

**The Role of Religious and Traditional Institutions during Conflict
and in Peacebuilding**

**Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of
Liberia, Vol. 3: Appendices, Title IV: "The Conflict, Religion and
Tradition"**

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia

The Conflict in Liberia and subsequent transitional justice process through means of a truth and reconciliation commission provide a unique opportunity to examine how the exploitation of religious and traditional identities/institutions became a means to fuel and perpetuate the conflict. Likewise, it also offers an example of how the strength and credibility of a religious community can be instrumental in facilitating formal peace processes.

The enabling statute that created the TRC of Liberia introduced for the first time in a truth and reconciliation commission a specific area of inquiry into the role of religious and traditional institutions, both in conflict and in peacebuilding. A separate subcommittee was created to examine these disparate roles in the context of Liberia's conflict. The directive to explore religious and traditional activities during the Commission's hearings, statement-taking and outreach efforts resulted in a rich collection of narratives that help inform our assessment of the roles religious and traditional leaders and institutions play in the midst of violence and conflict.

The following excerpt from the Final Report of the TRC of Liberia is both the culmination of this inquiry and the beginning point of future examination for how religious leaders and institutions influence the dynamics of conflict.

I. Background and Context

1. Statutory Basis

In recognition of the pivotal importance of religious and traditional institutions in Liberian society and their influence in the hope for to achieve sustainable peace, the Act establishing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia enacted by the National Transitional Legislative Assembly on May 12, 2005 expressly authorizes a formal inquiry into the role of religious and traditional institutions during the conflict and in peacebuilding.

The 'Mandate' of the TRC as set forth in Article IV of the Act requires the Commission to

[conduct] a critical review of Liberia's historical past, with the view to establishing and giving recognition to historical truths in order to address falsehoods and misconceptions of the past relating to the nation's socio-economic and political development. [Article IV, Sec. 4(d)]

The mandate further authorizes the TRC to 'adopt specific mechanisms and procedures to address the experiences of women, children and vulnerable groups" and to address their needs to advance national reconciliation and healing. (Article IV, Sec. 4(e). Article VII, "Functions and Powers", Section 26(q) authorizes the TRC to seek assistance from Traditional and religious leaders in the furtherance of its mandate. The authority of the TRC is extended in Article VIII, Section 27(c) to specifically make inquiry of Liberian institutions and its members to fulfill its mandate.

Accordingly, the TRC created a subcommittee named "The Subcommittee on the Role of Religious and Traditional Institutions During the Conflict and in Peacebuilding" whose objective was to make diligent inquiry into the activities of these institutions and their leaders during the conflict, the impact of armed conflict on their constituencies as well as their possible complicity in perpetuating the conflict. The inquiry also addressed the integral role religious and traditional institutions played in bringing an end to conflict and their efforts to build and sustain a peaceful and stable Liberia.

2. Historical Context

Liberia reflects encompasses multiple religious traditions among its population. Prior to the founding of the Republic of Liberia by settlers very closely identified with the Christian faith, there were inhabitants here the land was inhabited by tribes and societies that practiced indigenous traditional religions as well as the faith of Islam.

It should be noted that although it is generally recognized that a majority of Liberians

profess to align themselves with the Christian faith, there is extensive intermingling of traditional and faith-based practices among religious participants such that the faith of many Liberians is blended and integrates elements of both indigenous traditional and religious practices. Nonetheless, the prevailing early historical narrative of the history of Liberia is from a distinctively Christian perspective that does not necessarily recognize and accommodate the full breadth of Liberia's diverse religious and Traditional communities and their historically significant influences on the distinctive history and the formation of the a Liberian identity.

