tolerance. Because I come, well I could say not so much from a Christian background, but today I am a pastor. But my mother was a Muslim and father was a non-believer. I came from that kind of background. I have to have a certain level of sympathy to Islam because my mother was a Muslim so it is because of that, but it is not without criticism (2013:1).

The process of reconciliation has many phases. It begins with ending direct violence and accepting the status quo in order to make conflict resolution possible. The peace process continues with reconciling enemies, dealing with past atrocities publicly, and learning to forgive and forget. Often ritual healing and other indigenous traditions involving public cleansing ceremonies and pardons are needed to build a societal consensus. In this sense the following definition of reconciliation is useful: ‘Reconciliation- restoring broken relationships and learning to live non-violently with radical differences – can be seen as the ultimate goal of conflict resolution’ (Ramsbotha, Woodhouse & Miall 2005, 231–245). Hence, what was the multifaceted expression of reconciliation in the work of IRC SL? What was the role of religious leaders in inter-religious peace-building? In answer to these questions, I note that this study has its limitations, as the sample size is small and the results cannot be generalized.

Literature Review

The work of IRC SL has been discussed in recent studies. Prince Conteh (2011) describes how Muslims and Christians worked together and provided relief for war victims. Conteh’s article offers insight information about how cooperation began and how common ground for peace building was discussed and framed in common statements.

Former British High Commissioner to Sierra Leone, Peter Penfold (2005/2012), recounts how IRCSL built confidence between the government and rebels and helped them to start negotiating. Penfold does not agree with the results of the peace treaty and power sharing with the rebels as well the amnesty that was declared (Penfold 2005, 553-556). Nishimuko (2008) gives an account of Muslim-Christian activities and the government's tolerant religious policy. These articles and Peter Penfold's book *Atrocities, Diamonds and Diplomacy: The Inside Story of the Conflict in Sierra Leone* (2012) recognize the importance of good relations between Muslims and Christians and in turn their relations with the government and rebels.

The activities and methods of IRCSL from the early stages of the peace process to formal peace negotiations and the peace treaty can be found in Jessop, Aljets & Chacko (2008). Alimamy Koroma was a leading figure of IRCSL since it was established, and a key player during the peace negotiations. Koroma (2006) describes Sierra Leone, the reasons that led to the civil war and provides insider information about the peace process. Koroma's personal memories of his conversion to Christianity and friendly relationship with Muslim community helps us to understand how religions were able to work together as the agents of reconciliation (Koroma 2006, 278-301). Koroma highlights the importance of Christian converts' good relations with Muslims. Most Christian leaders are originally from an Islamic background. Koroma's article is a valuable means of understanding the peace process in Sierra Leone and the country's tolerant culture.

Harpviken and Røislien argue that the political role of religious leaders in Sierra Leone having good relations to the country's establishment was strong. "The IRCSL contributed to the peace accord for the country as religious organizations and cut through numerous levels in society; they can successfully play intermediary roles" (Harpviken and Røislien 2005, 17). Mark Turay (2000) describes how the interfaith cooperation began at an organizational level. In April 1997 the World Conference of Religion and Peace (WCRP) supported religious leaders in Sierra Leone in their efforts to form a local interreligious body. Turay's study argues that the need for negotiations arose from the grassroots level when the conflict worsened. Ordinary Muslims and Christians wanted their leaders to appeal to both belligerent parties engaged in order to end the violence.

The above studies are valuable to the present research, but are limited in their scope. No research has yet been done regarding inter-religious peace-building and the role of religious leaders based on a comparative study of religions.

The Sierra Leone Civil War

The civil war in Sierra Leone lasted for 11 years. It began in 1991 and has been characterized as one of the dirtiest wars in Africa, with mass killing, horrific levels of violence, and the abduction of children to become soldiers (Keen 2005, 219-240). The roots of the conflict are deeper, when after independence in 1961 two main political parties, the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) and the All People's Congress (APC) began to compete for power. Each ruled with an institutionalized patron-client system that faced many attempted coups and much opposition (Mateos 2011, 31, Utas and Jorgel 2008, 491).

