

Transitional Justice in Sierra Leone: Oral History, Human Rights, and Post-Conflict Reconciliation

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Fig. 1. Amie Mansaray, amputated during the Invasion of Freetown in 1999. Photo courtesy of Sierra Leone Memory Project.

The concept of oral history is not a novel idea in Sierra Leonean society where historical knowledge has always been passed on from one generation to another around late night fires beneath a moonlit sky. The fireside gatherings, in addition to various secret societies, served as institutions of learning in which elders transmitted stories of cultural triumphs or tragedies to the younger generation. The stories were intended to alert the youth to the circumstances underlying their past and their future responsibilities as heirs to the cultural heritage. Formal education, as an element of the colonial enterprise, removed children from these fireside academies into Westernized classrooms where we studied only colonial versions of our past.

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When we set out to launch the Sierra Leone Memory Project (Memory Project) in 2012, ten years after the end of the country's decade-long civil war, we were confronted with the issue of reawakening what many concerned individuals referred to as 'old wounds.' The idea of an oral history project that provides a forum for survivors of the civil war to voluntarily share their stories both as a tool for individual healing and collective national dialogue appeared to many as a deliberate attempt to reignite past traumatic experiences. It is interesting to note that even though some of those who raised concerns about opening 'old wounds' were themselves survivors, they were not direct victims or perpetrators. And it was disconcerting that some people, mostly those occupying high offices in the country, were speaking for the rest of society. None of the victims or perpetrators we consulted showed grave fears of opening 'old wounds.' In fact, they expressed gratitude for the opportunity to share their stories with what is rapidly becoming a Sierra Leonean society indifferent to the visible scars of the past.

We proceeded with the Memory Project on the premise that it would be a voluntary avenue for those who desire the opportunity and feel ready to share their stories. The project's mission was both as a healing mechanism and as a cultural imperative to confront and learn from the past. As uncomfortable as past deeds may be, they are part of the collective narratives that form the foundation of a shared national existence. Moreover, the growing trend towards restorative justice in international law and the fundamental human rights principles of dignity and the 'right to know' require the participation of victims, perpetrators, and all of society in post-conflict reconciliation. To reconcile is to address the fault-lines of society and restore community harmony.

Therefore, reconciliation requires that all members of society become cognizant of the undercurrent of disharmony. In the West African tradition, the responsibility of transmitting history from one generation to another rested with storytellers – griots. They told stories of ancient warriors not only to celebrate their conquests, but also to convey the values surrounding the choices they made even at the risk of bloody defeat. These devoted storytellers conveyed in great lyrical details the traumatic experiences, which sometimes involved scorched earth annihilation of entire armies and villages. People gathered in town squares to listen to the stories of lone warriors who survived major atrocities in war. Sierra Leoneans believe that these stories were told so that communities might re-examine their past choices and properly evaluate their future decisions, bearing in mind past errors of judgment. Societies lamented and empathized with people like lone warriors and took actions to ameliorate their condition by, for example, offering them wives, making them chiefs, or providing them with land or seeds to give them a fresh start in the community.

Oral history is now appropriately entwined with human rights through the relatively new domain of Truth & Reconciliation Commissions in international law, transitional justice, and international dispute settlement. Since the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which concluded the resolution of apartheid in South Africa, the process of transitional justice through truth seeking and reconciliation is gradually becoming a norm in national and international conflict resolution. While international criminal law is still a necessary element in bringing to justice those who bear the greatest responsibility for genocide, war crimes, or crimes against humanity, transitional justice mechanisms are becoming standard complements to criminal tribunals.

