

Post-Conflict Memorialization in Liberia

Progress and Challenges

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After a turbulent three years of national inquiry into Liberia’s violent past, the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) submitted a final report to President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and the legislature on June 30, 2009. The report made far reaching recommendations, many of which are considered controversial. Senior government officials (past and present) are recommended for criminal accountability through an extraordinary tribunal, or may face domestic prosecution and could be barred from holding public office for thirty years. But controversy arising from these now problematic recommendations has overshadowed other critical aspects of the report. Post-conflict memorialization, a component of many transitional justice processes, is one element of the recommendations that Liberians tend to agree with but which has received relatively little attention. Liberians want to remember the unspeakable horrors of the conflict so they may never again occur. In spite of the collective urge to remember the past and the commonalities in what is remembered, memorialization is not a simple process. Liberia’s post-war “memoryscape” evokes pain, misery, identity, and deep ethnic cleavages. Based on four years of research and direct programmatic engagement on the inventory of memories involving victims’

communities and interactions with victims' groups in Liberia, this article seeks to unpack the memoryscape, highlight the issues, explain progress—both at national and community levels—and discuss post-conflict memorialization as a crucial dimension to Liberia's post-war reconciliation.

Following the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that involved three years of public inquiry into Liberia's past, two other national processes have emerged as measures to take the country further away from violence. Both are grounded in the assumption that, though the future carries many possibilities, the preferred future can be claimed through appropriate economic rationality and structural and social planning. The National Vision 2030 and National Reconciliation Road Map are two post-TRC outfits bidding to realize social and economic dividends over the next two decades. Among Liberian policymakers the terms *software* and *hardware* are used to refer to the anticipated socio-economic results. Hardware refers to programs involving the economic transformation of Liberia. Software refers to programs focusing on the social transformation of the country.

The National Vision project is defined as “a non-partisan process by which Liberians will build a consensus on the future of the country or the formulation of a shared vision through a participatory process—setting the agenda to address the social, political and economic challenges that confront and may confront Liberia over the next 18 years and perhaps beyond—and a development framework consistent with the long term vision.” As an exploratory project, foundational studies (termed “retrospective analysis”) were conducted on the Liberia society including emphases on: a) demography; b) the Liberian economy; c) environment, land use and natural resource management; d) social structures; and e) governance. Findings from the retrospective analysis were designed to address the following questions: Where do we come from as a people? Where are we now? Where may we go? Where do we want to go? How do we get there?

Preliminary findings from these studies revealed that out of the sixty-eight variables, five appeared to be most dominant. These variables include: corruption, origin of the State, concession, financial management and state capacity. Liberia's problems of bad governance, over-centralized state arrangements, identity questions, and the eventual collapse of the state in the fourteen-year year civil war are all functions of these five

dominate variables.

The Reconciliation Road Map is preoccupied with accounting for the past, managing the present and planning for the future. Unlike the visioning project, the Road Map involves transitional justice as it attempts to address issues of reparations, memorialization and establishing a functioning traditional dispute resolution architecture.

Generally, both processes are somewhat separated by the hardware components of the visioning process—economic transformation of Liberia. Otherwise, the strategic point of convergence remains the software—social transformation of the country, culminating in a reconciled Liberia. Reconciliation as defined in the Road Map is “a multidimensional process of overcoming social, political and religious cleavages, mending and transforming relationship, healing the physical and psychological wounds from the civil war, as well as confronting and addressing historical wrongs including the structural root causes of conflicts in Liberia.” In November 2012 the processes in these conceptual documents will be launched at an historic conference that will gather Liberians from all walks of life, including the Diaspora.

For a country as divided as Liberia, the tasks set out for achieving the goals are as daunting as the goals themselves. The things that stand between the “Road Map” and the “National Visioning Project” are lessons learned from the TRC process (and final report), the political will to carry on and implement recommendations, and the uncertainty that implementation will address historic falsehoods and inadequate accounts of the country’s origin. Despite a poorly organized final report, the process of the TRC generated and archived rich and powerful materials. If nothing, the report stands out as the repository of victims’ voices and documentation of Liberia’s complex history. Until the political elite can transcend a “politics of fear” and find the courage and will to support aspects of the Road Map and Visioning that have strong links with the TRC recommendations, both processes will at best remain symbolic and at worst intangible to hard realities of postwar Liberia. And finally, until remembrance can grapple with the complexity of the origins of the Liberian state and deconstruct a history of dominance by one social group over the other, the present will be dominated by the past and the future will remain unpredictable.

Liberia’s Two Social Groups: Settlers and Indigenous

People

The study of Liberia's history is a complex one. Is Liberia truly Africa's first independent country? Or was the country colonized by the American Colonization Society (ACS), an American non-governmental organization? Certainly, there are no straight forward answers to these questions. However, amidst a complex history, the study is made simpler by understanding the formation of the state, the two social groups that inhabited it in 1822 and the relationship that ensued thereafter.

While the ACS was nonprofit, non-governmental, and philanthropic in nature, its mission was political, with religious manifestations. Within this quasi-nongovernmental design, the repatriation of freed slaves was an exploratory project with a coherent set of objectives. The basic goals and objectives were, among others, to minimize the possibility of racial amalgamation back in the United States and to provide an opportunity for freedom in Africa. It also offered freed slaves a platform to experiment with the expansion of western civilization through which Christianity would be imposed on West African shores. Though it seems the settlers had a pretty clear mandate, the way in which this mandate would eventually impact the indigenous social order was uncertain. African values, belief system, and cultural practices characterized the existing social order. Though indigenous societies were not themselves homogenous, they were symbiotic, whereby various ethnic strands and autonomous social groupings tried to co-exist. The way of life was communal and the order of governance gravitated more toward elders and the rule of chieftaincy. Culture and tradition were not alien. Not surprisingly, settlers' clashed with the prevailing order. Their arrival also disrupted local governance systems. What followed was an asymmetrical social and political relationship out of which Liberia emerged as a nation state.^[1]

The origin of the state was fraught with many contradictions. With the support of the ACS, Liberia was declared independent in 1847. But how Liberia came to be a sovereign nation was not a consultative process between the two existing social groups. Throughout the constitutional convention and other processes of nation building that laid the groundwork for the declaration of independence, indigenous societies were alienated, marginalized, and systematically excluded from the process of governance. Political participation was limited, the economy was controlled, and structural violence was introduced. This form of violence was systemically rooted in the social structure and its institutions that harmed people by

preventing them from meeting their basic needs. Taxes were demanded without reciprocal social returns and citizenship was denied until 1904.