The revolutionary movement commenced in 1985 when President Momoh declared a state of economic emergency and reduced government salaries. Civil war broke out in March 1991, when Revolutionary United Front (RUF) leader corporal Foday Sankoh assembled an army and attacked the government. Sankoh had formed, together with Liberian rebel leader Charles Taylor and his army The National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NFLP), a military coalition based in neighbouring Liberia and began controlling diamond mines in the Kono district (Koroma 2007, 282–283; Mateos 2010, 31). Sankoh and Taylor were originally trained by Muammar Al-Gaddafi in Libya (Penfold 2012, 5).

The civil war in Sierra Leone demonstrates a fragile nation. The war was not a contest between two clearly defined groups (Keen 2005). Paul Richards's study of rebel fighters in the Sierra Leonean rainforest argues that the origin of the war lays further back in history and in the social orders (Richards 1996). The rebels never gained the peoples' confidence and started abducting children as soldiers right at the beginning of the war (Abraham 2004, 200–202). However, the RUF managed to form a culture of violence and a closed world of combatants with a command structure based on fear and violence (Denov 2010, 102–105).

The RUF atrocities, Sankoh's leadership and the conduct of the war was far from any form of acceptable social resistance. I remember watching two very young pregnant girls in a Red Cross hospital playing on the floor with my one-year-old daughter. They were happy and smiling. They were both also missing their right hands. This was the infamous short or long sleeve limb amputation. Rebels used to ask their victims which they preferred: long sleeves or short sleeves, cut below or above the elbow or at the wrist. Once the rebels had advanced to Freetown one would often see people in the streets with bandages wrapped a limb.

The Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone

During the war in January 1997, the World Conference for Religion and Peace (WCRP) decided to support religious groups in Sierra Leone and sent a representative to discuss the forming of an organization for inter-religious dialogue and peace. The WCRP encouraged religious leaders in to come together to discuss how they could help in building reconciliation in the country. The first meeting was at the American Embassy in Freetown (Conteh 2011; Penfold 2005, 551).

Muslim and Christian leaders in Sierra Leone knew each other already very well and they had started cooperation and formed Christian and Islamic action groups together with UNICEF many years before the war started. (2013:2). Muslim-Christian solidarity had been strong in the country as Reverend Khanu remembered an incident in 1992 when the Anglican bishop was badly beaten by the government soldiers (2013:1):

And when the news came to Freetown Christians gathered to support bishop. They said we will gather tomorrow and come to State House, and also some Muslims leaders also joined...and came to State House to protest why soldiers had to molest bishop... if today is bishop so and so, tomorrow it could be hadzi so and so...we must make solidarity. (2013:1)

In Sierra Leone there was strong national resistance against the war and in 1995 already 60 different groups from the religious, civil and non-governmental organization sectors were working for the peace. Organizations such as Campaign for Good Governance, Network Movement for Justice and Development, and Human Rights Committee formed a coalition of Civil Society Movement and were present in the Abidjan (1996) peace negotiations (Mateos 2010). The Women's Movement for Peace lobbied all parties to the conflict. The women's advocacy outside Sierra Leone attracted international attention (Dyfan 2003).

International help from the WCRP was an important factor in initiating Muslim-Christian cooperation. After several consultations, over two hundred Muslim and Christian delegates came together on 1 April 1997 with financial support and encouragement from the WCRP to establish IRCSL. The founding members were leading Islamic and Christian organizations. The member organizations of IRCSL were "the Supreme Islamic Council, the Sierra Leone Muslim Congress, the Federation of Muslim Women Associations in Sierra Leone, the Council of Imams, and the Sierra Leone Islamic Missionary Union. Constituent Christian members of IRCSL included the three Roman Catholic dioceses in Sierra Leone...the Pentecostal Churches Council, and the Council of Churches in Sierra Leone, representing eighteen Protestant denominations" (Pham 2004).