The United Nations has offered some guidance in the area of transitional justice, which encompasses both criminal tribunals and Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. UN Secretary General Report 616 (2004) defines Transitional Justice as “the full range of processes and mechanisms associated with a society’s attempts to come to terms with the legacy of large-scale past abuses, in order to ensure accountability, serve justice and achieve reconciliation.”¹ According to the report, Truth Commissions are “official, temporary, non-judicial fact-finding bodies that investigate a pattern of abuses of human rights or humanitarian law committed over a number of years. These bodies take a victim-centered approach and conclude their work with a final report of findings of fact and recommendations.”² Therefore, Truth and Reconciliation Commissions are not only tasked with truth seeking and facilitating reconciliation, they are also required to provide complete and impartial records of the conflict with recommendations. For these reasons, Truth and Reconciliation Commissions mostly rely on the testimony of victims and the confessions of perpetrators in addition to various historical documents to accomplish their tasks.

However, a major limitation to these commissions is that their operations are often confined to limited timeframes within which they are required to complete their mandates and issue final reports. For example, the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Commission), which was “established is to create an impartial historical record of violations and abuses of human rights and international humanitarian law related to the armed conflict in Sierra Leone, from the beginning of the Conflict in 1991 to the signing of the Lomé Peace Agreement; to address impunity, to respond to the needs of the victims, to promote healing and reconciliation and to prevent a repetition of the violations and abuses suffered,” was only operational between 2002-2004. In addition to the

¹ Report of the Secretary-General on the rule of law and transitional justice in conflict and post-conflict societies, S/2004/616 (Aug. 23, 2004)

² *Id.* at para. 50

logistical challenges of such a broad mandate, one constraint of such a limited time frame is that many survivors of violent conflicts are often unprepared to volunteer testimonies so soon after the conflict.

In Sierra Leone, the problem wasn't only that the Commission was established immediately after the war, but also that it was set up alongside the Special Court for Sierra Leone (Special Court). Establishing these two institutions within the same timeframe may have prevented many from participating in the Truth and Reconciliation process for fear of future prosecution. The Special Court for Sierra Leone also prevented indicted persons from publicly participating in the Truth and Reconciliation process for procedural reasons, at least during the time of their indictment and trial. This tension between the mandates of the Special Court and the Commission came to a head when Chief Samuel Hinga Norman, former Deputy Minister of Defense and head of the Sierra Leone Civil Defense Forces (CDF), made a formal request to testify before the Commission while he was in Special Court custody.³ Despite persistent requests by the Commission and a Special Court hearing to that effect, the court denied a public hearing for Chief Norman as requested by the Commission. On appeal, Justice Robertson of the Special Court concluded that there shall be "no public hearing of the kind requested or of any other kind prior to the conclusion of the trial."⁴ In its response to the Special Court decision on the Norman request, the Commission stated that the ruling "dealt a serious blow to the cause of truth and reconciliation in Sierra Leone" and represents "a grave and irreparable injustice" both to Chief Norman and the people of Sierra Leone. This so called Hinga Norman saga could have been one reason why some perpetrators might have feared that their participation in the Commission could land them in court, even though this was strictly not the case. In fact, the Special Court never indicted any of the people who testified before the Commission. Nonetheless, the saga illustrates not only the fraught relations between the Special Court and the TRC in Sierra Leone, but also the structural contradictions of criminal and transitional justice in post-conflict societies generally.

As an attempt to address some of these problems and limitations, the Sierra Leone Memory Project was created with two main goals. The first is to continue the work of the Commission by providing an avenue for survivors who wish to share their stories, and to help disseminate or facilitate dialogue around the work already accomplished by the Commission. The second goal is to highlight the post-conflict conditions of many survivors, especially as they pertain

³ The Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *The Hinga Norman Saga* (Aug. 21, 2013), <http://www.sierraleonetr.com/index.php/resources/the-hinga-norman-saga>

⁴ *The Prosecutor v. Sam Hinga Norman*, SCSL-2003-08-PT (2003), para. 41.

to the question of reparation for victims. In this regard, it follows the recommendations of the UN Secretary General to “provide a public platform for victims [and perpetrators] to address the nation directly with their personal stories and...facilitate public debate about how to come to terms with the past.”⁵ Those who fail to come to terms with the demons of their past are destined to confront their restless ghosts. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu has emphasized, while victims of injustice and oppression must be ready to forgive, those “who have wronged them must be ready to make what amends they can. They must be ready to make restitution and reparation.”⁶ Therefore, transitional justice in its true application requires holistic participation by victims, perpetrators, and society at large. It cannot be properly achieved in isolated groupings unwilling to listen and empathize with others.