Not only did the settler's manifest mission result in deep social cleavages, it also created foundational legends along with national symbols, insignia, and a widespread pattern of western-style names in public spaces that symbolized the settler's occupation and triumph over their indigenous compatriots. Culturally, this structural violence suppressed and pushed the values and symbols of the indigenous social group to the brink of extinction. The settler's manifest mission was at the core of societal dissonance and was at the center of later agitation by indigenous groups to bring an end to repression by opening up the space for broader cultural and political participation in the hope that values and symbols would either be reformed or at least allowed to co-exist. Until 1980, there was barely any record of ethnic violence in Liberia.^[2] On April 12, 1980, a violent social change ended the rule of the settlers' oligarchy, which had lasted for 133 years. Orchestrated by seventeen lower ranking members of the military, all of them of indigenous stock, the coup was led by Master Sergeant Samuel Doe. Many saw the military takeover as true independence for all Liberians.^[3] Indeed, it was an opportunity for historical clarification and a timely period to integrate the two groups, both culturally and politically.

But the celebration was short lived as the military regime started to imitate the very system it had overthrown.^[4] From what appeared to be a simple dichotomy of settler versus indigenous societies, politics and participation shifted within the indigenous ranks and became ethnicized. Doe's ethnic group, the Krahn, was privileged over all others. Frustration and contempt with the system started but were often quelled by ethnic purges and other repressive tactics. Against mounting pressure to open up the space and in a desperate attempt to hold on to power, Doe stacked his government and military with more ethnic Krahns, particularly those from the Gbobo and Konobo clan.^[5] In 1985, a coup attempt was staged to unseat Doe, but it was foiled. The coup was led by General Thomas Quiwomkpa, one of the seventeen indigenous soldiers who overthrew the settlers' oligarchy. Quiwomkpa was an ethnic Gio. The failed coup triggered a widespread systematic purge against ethnic Gios and Mano of Nimba, the native land of the coup leader. Quiwomkpa's failed coup against Doe was reportedly staged out of frustration, protesting the betrayal of the ideals and purpose of the 1980 military coup that had removed from power the settlers' oligarchy. When the coup failed, Quiwomkpa was arrested and

killed. Doe and Quiwomkpa had previously been friends and comrades-in-arms during the military takeover in April 1980.^[6]

This was the context that gave rise to the implosion of Liberia on December 24, 1989, when Charles Taylor launched an insurgency against Doe. Charles Taylor, a Liberian of both settler and indigenous parentage, fled the country a few years earlier over allegations of corruption. Following a dramatic turn of events in the United States, including a mysterious prison break, he returned to Liberia as rebel leader of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL). He mobilized Gio and Mano militia with grievances against Doe and ethnic Krahn as a strategy of recruitment. Mandingoes, another Liberian ethnicity, were also targeted and killed for their perceived favorable proximity to Doe's government and their overwhelming Islamic persuasion. Though the Liberian constitution recognized and stipulated that the state is secular, there was and continues to be an assumption that the nation was built on Christian principles, the result of which was a low tolerance for Islamic faith. Indeed, this assumption remains one of the foundational falsehoods on which the state has been erected. Following nearly fifteen years of destructive civil war that claimed the lives of a quarter million people and after several failed attempts to broker a peaceful solution to the conflict, on August 18, 2003, a Comprehensive Peace Accord was signed in Accra, Ghana. In stark contrast to all thirteen previous peace agreements, Accra stands out as fundamentally different because of its commitment to reform and to account for past wrongs. And it chose to pursue this new path through a truth commission, a component of the transitional justice field.^[7]

Transitional Justice and Post-Conflict Liberia

Just as transitional justice is nascent to the field of human rights, so too is its practice and application in post-conflict Liberia. Transitional justice work actually began in Liberia in 2004, several months after the signing of the Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA).^[8] It evolved when the National Transitional Government created the first Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), known as TRC-1. Liberian civil society rejected this commission and agitated for reconstitution because of limited consultation among key stakeholders, particularly civil society groups.^[9] A two-day consultative forum was organized to address the impasse that ensued. The forum brought together commissioners of the embattled TRC-1, members of the Transitional Legislative Assembly, officials of the

Transitional Government, members of United Nations Mission in Liberia, and members of international organizations including the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ). The ICTJ's participation at this forum was focused on providing comparative experience and lessons learned from truth commissions elsewhere. Applicable standards and ethics were stressed and mistakes to be avoided were emphasized.^[10] TRC-1 was eventually dissolved. The second commission, TRC-2, was constituted by an act of the legislature and inaugurated in 2006.^[11] It was mandated to conduct a critical review of Liberia's historical past, aiming to establish and give recognition to historical truths in order to address the falsehoods and misconceptions of the past relating to the nation's socio-economic and political development.^[12] In search of truth, the commission launched a massive search for information through various means, including statement-taking and public hearings. Over 20,000 statements were collected, including 800 testimonies provided by witnesses heard in Liberia and the United States. From the enormity of data collected, the commission wrote its final report and formulated over 120 recommendations. Central to them are the establishment of an extraordinary tribunal and a domestic criminal court to prosecute. The report also recommends a reprieve from prosecution for thirty-eight individuals who admitted to committing heinous crimes but showed remorse. Further, forty-nine individuals, including President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf are recommended to be lustrated from public life for 30 years.^[13] The report was to be a catalyst for enhancing post-war reconciliation, but, instead, it heightened the dichotomous relationship between ordinary Liberians and the ruling political elite.^[14] On the one hand some ordinary people are calling for full implementation, while on the other some of the political elites want the report quashed.^[15]