Muslims and Christians agreed that common interfaith cooperation would be more effective than the work of a single religious organization (Conteh 2011). As Reverend Khanu remembered: "I became president of the IRCSL and Alimamy Koroma became general secretary, Bishop Humber became the vice president and so we walked" (2013:1). Alimamy Koroma described the commitment of Muslim and Christian leaders as follows: "that leadership decided to tackle the war itself, not just the casualties of war" (Koroma 2007, 288). The African Traditional Religion group (ATR) was ignored and excluded and was not a part of the formal organization (Conteh 2008). Cooperation between IRCSL and the Abrahamic faiths began with the role of Islamic and Christian religious authorities being strong in new organization. The Muslim and Christian leaders defined and shared common values, principles, moral concerns and purposes in IRCSL Statement of Shared Values and Common Purpose:

We believe in God, and in the revealed law of God...in the natural law and the just law of man...in the equality of all people before God and the Law... Recognize our common human destiny... recognize our common history with religious and cultural diversity... recognize our common benefit in unity with diversity....commit ourselves to truth, justice and common living...commit ourselves to the respect and protection of human rights...commit ourselves to peace in Sierra Leone and the world...we trust the just Law of the land of Sierra Leone...feel responsible for the future of our nation, and the religious communities of Sierra Leone and beyond (Conteh 2011:11).

The dialogue and cooperation was based on common humanity and unity through creation. The Muslim and Christian organizations provided assistance and welfare to their members who had suffered during the war. The following IRCSL Statement of Shared Moral Concerns describes the basis of the co-operation between Muslims and Christians:

We, the responsible representatives of the Christian Churches and the Islamic Community in Sierra Leone recognize that our Religious Communities differ from each other, and that each of them feels called to live true to its own faith. At the same time, we recognise that our religious and spiritual traditions hold many values in common, and that these shared values can provide an authentic basis for mutual esteem, cooperation, and free common living in Sierra Leone (Conteh 2011:10).

Reverend Khanu stressed that the above statement most importantly reflected the current situation in Sierra Leone: “that was the reason we did not talk about doctrines. We did not talk about articles of faith, about doctrine about practice, no” (2013:1). However, the inter-faith work was not easy for all members of the Christian and Muslim communities:

It was difficult, it was very challenging... some Christians first of all did not want the relationship...and some Muslims also actually they did not want have anything to do.... Because they felt that it was a betrayal to use very strong expression, it was betrayal of faith. That we have own faith, we have any business to do with Muslims and vice versa on both sides were people opposed it (2013:1).

In fact, the interfaith co-operation that IRCSL was building was more of a political than religious organization, as Reverend Khanu recalled: “And when you read the Common concerns [statement] you find same concerns in Islam and you find the same concerns in the Bible and Christianity, so it was not the doctrines of Christianity and Islam, but based on common concerns” (2013:1). As Sheikh Conteh described the relation between the faiths:

There has been a marriage between the followers of these two main denominations [sic] in our country, Muslims and Christians. Before the rebel war...the beginning of the history of this country Muslims and Christians have been living together, loving each other, interacting, exchanging ideas, and they have seen themselves not as Muslims or Christians but as people of the same Creator and people worshipping the same Creator and people recognize the talents of the respective members of denominations (2013:2).

Sheikh Conteh understands relations between the faiths closer than Reverend Khanu. The Muslim view is different because according to the Prophet Muhammad, Muslims see Christians as the People of the Book and Jesus as one of Islam's prophets. Islam sees itself as the continuation of the Abrahamic faith that was first given to Israel and Christians and later to Muslims (Goddard 2000, 24–25). According to Sheikh Conteh: “We do not see any difficulties to accepting the fact that Muslims and Christians came from one particular source, from one origin, from the Creator, Allah, God, and that God or Allah created this universe. We are able to use appropriate full Quranic and Biblical quotations on peace “(2013:2).

Sheikh Conteh described the religiosity in Sierra Leone: “In our country we do not have a freethinkers ... you are either a Muslim or a Christian and religious people in this country are highly esteemed and respected” (2013:2). The life of RUF rebel soldiers in the jungle was also anchored to religious practices. Christians and Muslims in the rebel army began each day with a morning prayer in warring camps: “Every member of the camp was expected to practice either Islam or Christianity, different members were appointed each day to lead in prayers...On the battlefield, many RUF soldiers wore crosses or carried rosaries, or talismans...religious objects...believed to possess supernatural powers for protection against the enemy” (Conteh 2011:6).