Fig. 2. Alicia Wells and Alyssa LaPane conducting an interview with Francis Kaifala, Esq. Photo courtesy of Sierra Leone Memory Project.

⁵ Report of the Secretary-General on the rule of law and transitional justice in conflict and post-conflict societies, S/2004/616 (Aug. 23, 2004), para. 50.

⁶ Desmond Tutu, *We Forgive You*, in *The Rainbow People of God: The Making of a Peaceful Revolution* 222 (Random House 1994)

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Since the aim of the Memory Project is to offer an avenue for survivors to voluntarily share their stories, we are primarily engaged in the process of collecting testimonies from such survivors. We intentionally use ‘survivors’ in order to expand the process beyond traditional victim/perpetrator categories. There are many aspects of the Sierra Leonean civil war that blurred the very notion of victim/perpetrator. Child combatants, for instance, are the embodiment of both victims and perpetrators. The recruitment or use of children in armed conflict is a violation of their rights under international law, but as combatants, the children were also responsible for some of the most horrendous war crimes and crimes against humanity. At the end of the civil war, many child combatants were treated as juvenile perpetrators and rightfully excluded from criminal prosecution for their acts. Little attention was paid, however, to their personal victimization as children who were mostly conscripted into armed forces or paramilitary groups and forced to commit despicable crimes incongruent with their years. One specific objective of the project is to offer these survivors an open platform to share their stories in their complexity and possibly enable us to better understand and address their plights and thereby perhaps the underlying problems of our past.

Beyond transitional justice mechanisms such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Special Court for Sierra Leone, there is a need for the restoration of society after the trauma of mass atrocity. Restorative justice takes into consideration the needs of victims, perpetrators, and the community. Thus, restorative justice continues long after criminal prosecutions or Truth Commissions. Restorative justice is usually intertwined with Truth Commissions because to be successful, the process must rely on the factual historical records and sincere hearings facilitated by a Truth Commission. In order to effectively reconcile a post-conflict society, it is important to understand the foundations of the conflict and its effect on various members of the society. The work of a Truth Commission is to offer such an impartial and complete understanding of the conflict and also to provide constructive recommendations on how to restore society. This aspect of transitional justice is why the Memory Project also centers on the post-conflict conditions of survivors as they pertain to reparations and reconciliation.

The Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission concluded its work by providing recommendations for reconciliation going forward. Among its recommendations, specific emphasis was placed on reparation for victims. In drawing attention to truth telling and reparation as key components of reconciliation, the Commission stated that “[t]ruth telling without reparations could be perceived by the victims as an incomplete process in which they revealed their pain and suffering without any mechanism in place to deal with the

consequences of that pain or to substantially alter the material circumstances of their lives.”⁷ Such a result is considered a double victimization and has the potential to damage the reconciliation process. However, it is exactly the kind of double victimization that victims of the Sierra Leonean civil war face because subsequent governments have failed to act constructively on the recommendations of the Commission.

The Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission consciously refrained from following the South African model of providing reparation only to those who participated in the Truth and Reconciliation process by recommending that the government implement various methods to meet the needs of all victims. However, the Commission suggested certain categories of victims whose compelling conditions necessitate the government to prioritize their needs. The Commission recommended the following groups of victims as beneficiaries of specific measures of reparations due to their particular vulnerability: amputees; other war wounded; children; and victims of sexual violence.⁸ Unfortunately, the government has thus far failed in its obligations towards these victims and many have died due to illnesses resulting from their victimization, starvation, and extreme poverty. Some of the victims such as amputees and child combatants continue to face abuse and humiliation in their communities. War victims are taunted in the streets as they beg to make ends meet. Kadiatu Bangura, one of the double amputee women interviewed appealed to Sierra Leoneans in these words: “You are not doing us any good by taunting us in the streets. It is tormenting us...it is tormenting us...taunting us in the streets. We didn’t chop off your hands, we didn’t do this...we didn’t chop off your foot...it is all tormenting us.”⁹