In or around 1984, during the regime of Samuel K. Doe, the Constitution of Liberia was amended to eliminate explicit reference to Christianity (and the implication that Liberia was a 'Christian state') and expressly permitted the free exercise of religious practices. The language of toleration was joined with the admonition that no Christian sect should have "exclusive privileges or preference over any other sect" (Art. 14; Constitution of Liberia). The authority to exercise one's religion freely is restricted, however, to practices that are peaceable and do not 'obstruct' others. Aside from any other legal conclusion to be drawn from the amendment of the Constitution of Liberia, these revisions appear to be responsive to the perception that the historical association of Christianity with the nation's leadership was restrictive to the free exercise of religious and political rights of practitioners of by other faiths and religious traditions in Liberia.

Because of the close affiliation between religious practice and tribal identity, over the course of time some tribal or ethnic characteristics were closely identified with a particular faith. Most notably, it was mistakenly presumed that all Mandingoes practice the faith of Islam. While adherence to Islam is strongly prevalent within the Mandingo tribe, this assumption led to the deaths of numerous Muslims who were unaffiliated with the Mandingo tribe, particularly in the early 1990s, because the NPFL presumed all Mandingoes (and thus, Muslims) to be aligned with their adversary, President Samuel K. Doe.

Violence was broadly directed against other ethnic groups or tribes often based upon perceived characteristics of that tribe, including a tribe's perceived support for certain political or military leaders. Because one's ethnicity, tribal identity and religious faith were rarely distinguished, it is difficult to discern whether a particular violent act or atrocity was motivated by ethnic or by religious hatred. However, some key events during the conflict

were clearly and specifically targeted against religious and Traditional populations and institutions.

3. Exploitation of Religious and Traditional Institutions and Practices

There is little evidence that the conflict in Liberia during the TRC mandate period was caused by religious intolerance; however, key events during the years of conflict were clearly directed specifically at religious and traditional populations and sacred places. In addition, political and military leaders exploited religious and traditional differences and the existence of religious intolerance to manipulate support for their own interests. In large part, the aspiration of becoming a unified Liberia rests on the ability of Liberians to see religious and ethnic diversities as contributing to a broader notion of what it means to be Liberian-- rather than as divisive characteristics.

Religious institutions were occasionally complicit—sometimes willingly and at other times unwittingly—in facilitating prolonged combat because of their unique positions in the community. Church leaders sometimes influenced support within their communities for various factions by vocally advocating for competing parties or their leaders. Church facilities and mosques, seen as places of refuge, were exploited because of this attribute: persons seeking refuge often became the victims of mass murder within their walls. Conversely, combatants sometimes sought the protection of sanctuaries either for their own personal safety or to stockpile weapons. These sacred spaces also fell victim to looting, desecration and destruction at the hands of all parties to the conflict.

Military leaders and combatants sought the blessing and support of religious and traditional leaders for protection during battle. Such protection was offered by religious and traditional leaders in the form of prayers, blessings, charms and secret practices that were designed to provide protection from harm, such as “bullet protection.” Some religious bodies solicited financial support for various factions. [Subcommittee County Outreach; Harper, 2007]

A not uncommon practice by combatants during the conflict was to kill and dismember enemy combatants as well as civilians. Body parts were sometimes distributed to other communities for consumption by combatants. Certain organs, such as the heart, were often eaten with the belief that the eating of human flesh and organs would embolden the combatant. Another common practice was to create an elixir comprised of human blood,

sugar, gunpowder and gin to serve to combatants with the expectation that it would make them more powerful.

These practices were perverted derivations of Traditional rituals of secretive origin. During the conflict, these Traditional ritualistic practices became openly visible and commonly practiced by military as well as political leaders seeking supernatural powers in the prosecution of armed conflict.

Scholars point to religious and Traditional communities as having a reliance on political leaders of their respective eras. This is an attribute of the conflict with deeper roots in the Liberian political history of patronage. For example, Charles Taylor exploited his relationships with Christian communities and Traditional societies to his own advantage by acquiring leadership positions in these institutions; likewise, these religious and Traditional institutions received patronage and otherwise benefited from their relationship with Taylor.