Importance of Remembering the Past

Indeed, because of controversy surrounding the final TRC report, public focus has shifted away from other crucial recommendations, such as reparations for war victims and post-conflict memorialization. The report recommends that memorial sites be built in the capital of each county as well as every site of a mass burial. The report also has recommended that a befitting grave be erected with a tomb to honor the memory and tragic death of two of Liberia's Presidents: William Tolbert and Samuel Doe. If pursued, these memorials would evoke an interesting symbolism involving Liberia's two social groups. Tolbert, of settler origin, was assassinated during the April 12, 1980, military takeover, while Doe, a Krahn, was captured and killed by Prince Johnson's Independent National Patriotic Front of

Liberia.^[16] Johnson is now senior senator of Nimba County. For nearly thirty years the whereabouts of the corpses of the two former presidents have been unknown; however, it has been rumored that Tolbert's corpse was cannibalized for ritualistic purposes and Doe's body was initially buried but later exhumed and cremated. The rumor surrounding the disposal of Doe's corpse is rooted in Liberian spirituality. It was believed that Doe had great spiritual power, and, if allowed to be buried without cremation, he could have reappeared in a spiritual form and waged unspeakable havoc on Johnson's men.^[17]

The underlying goal of post-conflict memorialization is to represent the past in ways that deter future aggression, hostility, and repression. This is exactly what many Liberians are craving—that violence remain locked in the past. In the last few decades, memorial has increasingly become a component of the struggle for social justice. But in Liberia, was there any glory in the struggle (if the civil war can even be referred to as such)?

As a survivor of the civil war, a Liberian of indigenous parentage, enlightened about the dissonance between settlers and indigenous groups, when the war was over, I was uncertain about how post-war sites of massacres and mass graves would be remembered. And so when I went into the field to identify and examine memorials, monuments, or markers of any type commemorating mass atrocities, I was eager to track patterns. I was also keen on uncovering hidden messages that victims' communities were trying to communicate to the public and the meaning these messages could have for national politics, as memorials can be a powerful forms of truth telling.

From urban Liberia to its rural parts, I inventoried over two dozen sites of massacres and mass graves and visited and engaged with three memorial sites. There I observed some patterns. The idea of remembering the past was locally driven with active community involvement and little outside prompting. Women played key roles in the process of memorialization from the consultative stage up to completion. Those memorials were dedicated to the memory of ordinary Liberians (as a collective, see case studies that follow) who were massacred or buried in a mass grave. Some of the motivation behind the need to remember is based on spiritual belief. In the communities surrounding all three memorial sites, dreams about those who were massacred repeatedly occurred to residents. The message from these dreams was clear: "We [the dead] don't want to be forgotten."

Based on my observations, I reached the conclusion that though the war was waged on

ethnic platforms, ethnicity's leverage is more a strategy than an ideology. The evolving pattern of postwar memorial is that memorials are dedicated to community rather than to individuals who participated in the violence. In effect, community activists refused to allow memorials to be used as a tool to canonize self-declared ethnic heroes. In Liberia the war was waged on a pretext of ethnicity, as an act of liberating the country from repression and bad governance, while in actuality, the conflict was about wealth and power. Ethnicity was a vehicle to achieving power.

At the national level, places are being transformed through commemorative means. Post Stockade and Belleh Yallah prisons are shining examples. In 2007, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf ordered Post Stockade and Belleh Yallah closed. This was an effort aimed at preserving posterity, as these prisons were used as places of torture during more than 130 years of rule by the Settler Oligarchy, as well as during the military regime of the 1980s. In the same light, Camp Shefflin military barracks was renamed in honor of Edward Beyan Kesselly, an indigenous Liberian and founder of the ruling Unity Party.^[18] In 2008, Professor Sakui Malakpa, serving as National Orator of Liberia's 161st Independence Day, called for the renaming of Monrovia as a means of breaking with the past, arguing that the city's name serves as a symbol of a nation dominated by the aspirations of the settlers, to the exclusion of their indigenous compatriots. He also called for national languages and culture to be integrated into school curricula as an attempt to capture a common Liberian identity as part of the country's post-war transformational process.

Liberia's 165 years of existence has been fraught with repression and violence, most of which has revolved around the dissonance between settler Liberians and their indigenous compatriots, resulting in the nihilistic civil conflict that destroyed about 250,000 lives. Remembering and memorializing such a past is no small feat, and remains one of the major challenges that must be grappled with as part of post-war recovery efforts. Many issues require close examination: Can the past only be truly remembered by tearing down monuments, relics, and foundational legends that are not inclusive of the aspirations of all Liberians? Should there be attempts to redesign insignia (or relics) that do not reflect inclusion or collective makeup? Or, rather than destroying and starting again, should one simply seek new opportunities for memorializing? If post-war reconciliation is the microcosm of how the past is represented in the present, should there be a space for contradictory historical narratives to coexist side-by-side? And if so, should we discourage

the design of memorials or monuments that cast aspersions on ethnic, religious, or warring groups perceived to be responsible for committing certain acts? In an attempt to understand some of these questions, we must first deconstruct the “memoryscape” of Liberia.

Inventory of the Memoryscape

Memoryscape is a concept that describes the memory universe in Liberia. Structures comprising this universe include places, street names, sites of massacres, mass graves, symbols and foundational legends. These places can be either visible or invisible as component parts of the memoryscape. Both the visible and invisible markers tell a story about what happened or provide an historical interpretation (or context) to some of the root causes of the Liberian conflict. Woven together the markers capture the public imagination about what has happened, revealing the source of peoples’ pain, agitation, and desire for accountability. Understanding this sphere of post-war Liberia is an attempt to grapple with the demand for both official and unofficial forms of memorialization.