Many amputees have resorted to begging in order to survive or take care of themselves and their children. After serious abuse at the hands of rebels, standing on street corners as beggars is a severe test to the dignity of many of these victims. According to another interviewee:

I don’t feel fine because this was not my life. This is not what I used to be...but I don’t have any other means...people laugh at us...those who do not know the pain we feel. Some tell us to go back to our villages and work. But what work can I do? I can’t even bathe on my own...I have suffered! What they did to me I won’t forgive them in this world until judgement day. I won’t forgive these people till judgement day! Because I used to do things for

⁷ Witness To Truth: Report of the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Vol. 2 (2004), para. 41.

⁸ *Id.* at para. 58.

⁹ Interview with Kadiatu Bangura, Sierra Leone Memory Project (2012)

myself; I used to hold farm hoes without begging anyone, I used to carry my own tray of goods for sales without begging anyone. I won't forgive these people until we stand before God on judgement day.¹⁰

Almost everyone interviewed expressed the magnitude of their suffering in post-conflict Sierra Leone. The pain, indignity, and alienation among victims inhibit the establishment of a lasting peace in the country.

The Commission anticipated the severe pain and agony that many victims would experience in post-conflict Sierra Leone if their specific needs were unmet. It stated that many of the victims have “enduring physical handicaps as a result of which they suffered cumulative harm both physically and mentally. Many are unable to reintegrate into their communities of origin, cannot sustain themselves or their families, and are unable to tend to their medical conditions because of the high costs associated with treatment.”¹¹ It suffices to point out that many of the amputees and war wounded in Sierra Leone are not only street beggars but cannot even obtain free government healthcare when they fall ill. Consequently, some victims are becoming disgruntled and losing faith in the promise of reconciliation. Their current condition has inevitably given the work with the Sierra Leone Memory Project a new dimension. In addition to recording stories of their experiences during the war, our added aim is to make survivors visible members of the community and facilitate dialogues between them and the larger society. The international commitment of “never again” following most violent conflicts cannot be realized if we fail to address some of the same factors that ignited the conflict.

The recording of testimonies through the medium of oral history is gradually enabling Sierra Leoneans to break the cone of silence that typically mutes the aftermath of horrific experiences. For the victims, it offers an avenue for them to make public their victimization and to invite society to examine veiled wounds with a view towards collective healing and reconciliation. In addition to the personal bitterness that may still rest in the hearts of some victims, the persistent poverty of the country and the lack of proper care for those debilitated by the war are making it difficult for the country to move forward together. Post-conflict societies cannot progress if conditions remain that serve as an obstacle to proper healing, such as lack of basic necessities for victims to live a dignified life.

¹⁰Interview with Saudiatu, Sierra Leone Memory Project (2012)

¹¹ Witness To Truth: Report of the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Vol. 2 (2004), para. 59.

By telling their stories, those who are most affected by conflict can petition their neighbours in society for collective redress.

Moreover, by giving survivors the opportunity to share their experiences, the Memory Project allows participants to proactively shape the future for posterity. Stories of individual experiences can serve as a platform for dialogue and contribute to a collective narrative to guide future generations towards avoiding conflicts that may be detrimental to communal harmony. A fundamental aspect of storytelling in Sierra Leonean society is the underlying moral of the story, which is customarily discussed at the end. Storytellers, who usually have an idea of the moral aspects they want to advance, serve as moderators of the ensuing discussion of ideas or values. As soon as the group agrees on the moral of a story, the storyteller completes his moderation by applying said moral to a succinct closing statement for all gathered to remember. These conclusions can enhance further discussions and greater understanding in community.