Several IRC SL founders had already gained the trust of the government and RUF when they had participated earlier in the 1996 Abidjan peace negotiations (Jessop, Aljets & Chacko 2008, 93). The leaders met with President Kabbah, and they warned him of the country's worsening situation and encouraged him to act (Penfold 2005, 551; Koroma 2007, 290). The situation in Sierra Leone deteriorated further and two days after the meeting a coup led by junior army officers ousted President Kabbah. The IRC SL condemned the coup and actively pursued dialogue with the coup leaders. Muslim and Christian leaders acted as spokespersons for the broader civil society and organized a campaign of civil disobedience (Jessop, Aljets & Chacko 2008, 100). Reverend Khanu remembered the coup: “It was barely one year Government in office, so that coup was our first task. I spoke over the BBC and Voice of America to condemn the coup” (2013:1). The actions of the religious leaders prevented the junta from committing greater abuses against civilians (Turay 2000, 51). The new faith-based organization was part of the establishment and had good contacts with both the government and rebels.

In February 1998 the junta was overthrown by Nigeria's Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) force, a West African multilateral armed force established by the Economic Community of West African States. The IRCSL organized joint Muslim-Christian nation-wide Thanksgiving services on March 1998 attended by thousands of people (Jessop, Aljets & Chacko 2008, 100). Interfaith services were a unique way to bind people together and mobilize them during the time of crisis. However, the war was not yet over. I remember the tense atmosphere in Freetown in October when twenty-four rebel army officers were executed by firing squad in Lomley Beach. You could hear the sound of the firing squad from afar. The RUF continued to advance in late 1998, before Christmas rebels captured Waterloo, a town near Freetown. Tens of thousands of people fled to the capital.

The RUF transacted in diamonds as foreign companies supplied aircraft and mercenaries to the rebel army (Gberie 2005; Mateos 2010). Churches and mosques and houses were burned and looted during the rebel attack in Freetown on December 1998 and January 1999. With the assistance of Liberian President Charles Taylor on 6 January, the RUF invaded Freetown and the massacres started. The IRCSL condemned the war and urged the rebels to lay down their arms proclaiming that violence is against God's creation and His divine will. Ordinary Muslims and Christians wanted their leaders to appeal to both warring parties to end the violence. When the fighting intensified, it became obvious that Muslims and Christians had to work together even more closely and use their religious influence on the rebels and the government in order to reach a peace agreement (Turay 2000, 9; Penfold 2005, 552–554).

The UN's special envoy Francis Okello encouraged IRCSL to open a dialogue between President Kabbah and RUF leader Sankoh. Muslim and Christian leaders had been active in speaking against RUF atrocities but also in publicizing the rebels' material needs. The IRCSL realized that peace would depend on the people of Sierra Leone and their support for a peace process based on forgiveness and reconciliation. The religious leaders had already in 1997 started a dialogue with the coup leaders, had listened to their grievances and had provided human assistance to the rebels (Jessop, Aljets & Chacko 2008, 100–101), as IRCSL was ready to take a new step in the peace building.

In March IRCSL leaders began constructing a dialogue between the rebels and government, and they spoke out against the violence and revenge. The IRCSL met President Kabbah, who allowed them to meet RUF leader Sankoh (Koroma 2007, 292). The new IRCSL co-chair Moses Khanu, who like his predecessor was also secretary general of the Council of Churches in Sierra Leone, took up the challenge and, after several meetings with Kabbah, led a delegation that was allowed to meet with Sankoh in a military installation near Freetown in March 1999' (Pham 2004). As Reverend Khanu recalled the words of the President: "You could meet him [Sankoh], but let me warn you that he knows how to talk" (2013:1). The IRCSL delegate met with Foday Sankoh at the military barracks in Freetown. Reverend Khanu described the meeting as follows:

We try to find means and ways how to talk to Foday Sankoh, the rebel leader. So we had access to him when he was caught; he was arrested in Nigeria and brought to Sierra Leone as a prisoner. He was to stand trial. He stood trial and he was condemned to die. He had pyjamas with a big C [letter]. We went in there and we discussed with him about... his men to stop the war. We had this discussing a couple of times. And finally he agreed to have a voluntary ceasefire. He called for it and called men to ceasefire. Nobody forced during that time. So we continued meeting with him. He agreed for him and the government to meet and talk peace, but then the venue became a big problem (2013:1).