In 2008, the ICTJ Liberia Program conducted a research project, taking inventory of the memoryscape in Monrovia. This was the first wave of the research project, which had three aims: first, to document issues of memorial significance through investigating national symbols, relics or insignias, particularly focusing on the dominance of western-style names in prominent public spaces and buildings; second, to investigate if and how Liberians want to remember their past, especially those who stayed in communities where mass atrocities occurred; and third, to uncover laws or policies regulating the naming of public spaces and buildings (this final aim is beyond the scope of this paper and will not be discussed further).

For more qualitative assessment and profiling of these places, we designed three categories for the inventory exercise. The first is termed *visible places that are invisible*—these are streets and public spaces that are unnoticeable and about which no one cares. Mechlin Street, located in downtown Monrovia, provides a paradigmatic example of this category. Mechlin Street was named in memory of colonist Joseph Mechlin of the American Colonization Society (ACS), but few people know or care about him today. Who he was and what he did that may have impacted the formation of modern day Liberia do not come to mind when walking down the street.

The second category is termed *invisible places that are visible*. Unlike the above-mentioned

category, these are places that are unmarked, yet everyone knows where they are and what they mean. Many of these places researched are linked to memories of ethnic violence committed during the war. God Bless You Gate, forming the intersection between Paynesville and Dupont Road, lying within the eastern district of Monrovia, is but one example. The name is misleading as it tends to imply a manifestly religious place. Nearly everyone who passed through this military checkpoint was compelled to demonstrate proof of his or her ethnicity, either by an ID or an ability to speak the appropriate language. Rebel fighters also claimed they had spiritual charms that could detect one's ethnicity. In this quagmire of "guilty until proven innocent," civilians who were not lucky enough to get past these traps were simply executed. Since survival here depended largely on chance and fate, it was dubbed God Bless You Gate. Today God Bless You Gate is an ordinary place, a taxi and bus stand where pedestrians wait to catch a taxi or bus ride. Though there is no physical marker indicating the horrors that took place, the site is vividly remembered. The majority of those executed at this check point were ethnic Krahn and former officials of Doe's administration.

The last category is termed *visible places that are visible*. This was the main purpose of the inventory exercise. These are places, symbols, and relics that immediately evoke memories of the past when encountered. It also means people notice them, care about them, disagree or are angry about them. Our main task was to do an inventory, analyze these names and sites and assess them. Examples include names of stadiums, major streets, national symbols, and sites of massacres, especially those that people remember and have strong feelings about. When we focused on the history and meaning behind the naming of particular places and symbols, we wanted to know, for instance, what ordinary people thought about Antoinette Tubman Stadium (named in honor of the wife of Liberia's longest serving president, William V. S. Tubman).

Similarly, the national seal or motto is an important reference in the inventory of the memoryscape. First its pictorial content is telling: it depicts a sailing vessel approaching the coast—a palm tree, a plow, a spade on the shore, a dove on the wing with an open scroll in its claws, and the sun just emerging from the waters. Above the emblem is the national motto "The love of liberty brought us here." And beneath it the words "Republic of Liberia." The symbols of the seal are obvious: a peace-bringing bird—the dove—arrives with a message from the United States of America, granting independence. The ship represents the arrival of the colonists, as does the national motto—"The love of liberty

brought us here.” The spade and the plough also refer to the colonists, as these are the tools they brought with them to build a new society. From the wording to iconic representation, the seal is a divisive symbol that celebrates only one side of a dual heritage. Aside from representing one side, it represents the whole history as one in which a foreign minority arrives on African shores to bring enlightenment.

In numerous places, raw evidence of war in Liberia is indelible. Two of the most notable are St Peter’s Lutheran Church and the Bakedu massacre site. These are prominent markers on the country’s post-war landscape because they strike at the pulse of both ethnic and religious violence. Thus, how these places are remembered is integral to addressing ethnic and religious post-war reconciliation.

Until September 2005, John Dayen was living proof of the horror of the massacre at St Peter’s. He lost both his legs, amputated above the knee (leaving two odd-looking stumps), his aunt, his sister, and other relatives. I got to know him when the Don Bosco mission of the Catholic Church organized a hostel for young boys living under difficult circumstances, referring to boys who were either orphaned as a result of the mayhem of war or those whose parents were unable to provide for them due to the economic hardship imposed by the war. He and I were direct beneficiaries of this program, using both school aid and welfare programs. While living together for many years, he would tell stories about the night of the massacre and how he got shot in the legs. I learned later the context under which it all occurred.

In mid-1990, when ethnicity in the Liberian crisis was highly politicized and systematic killings were common (ethnic Krahn on the one hand and Gios and Manos on the other), members of these groups sought safety where it was most assured. In Monrovia, Gios and Manos fleeing ethnic purges sought refuge in several established Internal Displaced Persons (IDP) centers, including St. Peter’s Lutheran Church. Although there was a looming terror, people felt more secure within the walls of the church. After all, St Peter’s was not an ordinary IDP center but a church compound; Liberia is a religious society and the majority of its people are Christian.

On July 29 and 30, 1990, this notion of sanctity was shattered when a horrific massacre was perpetrated by marauding ethnic Krahn militias. Some 600 people were murdered, including women, children, and the elderly.^[19] Charles Taylor’s father, Nelson Philip Taylor, who

was also an IDP, was among those killed.^[20] On the question of why such an unspeakable horror happened, several factors emerge. One viewpoint asserts that ethnic and political violence in the early 1990s made the Lutheran Church an easy target, because, out of a total of nearly 2,000 IDPs, St. Peter's was believed to be housing the single largest concentration of Gios and Manos. Other accounts contend that knowledge of Taylor's father^[21] at the IDP Center emboldened ethnic Krahn militias to carry out mayhem, for it was an opportunity to eliminate two birds with one stone.^[22] The last viewpoint attempts to make the massacre justifiable from a strategic point of view.