4. Religious and Traditional Institutions in Peacemaking.

Religious and Traditional institutions were also active in peacemaking activities and they were integrally responsible for peace processes leading to the 2003 Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Accra, Ghana.

Partly in response to violence in Nimba County in 1990 directed at Muslims (who were identified as Mandingoes) by the NPFL, the Liberian Council of Churches and the National Muslim Council of Liberia collaborated in the formation of the Inter-Faith Mediation Committee (IFMC). The early goal of the IFMC was to neutralize religious and ethnic tensions through cooperative dialogue and engagement with warring factions. These efforts ultimately contributed to the involvement of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and deployment of its peacekeeping forces ECOMOG during the conflict. The IFMC was an early critical catalyst to peacemaking efforts among the various factions in the conflict.

The IFMC was later reorganized into the Inter-Faith Council of Liberia, and in 2001 organized into its present entity, the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia (IRC-L). In addition to implementing disarmament and repatriation initiatives prior to the 1997 presidential elections, the IRC-L most notably embarked upon mediation efforts between the Government of Liberia and rebel factions beginning in 2002 that paved the way for formal peace talks among the parties in Accra, Ghana. When peace talks were interrupted by

continued violence, the IRC-L was instrumental in the adoption of a ceasefire that permitted the resumption of dialogue leading to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed in 2003.

Among religious and traditional leaders active in peacemaking activities, a few individuals, such as Catholic Archbishop Michael Kpakala Francis, were recognized for their personal courage in the advocacy of peace. Likewise, it was the commitment of Bishop Arthur Kulah and Sheikh Kafumba Konneh who spearheaded cooperative interfaith efforts that led to the establishment of the IFMC. These institutional efforts were supplemented by religious communities providing relief supplies to those burdened by the conflict and by the efforts of individual religious and traditional leaders in peacemaking activities who were vocal even in the midst of the risk and threat of personal harm. These leaders, among others, helped bolster community advocacy for peace efforts through their bold and visible opposition to armed violence.

While not extensively engaged at an institutional level, it is recognized that there were also Traditional leaders who sought to prevent violence in their communities by implementing positive Traditional forms of peacemaking, conflict resolution and intervention on behalf of victims of the conflict.

II. Key Events in Victimacy

There were acts of violence against religious populations and sacred places that were not motivated by intolerance of religious or Traditional institutions, but were directed specifically at religious and Traditional populations. These events were significant because of the injury suffered by the traditional or religious faith system. For example, one perpetrator recalled a remark upon the intentional killing of a religious worker that it did not matter that the victim was called upon the service of her faith because he (the perpetrator) “was not going to heaven, anyway.”

In some instances and in some areas of Liberia, conflict and violence was in fact fueled by religious intolerance. A significant number of violent events in Lofa and Nimba Counties, in particular, were attributed to religious vengeance, most notably against Muslims and traditional institutions.

Violence in Lofa County was directed specifically toward religious and Traditional communities and structures. The victimized community was primarily the Muslim community, but traditional sacred sites and communities were also targeted for violence.

Nimba County bears similarities to the situation in Lofa County particularly as it pertains to the intersection between land, ethnicity and the effects of religious affiliation. Muslims in Nimba County in particular were singled out for targeted violence because of their association with the Mandingo tribe. In addition to the summary execution of persons who were identified as Muslim, there was considerable destruction to homes and sacred sites such as mosques. As a consequence, many Muslims fled Nimba County in the early 1990s. Moreover, an important dimension to the harm suffered by the Muslim citizens of Nimba County in particular, was that many have been displaced and their property has been appropriated by combatants and other tribes in the communities of Nimba County. Consequently, extreme tension over the ownership of land in Nimba County is the continuing legacy of the conflict in Nimba County. [Subcommittee County Outreach Hearings, Nimba County, 2007].