The IRCSL provided food, clothing, blankets and sanitary kits to the rebels in the bush. Sankoh was given permission to use radio and contact his field commander by radio. The RUF field commander responded and released 54 abducted children. The combatants had a face-to-face meeting with IRCSL in the bush. As Sheikh Conteh recalled:

And it was the Inter-Religious Council that met the rebels in the bush. We were there. You know, we were two women with us, about seven men both Muslims and Christians. We went into the bush and pleaded, you know pleaded rebel leaders to see reason for peace. And for goal that effort was able achieve was release of over fifty captives including women and children (2013:2).

According to Sheikh Conteh, Muslims shared the same neutral role with Christians when dealing with rebel leader Sankoh and the RUF: “when we made to that confidence-building exercise and when we demanded a meeting with their leader Foday Sankoh...we are able using as I said the Scriptures, to able to convince him and let him yield to see reason and meet with the government for peaceful negotiations” (2013:2) The IRCSL heads used their authority as spiritual leaders employing religious methods when persuading the rebel leader to make peace. As Sheikh Conteh continued:

We were there to help the warring fraction realize...they are destroying themselves and that we are not created for destruction, and fortunately they all belonged to the two main denominations. We were able to let Almighty Allah to their hearts. So this was our own role in Lomé that we shall have general meetings with representatives of the various groups (2013:2).

RUF leader Sankoh was then released from prison and was ready to sit at the negotiating table in March 1999. The IRCSL traveled to the neighbouring country of Liberia to meet with President Charles Taylor, whose presence was necessary in any peace process because he was the biggest supporter of Sierra Leone’s rebels (Penfold 2005, 553–554).

Reverend Khanu remembered how US presidential envoy Jesse Jackson was active in pushing the peace negotiations forward: “He called on civil society, the IRCSL, he called on the President and he said we should talk peace, we should forgive. So, Jesse Jackson came and he pushed the President [who] was almost like crying” (2013:1). The USA understood that achieving a peace accord was important, and sent their special envoy Jesse Jackson, a personal friend of Liberian President Charles Taylor (Mateos 2010, 36).

The agenda of the Lomé negotiations was to achieve a peace accord. The participants represented the Sierra Leonean populace and government, as well as the AFRC–RUF alliance, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Organization of African Unity (OAU), United Nations (UN) and the British Commonwealth. The countries present at the negotiations were Nigeria, Guinea, Liberia, Burkina Faso, Libya, Togo, the US and the UK (Turay 2000). The RUF invited IRCSL to an informal meeting before negotiations. During the negotiations IRCSL, WCRP and Norwegian Church AID acted as informal mediators, remaining neutral facilitators and go-betweens convincing the parties to stay at the negotiating table. When there were problems IRCSL members began to pray and preach (Penfold 2005, 554). `During the nearly two months of difficult talks, IRCSL played a significant behind-the-scenes role, facilitating communications between the parties during the periodic impasses. Its role was recognized by the parties, which gave IRCSL the leading role in the Council of Elders´ (Pham 2004). Sheikh Conteh remembered the negotiations, where using language grounded in Islam and elements of forgiveness:

Retaliation has negative results... We ask Almighty God to forgive us as we forgive those who trespass against us. So, if you forgive to those you must also ask God’s, Allah’s forgiveness for those who trespass against you. And you know for reconciliation, for two factions to reconcile, we have what we call confession, acceptance of wrong and right, and then forgiveness has very positive reasons. So the perpetrators, when they confess their atrocities to their brothers and sisters and tell them those we are affected, the reason for forgiveness is to reintegrate their lost brothers into the society (2013:2).