One might presume that the daily lives of IDPs within the walls of St Peter's were haunted by fear and anxiety. But there were other competing emotions: lust and pleasure. While others were praying, some were smoking and having sex on the altar of God, according to Pastor Peter Paye, former senior pastor of St. Peter's. He disclosed further that attempts to discourage these acts of abomination proved futile. In fact, he recalls a revelation by Pastor Nyumah Tyee, resident pastor of St. Peter's at the time, who was also killed during the massacre. In the revelation, Tyee foretold the IDPs that a massacre was imminent but indicated that a Passover was certain so long as IDPs reverted to the ways of God and respected his Holy place. Without this change, he had said the destruction of people was inescapable. A few of the IDPs took the message seriously and fled the church. Others who dismissed it and termed it a moral hoax remained and suffered unspeakable horror. Paye argues that the massacre was a function of God's wrath against mankind for the act of debauchery in a holy church rather than the consequence of ethnic politics gone amok. For him, Ezekiel 22:30-31 and other biblical references discuss the consequences of God's wrath and remain the foundational basis for his argument.

The viewpoint here tends to raise the stakes of morality over real threats of ethnic and political violence in Liberia. Sadly, John Dayen, himself an ethnic Gio who had always wanted to tell his story, died less than five months before the TRC was inaugurated. Yet by complete accident, Jerome Verdier, now an elder of St. Peter's Church would be selected to lead the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and would uncover the truth of this incident among many others.

In reciprocal actions, the Gio- and Mano-led National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) massacred over 500 Muslims and placed the severed head of an imam on the Koran in a town called Bakedu. The majority, if not all, of the Muslims slaughtered are believed to

have been ethnic Mandingoes. Muslims and Mandingoes in general were perceived to be strong supporters of President Samuel Doe, an ethnic Krahn. Today, families of victims and the Islamic community in Bakedu, and all of Liberia in general, commemorate this incident by feasting and celebrating, atoning and healing for both the dead and surviving relatives.

The memory of the St. Peter's Lutheran Church incident continues to linger. Victims and survivors of this massacre are organized into a group called Lutheran Massacre and Survivors Association (LUMASA). In 2008, they appeared on the national scene, seeking reparations in an effort to restore their dignity. The burgeoning advocacy of this group has inspired the formation of Liberia's biggest victims group, Liberia Massacre and Survivors Association (LIMASA). In honor of the victims, St. Peter's Church holds an annual requiem mass on July 29. At the nineteenth anniversary celebration of the massacre, the church launched a fund drive, partly to support victims financially and partly to construct a shrine that would serve as a place for mourning and reflection. When the memorial shrine is built, it will have to coexist alongside an existing memorial—the Philip Nelson Taylor Memorial. During Charles Taylor's regime, his family members erected a memorial on the premises of the church compound in memory of his father. Though not a Gio or a Mano, he sought refuge at St Peter's Lutheran Church.

Investigating How Liberian Communities Commemorate the Past

The second wave of the inventory exercise began in July 2010, exactly one year after the TRC released its final report. This second wave focused on sites of massacres and mass graves listed in the TRC final report. Over one hundred massacre sites are listed, and sixty-four of these sites are presently under review. The research began in October 2010 and ended in July 2011. These sites are located mostly in the western and eastern part of the country, including Bomi, Bong, Grand Cape Mount, Gbapolu, and Margibi Counties. Before the main research, we launched a pilot memoryscape project in Bong County in which six sites of massacre were studied. Operating in a post-TRC context, we had to shift our objectives to fit the changing national dynamics. Primary among the objectives of the study was to develop a profile of victims' communities, reflecting how many people were killed and how the communities want to remember the massacre. Characteristic elements of the profile include understanding victims' attitudes toward remembering mass atrocities and

identifying gaps for intervention. Through this means, we explored the linkages between how the past is remembered and how this memory may promote peacebuilding and community reconstruction in rural Liberia.

To gather data on victims' attitudes in a community, we employed the following research methods: 1) Two focus group discussions were held at each massacre site involving residents and former TRC county coordinators; 2) Three targeted informant interviews were held, involving key stakeholders and persons with considerable knowledge of the community's history and the incident under study; and 3) Field research was conducted with elders, youth, and women. The latter method was applied only in Bong County.

Prior to the rural Liberia inventory project, we were informed about an exemplary creative memorial initiative—Samay Memorial. This memorial is in many ways the flagship for community memorial initiatives in Liberia because of the compelling story and energy that was put into it. Though still a work in progress, the Duport Road memorial project is another example that sheds light on consensus building and the effect of community participation on post-conflict memorialization. The third is Kpolokpala where a reported 700 persons were brutally massacred. Below are three case studies developed around Samay Memorial, Kpolokpala and the on-going Duport Road Memorial project.

Case Studies

Duport Road Memorial. This community was among the worst affected during the Liberian conflict. It was the scene of two horrific massacres and is the site of several mass graves. In 1990, the Charles Taylor-led National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) allegedly arrested, tortured, and summarily executed many people perceived to belong to the Krahn ethnic group. Most of the killings were carried out at the end of Duport Road known as the Waterside. Some of those killed here were first arrested at the God Bless You Gate. Four years later, the community was attacked again. In December 1994, more than forty-four people were massacred, allegedly by forces of the NPFL, this time at a location on Duport Road known as the Cow Field. The victims included men, women, children, and the elderly. At the edge of the Waterside area, a physical marker was erected in honor of those killed. The marker is a signpost made out of a corrugated metal barrel. In dimension, it is a plain flat surface, approximately two feet high, painted with a white background. Printed in black

against the white background and emblazoned in bold letters are these commemorative words: “Innocent Victims of the Liberian Civil War, 1990, killed because of the tribe they belong to.” Due to neglect, this signpost fell into disrepair.