The desecration and destruction of sacred places led to a weakening of religious and traditional institutions and threatened the collapse of systems of reliable rules and norms upon which religious and traditional communities depended on a daily basis. Perpetrators intentionally violated the institution of ‘sanctuary’—a place where the dispossessed should be able to find safety. The key events addressed below demonstrate a broader loss of respect for, and violation of, religious and traditional institutions during the conflict. Perpetrators intentionally violated the institution of ‘sanctuary’—a place where the dispossessed should be able to find safety. The desecration and destruction of sacred places led to a weakening of religious and traditional institutions and threatened the collapse of systems of reliable rules and norms upon which religious and traditional communities depended on a daily basis.

For example, the attack upon refugees harbored within St. Peter’s Lutheran Church in Monrovia demonstrates the victimization of an institution and a violation of ‘sanctuary’—in addition to the egregious loss of life.

1. St. Peter’s Lutheran Church Massacre—July 29, 1990.

The events of July 29-30, 1990 at the St. Peter’s Lutheran Church in Sinkor are widely known and addressed in detail in other parts of this report. However, one dimension of this

event, known as ‘The St. Peter’s Lutheran Church Massacre’, that is specifically addressed herein is its impact on the institution of the Christian community, in particular, and religious institutions more generally.

For several months in 1990, St. Peter’s Lutheran Church became the refuge of women, children and men predominately from the Mano, Gio and Kpelle tribes fleeing violence throughout the country. Of significance here is that the Church was seen as a place of sanctuary—sanctified by God as a place of worship and protection; it became an attractive site for protection from harm because it was a sacred place.

On the night of July 29, combatants from the Armed Forces of Liberia surrounded the church and desecrated its sanctity by committing the murder of approximately six hundred persons taking refuge there. First using cutlasses and bayonets and then gunfire, soldiers moved into the sanctuary and classrooms in the outbuildings to locate and kill persons who had sought the protection of the church.

The next day, July 30, 1990, the few that survived the attack were being assisted at neighboring facilities, including the nearby United Methodist Compound, where soldiers of the AFL again violated the sanctity of church facilities to kill survivors and those who sought to aid the victims with humanitarian assistance. The expansion of the territorial scope of this atrocity is significant not only because its impact on the Christian community was therefore larger, but also because it reflects a larger community of religious institutions that were victimized because of their willingness to provide assistance in response to the carnage.

2. Lofa County—Early 1990s

Lofa County is an ethnically and religiously diverse county where 16 tribes can be found living in close proximity to each other. Consequently, communities were gravely impacted as the conflict exploited and perpetuated religious and ethnic distinctions. Thus violence in Lofa County was directed specifically toward religious and Traditional communities and structures. The victimized community was primarily the Muslim community, but traditional sacred sites and communities were also targeted for violence. It is commonly held that Traditional communities suffered greatly in particular through the desecration of sacred sites; although due to the secretive nature of traditional societies, little or no documentation can be obtained to detail the breadth and scope of this violence. However limited,

documentation and dialogue with stakeholder communities provide evidence, some revealed acts of violence suggest that acts of violence were directed toward traditional societies, such as the instance where NPFL combatants rounded up all Zoes in a region, locked them in a house and set fire to the house.

By comparison, there is substantial documentation on the plight of the Muslim community in Lofa County. Events in and around Lofa County in the early 1990's exposed religious intolerance as a force fueling violence in those areas, particularly against Muslims who were generally associated with Mandingoes and who were seen by the forces of Charles Taylor as supporters of the Samuel K. Doe regime. Muslims, perceived by NPFL rebel groups generally as Mandingoes, were executed simply for participating in religious practices or wearing attire associated with Islam or for being identified as a Muslim. As a consequence, many Muslims living in Lofa County were forced to either hide or cease their religious practices to avoid being targeted for summary execution. In some cases, NPFL forces even entrapped persons into revealing their adherence to Islam by dressing in gowns and pretending to be Muslim in order to discover who would associate with them by connection of the Islamic faith. These civilians were arrested and executed. In one instance, Mandingoes were specifically rounded up and ordered into the town hall where they were executed by NPFL forces, who then attempted to destroy the community mosque.

