

# Post conflict recovery in Sierra Leone: the spiritual self and the transformational state

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“We need to get back to the old time mobilization of our grandmothers”, said Regina Amadi, Regional Director for Africa, of the International Labor Organization (ILO), May 8 at the 2009 African Women Changing the Global Outlook Empowerment Conference in Washington D.C. As she spoke before Somali intellectuals, Ugandan business women, Nigerian journalists, and Tanzanian political leaders, she and other global leaders shared their concerns about Africa’s political, economic and environmental and health condition. The British Embassy and National Geographic sponsored the conference by bringing together noted international panelists to respond to audience questions. While the usual suspects brought up age old hot topics such as good governance, the role of Ngo’s, and male political power structures, participants challenged female panel members on what they are doing to empower those who do not have the privilege to attend the conference. American Journalist, Makeda Crane asked, “What are we doing NOW to help the women in the Congo?” Makeda’s overarching question brought to light the complicated tier of injustices that make women’s goal to “help” and “improve” Africa a task bound by time, space, and resources.

What are women doing “now”? The journalist’s urgent demand for change in the Congo is not the first and likely not the last time the international community has called for an intervention on behalf those who cannot seemingly fend for themselves. But what about the women who are fending for themselves while waiting for high powered intellectuals to lobby for an action plan. How do we understand the emotional resources and coping skills of women staring into the face of immediate danger? Ten years ago, in Sierra Leone, the

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world faced the same challenges as a civil war resulted in violent and humiliating acts along the countryside of Kenema and into the city of Freetown. The devastations were massive, unpredictable and in most cases unpreventable by even well-equipped European military fleets. In the context of conflict and trauma, immediacy is a haunting fog that forces one to think and act in survival mode. While organizations descended to assist villages and communities with their most pressing needs, the women who survived the ten-year ordeal were forced to address their emotional state with the resources that were readily available.

## Immediate Healing and Long Term Recovery

This impulsivity for immediate action comes at a historical nexus for rebuilding in Rwanda and Sierra Leone while overlapping with the political unrest in Congo-Kinshasa, the Sudan, and Zimbabwe. We know that women are simultaneously recovering while others are living through unspeakable crimes. We know that they go on to forgive, forget or suppress what they have witnessed. However, what curiously reoccurs in women’s war testimonies are references to spirituality. Sierra Leonean women’s use of spirituality offers psychological clues as to how women continue to press forward and emotionally sustain themselves in the face of trauma. Spirituality aids in women’s ability to transcend their immediate experience and redefine themselves, creating a new world based on a self-tested transformation. Women uphold spiritual relationships as a core component for managing their emotional recovery. Women use spirituality as a self-affirming, personal, and private vehicle for recuperation in areas where organized religion can not sufficiently address the deep interpersonal areas of their lives. Spirituality functions as a regenerative force for individual empowerment by offering the individual an internal source of hope to overcome difficult circum-

stances. By first developing herself, a woman can then take her strength to catalyze others in similar situations. Spirituality as a healing mechanism is not a new concept. However, spirituality as a tool for African women's "self then state" transformation is an under-explored topic of post-conflict gender studies.

## Me, then We

Western psychology focuses on treating trauma within the frameworks of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) emphasizing individualism and self reliance<sup>1</sup>. Though post conflict nations such as Sierra Leone have collectivist attributes, collectivist psychological assumptions ignore the dichotomous nature of individualism and collectivism during traumatic recovery. Individualistic recovery is not limited to a western theoretical psychological outlook. Woman, as an individual in a post conflict setting often are socially mandated to sustain communal relationships. Women are the first ones expected to forgive the sons, brothers, fathers and husbands who carried out heinous crimes. These same women create self-development tools to remind themselves of their purpose and a connection to the "whole". Gendered spirituality serves as a core component in the overall communities' capacity to recover and transform after extreme trauma. Anthropologist Dr. Chris Coulter's (2008)<sup>2</sup> reflects upon witnessing a Kuranko girl's initiation ceremony three years after Sierra Leone's peace declaration. She ultimately concludes that the gendered ceremony is an opportunity for the Kuranko to reinstitute normalcy. Coulter says,

*"The social significance of the ritual is particularly emphasized; the ceremony is not only a social event but has become a key event in reconfiguring social relations after a decade of civil war."*



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Similarly, University of Sierra Leone's Dr. Aisha Fofana Ibrahim's (2006)<sup>3</sup> research revealed that most of the women she contacted participated in or desired some form of cleansing ceremony, because rituals are "an important catharsis",