In 2008, some elders of Duport Road met with the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) for direct technical assistance to improve upon earlier efforts and to gain knowledge from comparative examples on how best to remember the past. In partnership with the Memory Resource Group (MRG), a local coalition with expertise in post-conflict memorials, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission conducted a three-day training workshop. The purpose of the training was to facilitate an intra-community consultation whereby consensus over how to remember the past would be reached. Though the consultation revealed a preference for building a memorial hospital in honor of victims, the erection of a monument as a second choice was the final decision, primarily due to the prohibitively high cost of building and maintaining a hospital. To agree on the features and shape of the monument, a special work session was arranged for elders and key stakeholders of Duport Road Community. An independent architect and a fine artist volunteered their services at this meeting.

After the discussion, the artist captured the sketch exactly as described by community residents. If eventually built, the memorial would be an imposing structure, depicting a familiar scene of internally displaced people fleeing the fighting in 1990, a sadly typical scene in the community around that time. It was also a scene of horror and mayhem. At the apex of the monument would be a family: a man, his wife cradling a little child, and their two other children drawing close. On his right shoulder is a quilt and on his left a bundle of family belongings. The couple is seated on a rock and the expression on their faces is one of sorrow, grief, and uncertainty. Both the man and his wife are weeping and so are their children. At the bottom of the monument is depicted a six-foot-deep bunker. On both sides of it are drawings of torture and death in various shapes and forms. The size of the entire creation would be twenty feet in length by ten feet in width. The monument is expected to be built on the site of the mass grave that is a roundabout measuring one and a half acres. The idea is to recreate a psychological picture of what happened at Duport Road and how it felt going through interrogation at the God Bless You check point. According to the elders, it is intended to facilitate mourning and deep reflection. It is their hope that by these reflections, the idea of considering violence as a means of conflict resolution would be

discouraged. This sketch was eventually transformed into a technical drawing and a budget in the amount of US\$15,875 was set. Today, the Duport Road community has launched a fund drive to raise this money in order to erect the monument.

Samay Memorial.^[23] Like most other communities in Liberia, Samay was not spared the atrocities of the country's civil crisis. From the beginning of the conflict, given its proximity to Gbarnga (Taylor's base), Samay was one of the many towns that fell under the control of the NPFL. Samay experienced its worst suffering while under direct attack, allegedly by Liberia Peace Council (LPC) soldiers in October 1994. By that time, NPFL had launched a military campaign to reclaim control of Gbarnga, and Samay became victim of that effort on the night of October 22, 1994. Believing that Samay either posed a specific threat or harbored enemy sympathizers, alleged LPC soldiers attacked the town in the night, shooting indiscriminately and setting many buildings on fire. Twenty-seven residents were killed as a result of the attack on the town, and others were shot and killed while fleeing to surrounding villages. Other community members were later killed in other places as a direct result of the conflict, and by 2001 the community had lost thirty-seven members to the war.

In 2001, a few years after the election of President Charles Taylor, the community decided to commemorate the horrific events of October 1994. Two reasons led to this decision. First, those massacred were repeatedly appearing in the dreams of townspeople, making appeals not to be forgotten. In one of the dreams, it was indicated that the town would win no further football games, a local passion, if the massacre was forgotten. Second, the town believed that future generations needed a way to learn from the horrors of the civil war so that they would be less inclined to repeat them. With a collective decision reached to commemorate those who died, the elders of Samay sought approval from the local government to ensure that their memorial would not have political implications. In 2001, Charles Taylor was President of Liberia and the community feared the plan would be denied because it was politically sensitive and could trigger questions of accountability. In their consultation, the communities were assured that the project would remain neutral and apolitical.

A committee was first established in January 2001 and mandated to plan the monument and coordinate fundraising to implement the project. In consultation with community members, the committee decided to construct a monument to remember those who had died. The targeted budget for the project was LD\$52,000, the equivalent of US\$1,040. To raise these

funds, a community rice farm project was launched and the initial harvest generated proceeds of approximately LD\$7,600. To raise the outstanding portion of the budget, community members made individual financial contributions, both in-kind and cash gifts. In addition, women volunteered by gathering and crushing rocks to erect the monument. The women also offered to clear a site for construction and keep it clean. Craftsmen and materials were brought from Gbarnga and by December 2001 the project was successfully completed.

The final monument is a large cross, approximately ten feet tall and ten feet wide, with a depth of three feet, hidden in the jungle of central Liberia in a remote Kpelleh-speaking village. The site is a one-and-a-half hour drive from Gbarnga, Bong County, situated between Kokoyah and Jourquellh districts. Inscribed on the front are the words “In loving memory of our late fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters who died as a result of the Liberian civil crisis.” Inscribed below it are the names of thirty-seven community members killed during the conflict. Names of the committee members who worked on this project are inscribed on the back of the cross.

Since 2001 the town continues to engage with the site in a variety of ways. On Decoration Day (a public holiday in honor of the dead), the town gathers to mourn those who died. During the regular school year, teachers send their students to conduct research at the site by listing the names, dates, and causes of death of those who died. Women of the community maintain the site and keep it neat.

Recently, the community received funding support from the Open Society Initiative through the Transitional Justice Working Group (TJWG) to build a Palava Hut adjacent to the monument. Palava Huts in Liberia are traditional spaces in which to mediate and resolve communal disputes. Aside from its traditional function, it would serve as a new democratic space for dialogue, a museum to store artifacts, and a center of learning for children who would benefit from knowing about the horrors of violent conflict and the value of non-repetition. Since 2008, Samay has been fundraising to build this project. In 2010, ICTJ organized a meeting that brought together three victims’ communities to share their experiences and to expose their work to donor bodies who might be interested in working directly with affected communities. Today Samay in collaboration the TJWG and with funding support from the Open Society Initiative for West Africa have constructed a modern day Palava Hut.

