

Sierra Leone was torn apart by a violent conflict that lasted for over a decade between 1991 and 2002. The deep physical and emotional scars it left on the people and their communities and the destruction of the country's socio-economic and institutional foundations are still visible today. But Sierra Leoneans have also shown an extraordinary ability to deal with the painful and violent past and to move on. This does not mean that the victims would be able to easily forget the suffering they endured or that the return and (re)integration of the ex-combatants into the society would always go smoothly and effortlessly. Yet, if you ask around in the villages across the country, people almost always answer the same: "We have reconciled". What do they mean by that? And how have they achieved it? These questions form the core puzzle of the present thesis. It explores the process of reconciliation and restoration of relationships at village level in Sierra Leone, with a particular focus on the role of local ceremonies. While its main concern is with the specific circumstances in Sierra Leone, it also aims to contribute to the debates in transitional justice and peacebuilding fields regarding the 'local' practices of reconciliation in African post-conflict societies.

The thesis argues that Sierra Leonean communities have used a wealth of 'local' practices and techniques to remake social relationships and restore community cohesion in the aftermath of the war. Ceremonies and other ritual expressions have played an important part in this process by facilitating ex-combatant reintegration, fostering restoration of the relationships among the living and with the spiritual world and providing a symbolic closure. However, there are limitations. First, the widely declared unity in the villages they helped to foster largely meant restoration of the pre-war social order, with many of its injustices. Second, they are rooted in the local communities' history and are not easily transferable to the national level. It would therefore be a mistake to present the 'traditional practices' as a panacea for successful reconciliation.

These 'cultural resources' have also been severely impacted by the war. In the processes through which the communities strive for reconstruction and reconciliation also these practices are being renewed and reshaped as people appeal to the past as well as adjust to new realities. They have shown a high degree of adaptability to the contemporary needs of combatant reintegration and rebuilding relationships after the war and therefore deserve our attention.