The Lomé Peace Accord was signed on 7 July 1999 featuring a power-sharing agreement between the government and RUF. The sharing of power in the new unity government included members of the RUF and the former Armed Forces Revolutionary Council junta. RUF leader Foday Sankoh became the country’s vice-president and cabinet minister for mineral resources including diamond mining (Mateos 2010, 32; Penfold 2012, 185). Thousands of free copies of the peace accord were immediately distributed through churches and mosques. The IRCSL helped to introduce the agreement to the general public along with the message of peace and reconciliation. However, there were setbacks later and the British army intervened in 2000 to re-establish stability. (Penfold, 2012, 181–185). In any event, IRCSL had been committed to a message of forgiveness, amnesty and reconciliation for the people of Sierra Leone (Penfold 2005, 555; Koroma 2007, 294–295).

Reconciliation

The process of national reconciliation in Sierra Leone commenced following the peace agreement when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established. The TRC was part of the peace process. United Methodist Church Bishop Humber was its Chairman and religious leaders supported all its reconciliation activities including disclosing the truth. The TRC mandate was to compile a historical record of violations and human rights abuse during the Sierra Leone conflict (Conteh 2011). Muslim and Christian leaders participated in its activities. As IRCSL general secretary Koroma described the restorative justice: “There is a need for justice that will open up additional avenues...the kind of restorative justice that permits true reconciliation and supports sustainable peace” (Koroma 2007, 295). Reverend Khanu described the decision to support the TRC as follows:

TRC was on asking people to voluntarily testify ... your role in the war...Special Court was also established. America was very quick support it because that was the time America was also campaigning at the UN level that no American should be charged for war crimes. So we got the support from America to support the Special Court of Sierra Leone because of that, and we also supported their position at the UN (2013:1).

The word ‘reconciliation’ has both emotional and religious meanings. Looking at the work of IRCSL the notion of forgiveness has a political and social importance and touches upon people’s fears and anger. Asking for forgiveness and forgiving are powerful when the one who has done evil repents his actions and confesses before the community in which he has done wrong (see Ericson 2001; Botman 2004). Blanket amnesty was a general pardon for offenses of rape, mutilation and killing of civilians (Mateos 2010:33). Sierra Leone needed restorative justice dealing with past crimes publicly and collectively. The religious leaders supported the blanket amnesty in order to help the rebels and their victims integrated back into society.

The IRCSL brought both relief and religious scriptures as Reverend Khanu continues: “We brought Bibles and copies of the Holy Quran we gave to the rebels and we also took bullet shells and made them into crosses. And we distributed among people that what was known as the enemy, the bullet is now a symbol of peace” (2013:1). Muslims and Christians worked hand in hand. Still some criticism was voiced in Churches of the interfaith work between Muslims and Christians, as one Creole pastor argued:

The Inter-religious committee played an important role during the war, a very significant role. To be honest we are not part of the IRCSL community in Sierra Leone it is a watering down of Christianity. There lots of compromises in their meeting and even in the theology. You know it is not evangelical; it is liberal. Liberal and liberalism (2013:3).

It was a new thing for many Christians to work so closely with Muslims. Also, all Muslims in Sierra Leone did not closely cooperate with Christians. As one young Fulani Muslim man said of Muslim-Christian relations: “Islam is a good religion. There is no confidence in the Christian religion. Christians are not following God in their daily life. In Islam it is a problem marrying three or four, it is too much. Muslims and Christians believe in the same God, but Jesus Christ was not God. We know that Allah is one” (2013:4). However, the Muslim organizations joined IRC SL and have continued in cooperation.

A Christian from an African Traditional Religion (ATR) background was happy when IRC SL helped to create better relations with Muslims. As he expressed it: “The IRC SL has worked to repair all local cracks. An evangelist was preaching next to the Mosque on Friday: ‘You will go to hell if you don’t repent!’ The IRC SL sent one Muslim and Christian to discuss with local leaders. And they agreed that the Evangelist should pick another day to preach and not to do it next to the mosque” (2013:7). Local churches and mosques then have built up friendly relationships. As one Temne Christian man said: “I want to give testimony to the Muslims. I send food to Muslims during Ramadan, share bread together with the Imams when there is a conflict” (2013:8). The presence of religious leaders such as Imams and pastors is important when they bring their spiritual authority to these gatherings. There were elements of this in local religious communities, which helped the reconciliation process. Sheikh Conteh recalled the process of reconciliation:

Exactly... come times it is difficult to forget, you know for instance all have individual stories our individual bitter experiences we had during that civil war...we cannot go on fighting when we want development and progress. You see, we can only continue in animosity and ransoms. So, I think forgiveness should be a must if you want development and progress (2013:2).