*"In Sierra Leone, cleansing ceremonies can last from a day to a month depending on the physical and emotional state of the person seeking a "cure" and the amount of money they can afford to spend. Such ceremonies often include ritual baths in which people are bathed by herbalists with a mixture of herbs and then given herbal and/or lasmami potions to drink. Lasmami is a kind of holy water made in two different ways. A wooden slate inscribed with a specific Quranic verse is hung over a container then washed clean or pieces of paper with the Quranic inscriptions are soaked in the water- the water collected in these processes is what is called. Lasmami. (Fofana 188)*

More so, in a post-colonial, post conflict atmosphere, women's spiritual self-care alludes to a larger national liberation and transformation movement that demands her participation in a self-reflective process in order to move the nation toward healing. Dr. Philomena Okeke-Ihejirika (2008)<sup>4</sup> credits spirituality as source of stability amidst the rise of rapid global movements requiring that people

hold onto to something steadfast and reliable.

*"Movements of spiritual revival have become global phenomena in response to the contemporary ontological insecurity fostered by rapid shifts, uncertainties and extreme fluidity" (87)*

What appears as a spiritual "revival" also represents

an external manifestation of women's inner orientation toward transformation giving birth to a new post-conflict social movement.

## Rhetoric and Politics of Recovery

Social healing during and after post - conflict arise out of an individual's will to inflict change functions as form of recovery that taps into longing for connectedness in a fractured community. However, a forced social healing program urging communities to recover so the nation can "move on" undermines the inner work that must happen first. The rhetoric of post conflict recovery in Africa is often painted with a broad brush of reconciliation, forgiveness and national healing. These concepts appear abstract in the face of most women's immediate reality. Her life is lumped together with overall national healing. Her personal experiences are simply one of many who survived to tell their story. Religious leaders are complicit in this umbrella approach by promoting healing in a package of confession and apology performances. Should these techniques automatically act as a catalyst for healing across all countries and conflicts? [Dr. John Hatch's essay \(2006\)](#)<sup>5</sup> on religion and reconciliation in South Africa rightly criticizes how formal religion pollutes recovery because of its unregulated influence in politics.

*The South African experience lends some credence to the claim that reconciliation's praxis problematizes walls of separation between religion and politics – and brings them into dialogue.” (1)*

Hatch's assessment of reconciliation highlights the blurred lines of religion and politics. Here collective healing trumps individual recovery. Women's personal transformation challenges the definition of recovery and healing by circumventing traditional patriarchal spiritual guidelines.

## Prescribed Healing and Personal Recuperation

Like South Africa, Sierra Leone's reconciliation process was put in place under the hands of religious leaders and political enforcement. For example, during Sierra Leone's truth commission, participants were urged to "forgive the rebels" (Schroven 17).<sup>6</sup> Recovery and healing are more than a harmonious prescribed notion of forgiveness. Recovery and healing operate on a spectrum of living conditions that make life easier for women. Again the outsider's gaze and longing for immediate recovery is bound in its own form of neocolonialism. Expecting a community to recuperate via force in a government mandated healing process suppresses the true healing work and pushes recovery further away from the nation's grasp. Women out of post-conflict nations are moving away from the controlled psychological healing by designing personal pathways toward emotional recovery. Women's transformation occurs at multiple points along the continuum of trauma. Personal transformation within this socio-cultural context indicates that women are positioned to change their well-being by using their personal networks and resources. Transformation as a spiritual ideology symbolizes the power and plasticity of spiritual beliefs as an easily accessible tool for coping and recovery.



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Spirituality alone does not adequately answer how women recover. Spirituality is still mired in patriarchy and gender roles that limit an introspective process toward self- transformation and self re-connection. Yet, when one asks what can we do now, we must also ask what are women living in conflict doing now for themselves? We must always consider how they resolve their own problems and what resources they access to do so. As we in the west draft our action plans and brainstorm for solutions, we must be mindful of the dy-

namic psycho-spiritual process that each woman must experience in order to rebuild. If we expect our well thought out plans to take root, we need to learn more about the psychological evolutions that are currently underway. Who are the new generation of women who grew up only knowing a country of conflict, how do they rationalize their self in relation to the state? Can Regina Amadi's theoretical recommendation to follow the "way of our grandmothers" address the mutli-layered challenges of a new era of the self-empowered, self transformed "African Woman"? These questions can only be answered by positioning women to speak for themselves in spaces that can mindfully transform their thoughts into action. As new global female leaders emerge out of Africa, we must not forgo individual development with hopes of a mass healing movement. Post-conflict nations are entering a new era of identity. Women's individual and collective psychosocial state are critical to long term stability and set the rhythm to which the country will march. Spirituality is currently operating in the places where think tanks, political leaders, non-profit organizations cannot... the inner working of women's will and commitment to herself and thus the state.

## Endnotes

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