The sharing of traumatic experiences through storytelling can also be therapeutic for the storyteller. Storytelling compels individuals to engage in a sort of societal communion with members of their community by unveiling their vulnerability in a perceived atmosphere of trust and empathy. By revealing their deepest pain to members of their community, individuals often transcend internal hesitations surrounding questions of reception by others. However, such sharing of experiences is mostly effective in communities that are ready to confront whatever hidden horrors underlie the fabric of their society. Opening wounds in communities that cling to the false comfort of denial may produce backlashes that could be damaging to those who are already victims of the collective errors of said community. Therefore, post-conflict oral history projects should take into proper consideration the readiness of communities to share and participate in dialogues concerning the fault line of their past and the contours of their collective future.

One of the greatest aspects of oral history is that it is usually separate from the formal involvement of government. However, government as the trustee of the social contract is sometimes needed for the implementation of community recommendations following constructive dialogues generated by oral history in the aftermath of harrowing experiences. Ultimately, in order for communities to heal after shattering experiences, stories of their individual experiences, no matter how terrible, must be told. The sharing of stories reveals connections and similarities despite societal differences and allows communities to focus on their common humanity and experience. But such oral history in the aftermath of conflicts must be based on sincerity, openness, and truth. As much as some societies might prefer, it is impossible to expunge from history even those realities that are deemed uncomfortable or shameful to collective memory.

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Truthful and honest information about conflicts are critical cultural information because conflicts are manifestations of disagreements from which people can learn to live in harmony. Conflicts expose the bad in human society and successful conflict resolution brings out the best in them, but such transformation from conflict to harmony cannot be achieved without the complete willingness and participation of the entire community. A major consideration is ensuring that a comprehensive and truthful account of historical events is transmitted from one generation to another for the purpose of not only understanding the past, but also for the purpose of healing and improving future relations. This dialogue must therefore include all sides and perspectives in the conflict.

The testimonies of perpetrators are also vital to the overall process of community healing and forgiveness. While the victims might be willing to share their stories and forgive their victimizers, the healing process is incomplete unless perpetrators and the community as a whole are willing to express their own sorrow and remorse. Some perpetrators, especially those who were forced to participate in the commission of acts of violence against innocent civilians are also traumatized by their experiences and need the opportunity to share their stories and ask for forgiveness. Many individuals who participated in the Sierra Leonean conflict were conscripted against their will by various warring factions. Very few individuals became combatants by their own volition; others, especially child combatants, were both victims and perpetrators of violence who need the collective forgiveness of the communities they brutalized. Abubakar Sidikie, a former child combatant who was conscripted at age fourteen and forced to decapitate his aunt with a machete after his parents and siblings were burnt alive, expressed his sentiments at the end of his interview thus: "I want the world to know that I am sorry. All I need now is a job to help me forget the past."

Some ex-combatants live on the outskirts of Freetown where they continue to offer their services as guns for hire to interested politicians seeking to intimidate their opponents or the community, while many former child combatants have turned to petty crimes to survive. This situation is very risky for a post-conflict society, but even though many of the individuals interviewed expressed their inability to forgive their victimizers, it appears the feeling is mostly generated by the indignity of their present condition and generally not by their victimization during the conflict. Therefore, even with the brewing bitterness, most people like Saudiatu wish a brighter future for the next generation: "I don't want anymore evil for this country. All I want is good for this country, because we have already suffered. We don't want our children to suffer

as well.”¹² This sentiment was expressed by even those who were still severely agonized by their victimization and the depravity of their afflictions in post-conflict Sierra Leone.

Rights & Dignity in Post-Conflict Sierra Leone

When the Sierra Leone Memory Project was launched in 2012, the first survivors to come forward were a group of amputees from the Western Area. They were briefed on the purpose of the project and the interest in collecting their oral testimonies. At the end of the briefing, they were asked whether they had anything to share before proceeding. Surprisingly, the first group of participants simply wanted to thank us for “treating them as human beings” and granting them the opportunity to be heard. Their statement was encouraging because the very idea of an oral history project was born out of personal reactions to the misery of several of these survivors, especially amputees and other war wounded who spend their days in the streets of Freetown begging for food and money. Moreover, the absolute lack of knowledge about the civil war among the young generation is frightening. The Commission published a secondary school version of its report, but that material has never been introduced in classrooms. The current situation presents a violation of both human dignity and society’s right to know. One reason why some of the youth of Sierra Leone heave insults at victims begging in the streets is the fact that the younger generation does not understand the predicaments of these beggars as bearers of the scars of our collective inadequacies.