The blanket amnesty was not easy to agree on as Reverend Khanu stressed: “It was mixed... you have some [Christians] and Muslims saying let’s forgive, and others saying let them be punished. And the amnesty giving them an opportunity to transform the RUF into a political party was received with mixed feelings; not everybody was for the agreement” (2013:1). Sierra Leone was in danger of endless war without the treaty, as Reverend Khanu exclaimed that: “Sierra Leone was drowning. We were drowning and somebody came and let it not be drowned. If you get help you’ll not drown... After signing we had mixed feelings” (2013:1). A pastor living up country whose father was killed by the rebels still had strong feelings but saw the amnesty favorably:

The amnesty was good. I also find this same. In fact my father was killed by the rebels. When they kill your child or father, because of the amnesty you can forgive. It did a lot in this country. We are living still with rebels in the village. Because of the amnesty we are living with them... We are not going forgive them we cannot forget. As soon as I see the man who killed my father my mind reflects. I do any action. But I must forgive (2013:5).

Many children were born in the bush during the war, and IRC SL wanted to do more work at the village level. The religious rituals helped in the process of national reconciliation, and acrimonious relationships between the community and ex-combatants were ended. Religious leaders contacted local villages and organized gatherings for naming children, and bringing further reconciliation to communities. And according to Reverend Khanu:

Whatever they choose to do, we would support. Like this naming ceremony these children Muslim background child they would shave the head and give them proper names one maybe a name of their ancestor. If it were a Christian they would call prayers and they do renaming ceremony and name with child a biblical character (2013:1).

Hence, religious rituals bind people together and the leader's role is to mediate between community and deity (Esposito, Fasching & Todd 2002, 9–10). Islam has a long tradition of forgiveness and reconciliation among communities. Submission to Allah is important, and the ethnic traditions help with peace-building at the grass-roots level. The purpose of reconciliation, or *sulh*, is to end conflicts or hostility among believers. It is a contract that legally binds individuals and the community. *Sulh* is a process of restorative justice and peacemaking. Belligerents have understood that they should make peace instead of continuing in unending spirals of vengeance. Thus, local Imams and Sheiks participated in reconciliation processes and introduce the values of forgiveness and peace (Said, Funk & Kadayifci 2001, 182–83; Abu-Nimer, Kadayifci-Orellana 2008, 567–574).

In Sierra Leone, ATR practices are influential in people's lives and rituals have been used as a tool for community building. The former child soldiers went to the bush with local leaders, and underwent traditional rituals. As Reverend Khanu described:

Then we also did ceremonial cleansing for the boys. Because the boys also took to the bush, and give bath and do some counseling and do the all night dance, and morning or afternoon bring them to town square with nice names given and they would have forgiven them. Because it was not their fault it was the mistake they did (2013:1).

As a Mandingo woman who saw the cruelty of war and remembered the fate of many girls stated: "My girl cousin went to rebels during the war. She wanted to be a rebel leader's bush wife. She was very beautiful. She was abused by the rebel soldiers but she stayed with the rebel leader. After the war she was sick and died in AIDS" (2013:6). After such a bitter war there was a need to integrate such vulnerable young women 'bush wives' back into society. In this regard, ATR elements helped to remove the stigma and shame. Bondo secret society practices, such as ceremonial cleansing, were used. The authority of the leaders when performing these rituals was important. Thus, IRC SL was ready to co-operate with ATR members, and Reverend Khanu remembered the ceremonies:

Some of these girls were not accepted into their families ... we called ceremonial cleansing that these girls voluntarily want to be cleansed... putting them in the Bondo bush in the Bondo society... for two to three days in they will do some traditional counseling, talk to them and then they will bring them out, put on their new dresses and bring them in to the village square and say these are the new girls we have... they have removed the stigma from them. The stigma of calling them bush wives and these rebel wives. The stigma is removed, the stigma of discrimination, the stigma of name calling, finger pointing has been removed. (2013:1).