Kpolokpala Memorial. In 1994, Kpolokpala community was burned down during the infamous Fall of Gbarnga and over 600 people were reportedly massacred, desecrating the land and contaminating drinking water with large amounts of blood from victims.

According to the elders of the community, the number of people killed was astronomical by any standard of culture and tradition. To commemorate those massacred, the community opted to dig a well and install a hand pump instead of a static monument. For them, a well and pump would serve as a constant reminder of the dead while providing an alternative source of safe drinking water. Like Samay, Kpolokpala received similar funding support from OSIWA through the TJWG and the community has successfully completed the construction of the monument.

Conclusion

The origin of Liberia is a function of the way in which two social groups with distinct heritages came together in a terrific clash, one emerging as conqueror over the other. On a larger scale and in a chain of subsequent historical events, the origin of Liberia was problematic. Not surprisingly, scholars writing on Liberia's socio-political and economic development have often attributed the root cause of the conflict to the construction of the state. Since the national visioning retrospective makes a similar determination (among four other dominant variables), the support for this view is overwhelming. While I don't disagree with this determination, I have added a second root cause: "ethnicization" of political governance in Liberia.

Unlike theorists positing the primordial development of Africa as the basis for continued hostilities across the continent, the context in Liberia is different and distinctive in many respects. Ethnicity in this context should be understood as a political strategy that was leveraged toward achieving set goals. Proponents of the "new barbarism theory," who have often cast African civil wars in the vortex of an unending cycle of violence as indicator of a people unable to self govern, lack deep appreciation of context and nuanced understanding of political violence in Liberia. Ethnicity (and to some extent religion) was used by elites as a method or means in a wider political calculation where wealth accumulation and power were the ultimate goal and motivation of the instigators of the violence. In general, however, ethnicity and religion were not strong mobilizing ideologies on which the war was

fought and sustained. Closer reading of Liberian history is further instructive in that until the 1980 military takeover, little else is known about ethnic and religious violence. Further, the drastic reduction in pattern of what appeared to be ethnically motivated killings veered in different directions shortly after the implosion of the civil war. Fighters who were previously ethnically aligned with particular groups shifted sides many times, as soldiers of fortune illustrate the point of a war fought primarily to enrich the grand designers.

Thus, understanding the root cause of the Liberian conflict is essential for our analysis of the memoryscape. The end of the civil war in 1980 not only broke with 133 years of settlers' dominance, it ushered in the first indigenous administration and initiated a new memoryscape, and so it remains a critical point of reference. Accordingly the post-1980 memory universe reveals markers of indigenous administration, ethnic-based massacres and mass graves, attempts to change western style names and new narratives in which indigenous intelligentsia are asserting themselves as liberators. The pre-1980 memoryscape shows markers that are general reflections of the settlers' colonizing mission, which was in effect a blueprint to Christianize and civilize indigenous tribes of West Africa.

While Liberia has experienced different waves of transition (from settler to indigenous rule, authoritarian regime to civil war, and, in 2003, to a new democratic order), reforms that would clarify or review the historicity of myths, foundational legends, markers, and names in public and civic spaces were never really conducted. By implication, this means that the ideology on which Liberia's history is erected remains intact: namely that the settler minority arrived on the shores of Liberia and brought civilization and enlightenment to a benighted race. By default, one side of Liberia's dual heritage continues to be the official version of history. The symbolism of this historic expression is poignantly reflected in how streets and cities were named, how national orders were designed, and the motivation behind awards to a select few individuals.

To affirm pluralism as a characteristic of Liberians' national identity will require a shift from an identity founded in a single cultural heritage that promotes only one side of history to a more inclusive historical narrative. Not only does such a move require a large measure of political will but also a serious and thoughtful response to a complicated question: If post-war reconciliation is the microcosm of how the past is represented in the present, should there be space for contradictory historical narratives to coexist side-by-side?

Answering this question requires, in particular, a debate on what to do with the national

seal. In another article I discuss public markers; there I examined the debate over the seal as a potential source of reconciliation, which generated vigorous responses and a healthy exchange of views. Some were against changing the seal primarily because of the financial and economic implications and the need to redesign everything that bears the seal. Literally it would require changing every Liberian passport, as the seal is emblazoned on it, as well as every legal tender note. The other view generated by the article supports a change of the seal, for a post-war economy, supporters respond, is not as simple as the financial implications suggest. What is the alternative then? Could a solution be to allow the renaming of places and the redesign of a national order that honors eminent indigenous people?

Lessons from elsewhere have shown that when an opportunity to address historical wrongs is provided, it often yields mixed results. Historically, suppressed groups often seek not only inclusion into the new narrative but additional opportunity to tear down relics and legends in which they were denied representation. Inasmuch as such an approach promotes broader participation, it imitates the practices of exclusion, thereby perpetrating the cycle of single group dominance. Rather than tearing down relics of the past on grounds of historical clarification and social justice, the key to post-conflict demoralization is to strike a delicate balance between maintaining a previously dominant group whilst promoting inclusion of marginalized groups. Similarly, the redesign of symbols and markers for the purpose of inclusion remains an attractive possibility. The challenge however, is to manage public perception over how such a process occurs. It is key to seek new opportunities to remember the past rather than tearing down old markers. Leaving behind a trail of old markers maintains a memory of people's pain and anguish, but in the interest of posterity and pedagogy, society benefits more. In summary, both pre-1980 memoryscape and post-1980 project markers are exclusive and destructive. The former is dominated by one group ideology and history of conquest while the other is littered with markers of ethno-religious violence. For historical clarification, pre-1980 memoryscape work will require a great deal of political will and commitment to follow through on processes such as the national visioning and the TRC final report. The challenge with pre-1980 is essentially about re-writing history where all Liberians are reflected in ways that promote greater integration, inclusiveness and an enhanced sense of nationhood. The National Visioning Process and Reconciliation Road project seem well placed to do much of this.