¹² Id.

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Fig. 3. Double amputees enjoying lunch provided during an interview. Photo courtesy of Sierra Leone Memory Project.

The first principle of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is that “[a]ll human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”¹³ Therefore, by failing to implement the Truth and Reconciliation Commission recommendations, the government not only abandons its obligations and responsibilities under the transitional justice arrangements, it also violates the human dignity of helpless victims who bear some of the worst scars of the country’s wretched past. These ordinary citizens are humiliated daily in the streets as they bear the pain of their victimization and the indignity of having to beg for basic necessities for the rest of their lives. As in all cases of adding insult to injury, other Sierra Leoneans walk by them daily, and instead of respect, or even shameful recognition, they taunt these helpless victims for begging in the streets. It doesn’t have to be this way!

The Memory Project was launched to provide an avenue for survivors to share their experiences with their communities. We have learned that there is a

¹³ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, G.A. Res. 217 (III) A, U.N. Doc A/RES/217 (III) (Dec. 10, 1948), art. 1.

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growing separation between those who bear the brunt of the wrongful past and the rest of society. Our aim is that sharing stories will not only bring them together in a common narrative, but that it could also offer further opportunities for individual healing and perhaps a restoration of basic human dignity. Many survivors are aware of the general poverty of the country, but people deserve a certain level of dignity even in misery. This restoration of human dignity is what our first participants grasped when they expressed gratitude for treating them as human beings. Otherwise, there was nothing to offer them beyond the simple opportunity to be heard—an acknowledgement of their individual worth.

During the process of collecting testimonies, it became clear that concerns about opening ‘old wounds’ were really arising from society’s fear of not knowing what to do when confronted by their own demons. As Elie Wiesel has pointed out in his own writings about the holocaust, “[d]eep down, the witness knew then, as he does now, that his testimony would not be received. After all, it deals with an event that sprang from the darkest zone of man.”¹⁴ Sierra Leoneans have been afraid of revisiting the darkest zone of their past for fear of relinquishing the perverse comfort of deliberate ignorance, which allows ordinary people to avoid the moral obligation to act by claiming lack of knowledge about the victimization or suffering of others. Most people would rather avoid such guilt by leaving ‘old wounds’ undisturbed. Thus, deliberate ignorance is a sort of moral indifference to the agony of others whose wounds are usually in plain view. However, the reality is that wounds have to be cleansed and redressed to allow for proper healing.

Oral history projects geared towards human rights violations of the past could become an extension of Truth and Reconciliation commissions by engaging in an exploration of their work and also providing avenues for others to testify or express their views about the post-conflict society. As Wole Soyinka explains, “confrontation with history may enable us to ‘escape its conditioning’—that is, a conditioning that comes from a history of skewed human relationships—enables humanity to ‘fly off its seemingly magnetized trajectory into a new orbit of mutual human recognition and respect.’”¹⁵ Such confrontation with history must include open knowledge of all incidents and truthful information akin to the process of confronting history and dealing with past atrocities. Governments must be fundamentally transparent with information pertaining to the institutional aspects of conflicts.