These traditional cleansing or healing rituals enabled community building and helped with integration, but unfortunately only relatively few women participated in them. Women were often traumatized and too afraid to return to their home villages. Many 'bush wives' and 'camp followers' were actually fighters and the backbone of rebel forces. When Sierra Leone's demobilization programme began, only 4,751 women and 505 girls registered. Actually most of the female fighters did not participate in disarmament (Coulter 2009, 155–159, 177). There were also mass graves. People were buried during the war without religious ceremonies. The IRCSL organized inter-religious services in the cemeteries. As Reverend Khanu described:

On the mass graves. We did a number of mass graves because after the program we still had a few places that we are calling, people also believed that they had no fitting funerals had been done for to those who were killed and their blood was still caused upon against the people.... So all of these things, but when we did a proper burial these people would feel satisfied with these people having a fitting funeral (2013:1).

Reverend Khanu stressed how they worked: "Muslims and Christians did all ceremonies together in the mass graves right after the war: Christians, Muslims and bishops who also offer prayer. And we will give them money to prepare food and we will eat afterward with community people will eat" (2013:1). The expression of reconciliation was multifaceted: rituals in villages, interfaith services and common IRCSL resolutions. All of these religious activities helped people to integrate back into society and provided them with respect and support from the wider community.

Conclusions and Suggestions

The cooperation and warm relations between Muslims and Christians in Sierra Leone during and after the war is an encouraging example of religions working together. This study shows that in Sierra Leone there was a political will to use religious leaders as a tool for national reconciliation. The IRCSL worked to end the violence between the government and rebels. The role of faith-based actors was to prod both warring parties to the negotiating table and begin a peace process. After a peace treaty was signed, IRCSL supported amnesty and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in order to integrate the rebels and war victims into society.

The study also demonstrates that when religious leaders are committed to their own religion and show understanding and respect for other religions, close interreligious cooperation in a pluralistic spirit is possible. The Muslims and Christians acknowledged that they were from different religious communities but that they shared the same goals and were equally responsible for the future of their nation, Sierra Leone. A challenge for the leaders was to build common ground across religious boundaries. The IRCSL founders declared in the Statement of Shared Values and Common Purpose that they had common concerns and religious values which they exploited in the midst of the conflict to help bring about peace.

The religious leaders recognized their common history and how they could benefit from being united. The Statement of Shared Values and Common Purpose emphasized what the religions had in common rather than what separated them. As IRCSL characterized the common ground of beliefs: “We believe in God and in the revealed law of God.” Muslims and Christians recognized their same Abrahamic religious roots, even to the point of excluding African Traditional Religion (ATR) from the formal organization. Something clearly unique occurred when Muslims and Christians agreed to work as a single religious organization. However, IRCSL statement did not conceptualize God.

Christian leader Reverend Khanu stressed that IRCSL statement was based on joint concerns rather than “the doctrines of Christianity and Islam.” For his part, Chief Imam Conteh described the two religious communities “as people of the same Creator and people worshipping the same Creator.” The IRCSL condemned the violence as a sin against God and Creation, and held interfaith services as an example of the unity of the Sierra Leone people. After a peace treaty was signed, Islamic, Christian and even ATR practices became an integral part of the IRCSL reconciliation and healing process. Traditional cleansing and healing rituals enabled community building via Islamic and Christian practices.

The IRCSL was not an official participant in the peace process but had good relations with the government, rebels and other civil society groups – this helped in their peace efforts. There was clearly room in Sierra Leone for interreligious peace building when the nation’s fragile democracy was at stake. The authority of the religious leaders and the effect of the religious rituals bound people together and enabled better social cohesion and peace building. To conclude, religious organizations are generally present at all levels of societies in conflict diplomacy, based on cooperation between religions which are of increasing social value and importance.

Interviews

- 2013:1 Reverend Moses B. Khanu.
- 2013:2 Sheikh Abu Bakarr Conteh.
- 2013:3 Creole pastor from Freetown.
- 2013:4 Young Fulani Muslim man from Makeni.
- 2013:5 Middle-aged pastor from the province.
- 2013:6 Middle-aged Mandingo woman.
- 2013:7 Middle-aged teacher from African Traditional Religion background.
- 2013:8 Middle-aged Temne man.

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