Unlike pre-1980 Liberia, post-1980 Liberia is less ideological, where the former places of destruction are now communities and villages scattered across the country. Much of the transformation of such memoryscape will require drawing on the lessons of the war, so that the likelihood of what happened then will not happen again. As demonstrated in the case studies, victims' communities are already playing creative roles in transforming sites of massacres and mass graves into new postwar spaces of activity and usefulness. In partnership with the central government, a new Liberian identity can be formed. Ethnic diversity can be maintained *and* celebrated, and cultural differences can be embraced, ultimately forming the mosaic of Liberia. Until such a mosaic can be created that reflects the heritages of traditional African and Islamic peoples along with freed slaves, the memoryscape will remain rife with pain and anguish, always demanding more accounting.

1. 1. Amos Sawyer, *The Emergence of Autocracy in Liberia: Tragedy and Challenge* (San Francisco, CA: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1992).
2. 2. Bill Berkeley, *The Graves Are Not Yet Full: Race, Tribe and Power in the Heart of Africa* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).
3. 3. J. Gus Liebenow, *Liberia: The Quest for Democracy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).
4. 4. Elwood D. Dunn, "The Civil War in Liberia," in *Civil Wars in Africa: Roots and Resolution*, edited by Taisier M. Ali and Robert O. Matthews (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999; Bill Berkeley, *The Graves Are Not Yet Full: Race, Tribe and Power in the Heart of Africa* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).
5. 5. Stephen Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy: The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of an African Civil War*, 2nd ed. (Washington Square, NY: New York Univ. Press, 2006).
6. 6. Joseph Saye Guannu, in *War to Peace Transition: Conflict Prevention and Peace Building in Liberia*, edited by Kenneth Omeje (New York and Toronto, University Press of America, 2009).
7. 7. Accra Comprehensive Peace Accord, 2003.
8. 8. Aaron C. Sleh, Samuel G. Toe, and Aaron B. Weah, *Impunity under Attack: The Evolution and Imperatives of the Liberian Truth Commission* (Monrovia, Liberia, and Silver Spring, MD: Civic Initiative, 2008), 99-102.

9. 9. Priscilla B. Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths: Transitional Justice and the Challenge of Truth Commissions* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011).
10. 10. Aaron C. Sleh, Samuel G. Toe, and Aaron B. Weah, *Impunity under Attack: The Evolution and Imperatives of the Liberian Truth Commission* (Monrovia, Liberia and Silver Spring, MD: Civic Initiative, 2008).
11. 11. Aaron C. Sleh, Samuel G. Toe, and Aaron B. Weah, *Impunity under Attack: The Evolution and Imperatives of the Liberian Truth Commission* (Monrovia, Liberia and Silver Spring, MD: Civic Initiative, 2008).
12. 12. TRC Act, 2005.
13. 13. TRC Final Report Consolidated, vol. II (2009). Paul James-Allen, Aaron Weah, and Lizzie Goodfriend, *Beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Liberia: Transitional Justice Options in Liberia* (Monrovia: International Center for Transitional Justice, 2010). Available online.
14. 14. Jonny Steinberg, *Liberia's Experiment with Transitional Justice, African Affairs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 7-10.
15. 15. Aaron Weah, "Hopes and Uncertainty: Journey to End Impunity in Liberia," *International Journal of Transitional Justice Oxford*, 28 June 2012.
16. 16. Stephen Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy the Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of an African Civil War*, 2nd ed. (Washington Square, NY: New York Univ. Press, 2006).
17. 17. In 2008, Senator Prince Johnson testified before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and talked about the exhumation of former President Doe's corpse. On the question of why it was cremated, he said "it's not proper to bury a person twice." The author witnessed the public hearing of Senator Johnson.
18. 18. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, *This Child Will Be Great: Memoir of a Remarkable Life by Africa's First Woman President* (New York: Perennial, 2010); Elwood D. Dunn, "The Civil War in Liberia," in *Civil Wars in Africa: Roots and Resolution*, edited by M. Ali Taisier and Robert O. Matthews (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999).
19. 19. Stephen Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy the Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of an African Civil War*, 2nd ed. (Washington Square, NY: New York University Press, 2006), 80.
20. 20. Aaron C. Sleh, Samuel G. Toe, and Aaron B. Weah, *Impunity under Attack: The Evolution and Imperatives of the Liberian Truth Commission* (Monrovia, Liberia and

Silver Spring, MD: Civic Initiative, 2008).

21. 21. Nine years following the horrific massacre of over six hundred people, a memorial was dedicated to Nelson Philip Taylor, father of Charles Taylor, 17 January 1999. It was erected by Louise Yassah Zoe Taylor in loving memory of her late husband. Those massacred were all buried in a mass grave in the front of the church. The two spots where the mass graves are located are highlighted by white STARS essentially indicating a sacred place. The front yard of St Peters' was originally covered with red earth but has since been transformed into pavement. The pavement is a basketball court used by St Peters' Secondary School basketball team. Indeed it is a visible place that is visible!
22. 22. Aaron C. Sleh, Samuel G. Toe, and Aaron B. Weah, *Impunity under Attack: The Evolution and Imperatives of the Liberian Truth Commission* (Monrovia, Liberia and Silver Spring, MD: Civic Initiative, 2008).
23. 23. Unlike Duport Road, the massacre that occurred in Samay was no ethnic based killing, rather it was mass slaughter of people who were believed to be sympathizers or providing some sort of support to NPFL in its military campaign to reclaim Gbarnga. In 1994 Gbarnga, headquarters of Charles Taylor NPFL, was taken over by a coalition of warring factions. For a better retreatment over the political violence in Gbarnga, see Ellis, 150-188.