¹⁴ Elie Wiesel, *Night*, in *The Night Trilogy* 7 (Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2008)

¹⁵ Wole Soyinka, *Of Africa* 75 (Yale University Press 2012)

The ‘right to know’ requires a conducive forum for victims, perpetrators, and society at large to speak publicly about the underlying issues of their conflict without fear or intimidation. One indispensable element of post-conflict reconciliation that arises from the ‘right to know’ is empathy—the capacity to identify with the situation or condition of others. However, empathy cannot be achieved without honest dialogues that expose the hidden tissues of conflict across society. A failure of productive dialogue is what leads to conflict in the first place, and the end of conflicts usually creates a visible fragmentation of society into victims, perpetrators, witnesses, and succeeding generations; categories which must be merged for the trauma to be overcome. In order to re-establish trust and reconcile society, “there is a need to acknowledge publicly the abuses that have taken place, to hold responsible those who have planned, ordered, and committed such violations, and to rehabilitate and compensate victims.”¹⁶ In this regard, post-conflict communities have a right to collective knowledge of hidden truths within the darkest craters of communal existence.

In dealing with violent conflicts such as the Sierra Leonean civil war, humanitarian intervention is often preoccupied with ending violence and pacifying perpetrators, thereby giving little attention to their victims. For example, in Sierra Leone, most combatants were financially compensated to disarm, but many of their victims were left to the mercy of nongovernmental organizations. Peace is the responsibility of society as a whole; therefore transitional justice mechanisms have to give full weight to all aspects of truth, justice, and reconciliation. One of the greatest challenges facing post-conflict societies is avoiding the cycle of violence and retribution, the conundrum of yesterday’s oppressed becoming tomorrow’s oppressors. To avoid this scenario, perpetrators must acknowledge and take responsibility for their acts, victims must be willing to forgive their victimizers, and the rest of society must treat each other with dignity. Post-conflict justice and reconciliation processes cannot treat witnesses of atrocities as “dust-cloth,” to be used and discarded when no longer needed.¹⁷ Those who testify, whether at criminal tribunals, Truth Commissions, or for oral history projects, create lasting monuments that are greater than any erected monuments of remembrance. The testimonies of witnesses, as Saja Coric, president of the Center for Victims of Vojno Camp “GERD-Sumeja“ in Bosnia

¹⁶ *Id.* at 11.

¹⁷ Saja Coric, We built the greatest Monuments. Our Monument is not made of Stone. It is the Verdict itself, *Politorbis* Nr. 54. 11 (2011). Saja speaks to the ordeals of witnesses who testified for the War Crimes Chamber in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

and Herzegovina explains, are “the memories that will remain for future generations”¹⁸ as heirs to the cultural heritage.

Conclusion

The Sierra Leone Memory Project is an oral history project specifically geared towards survivors of a brutal civil war that entailed blatant human rights violations. Ultimately, the aim is that the testimonies collected will provide a meaningful framework for public exploration of the traumatic memories of political violence, to debate difficult questions about human behavior and choices in difficult circumstances, highlight the problematic nature of rigid ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’ labels, and also provide future generations with lessons about the importance of human rights and democratic values in preventing intolerance and violent expressions.

For the participants, the project intends to serve as a platform for justice, granting an audience and an avenue for the voices and experiences of those who were most affected by the war and continue to be most vulnerable in society. It aims to provide survivors with space for individual healing through reflection and to help build a collective narrative. Just as survivors have “no right to deprive future generations of a past that belongs to our collective memory,”¹⁹ society has no right to deprive these survivors, especially victims, of their dignity and rights. Society must respect the dignity of survivors and protect them from the re-traumatization produced by post-conflict abandonment.

The Memory Project remains cognizant of the possibility of opening ‘old wounds’ in a country that has endured so much violence and brutality, but the dangers of unattended wounds are far greater than revisiting them for proper care. We will not disregard the risks of reopening these wounds for those who are unready; therefore, participation in the project will remain absolutely voluntary for as long as it takes. It is never easy for those who survive traumatic experiences to speak publicly about their situation, but as Elie Wiesel has pointed out, for those who choose to testify, the “duty is to bear witness for the death and for the living.”²⁰ But above all, we hope to help prevent the degenerate past from becoming the collective future, and to escape what Wole Soyinka refers to as the ‘curse of repetition.’

¹⁸ *Id.* at 12.

¹⁹ Elie Wiesel, *Night*, in *The Night Trilogy* 13 (Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2008)

²⁰ *Id.*

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