Numerous reports of Muslims having been massacred in mosques in Lofa County confirm that sacred spaces were targeted because of their religious affiliation and that persons of the Islamic faith were purposely killed or injured by the NPFL in Lofa County.

The persecution of Muslims in Lofa County continued after Charles Taylor was elected president and Liberian government forces were engaging LURD rebels in and around Lofa County. Again, the inciting force for this violence was the association between Muslim and Mandingoes.

Later in the 1990s, Mandingoes, many of whom were Muslim, and others associated with ULIMO, committed violence against non-Muslims in retribution for earlier persecution.

The NPFL also targeted Traditional communities, at one point rounding up all Zoes, locking them in a house, and setting fire to it. [LOF-00156].

Nimba County bears similarities to the situation in Lofa County particularly as it pertains to

the intersection between land, ethnicity and the effects of religious affiliation. Members of the Islamic community in Nimba County in particular were singled out for targeted violence because of their association with the Mandingo tribe. In addition to the summary execution of persons who were identified as Muslim, there was considerable destruction to homes and sacred sites such as mosques. As a consequence, many Muslims fled Nimba County in the early 1990s. Moreover, an important dimension to the harm suffered by the Muslim citizens of Nimba County in particular, was that many have been displaced and their property has been appropriated by combatants and other tribes in the communities of Nimba County. Consequently, extreme tension over the ownership of land in Nimba County is the continuing legacy of the conflict in Nimba County. [Subcommittee County Outreach Hearings, Nimba County, 2007].

III. Findings

Expressions of faith and spirituality are central to Liberian culture. As a result, religious and Traditional leaders play an integral and influential role in Liberian society.

1. Leaders of Religious and Traditional institutions facilitated the processes by which cease-fires and peace agreements could be reached; most notably, the collaboration of Christian and Muslim leadership in the creation of the Interfaith Mediation Committee was a significant contribution to the peace process and ultimately led to the creation of the framework for the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2003.
2. Religious and Traditional communities were targeted and violated because of religious intolerance, ethnic associations and the exercising of political influence by religious and Traditional leaders.
3. Religious and Traditional institutions bear some responsibility for prolonging the conflict by failing to intercede in preventing violence and by directly supporting warring factions through prayer, advocacy, ritual protection and financial support.
4. The conflict in Liberia destabilized society by unraveling religious and Traditional norms. Of particular note, the conflict in Liberia damaged Traditional institutions and undermined traditional lines of authority.

Expressions of faith and spirituality are central to Liberian culture. As a result, religious and

Traditional leaders play an integral and influential role in Liberian society.

4. Recommendations

1. Justice. Recognizing the reliance of Liberians on traditional forms of justice, local forms of dispute resolution should be strengthened and utilized in national reconciliation processes as well as integrated into the formal legal system.
2. Reconstruction. Those Traditional institutions destroyed during the conflict and that positively influence the peaceful and orderly functioning of communities, such as the Palava Hut, should be reconstructed as a form of reparation.
3. Education. Comparative religious education should be incorporated into the national curriculum so as to address misconceptions of religious difference and to foster broad understanding and appreciation for religious diversity within Liberia's historical narrative and contemporary reality.
4. Holidays. In the interest of fostering a common sense of citizenship and national belonging, the recognition of national holidays should include a broader incorporation of special days that are observed by religious and traditional communities in Liberia.
5. Memorialization. In the interest of national reconciliation, the creation or expansion of a Memorial Day to remember victims of the conflict should draw on the participation of all communities and their respective traditions and rituals of remembrance. Additionally, monuments should be constructed to honor the victims of war and preserve the memory of its horrors as lasting symbols for future generations.
6. Local forums that take into account traditional and religious practices should be created and facilitated to further reconciliation among adversaries and that positively influence the peaceful and orderly functioning of all Liberian communities. Focused attention should be given to engaging former combatants in the reconciliation process.