

Research Master's Programme CASTOR (Cultural Anthropology: Sociocultural Transformations)
Utrecht University, The Netherlands

MSc Thesis: Uros Kovac

Title: The Savage bonfire: practising community reconciliation in post-conflict Sierra Leone

May 2012

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Preferred Journals of Publication: Cultural Anthropology; Transitional Justice

Word Count: 7,928 (incl. text boxes: 14,732)

Abstract

Fambul Tok is a Sierra Leonean non-governmental organization with an agenda of starting and facilitating the post-conflict reconciliation process in the rural communities of the country by organizing bonfires and cleansing ceremonies. It is an attempt of local community reconciliation based on traditional justice and reconciliation mechanisms. In this thesis I focus on ethnographic analysis of a single bonfire that took place in 2010 when a war-time commander Mohamed Savage apologized to the people who hold him responsible for most of the crimes committed in their town, including killing, looting and torture. I show how the creation of the ritualistic space as a context for addressing the crimes in a community setting enables all the actors in it to participate in an event that allows them to reconstruct memories of forgotten social bonds and re-imagine and re-produce their identity as a community through both speech acts and habituated bodily practices. I argue that the dynamics between the traditional cultural practices of everyday justice and forgiveness and the post-conflict reconciliation rituals is a complex one, since the bonfire is not only a simple implementation of traditional practices, but also a vessel for introduction of culture of forgiveness and social harmony into the community. I rely on the data collected through interviews with the participants of the bonfire and a four month long participant observation in their daily lives.

Keywords: Sierra Leone, Fambul Tok, reconciliation, ritual, traditional justice, apology

Introduction

Mohamed Savage, former commander of the Sierra Leonean Army (SLA) and later collaborator with the rebel groups Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) and Revolutionary United Front (RUF) during the 1991-2002 civil war in Sierra Leone -- allegedly responsible for some of the worst atrocities committed in Kono district in the east of the country -- made a trip back to the scene of the alleged crime. On 12 November 2010 he appeared before the people of the town of Tombodu. The event was organized by Fambul Tok (meaning “family talk” in Krio language), a Sierra Leonean non-governmental organization with an agenda of starting and facilitating the reconciliation process in the rural communities of the country by organizing bonfires and cleansing ceremonies. The townspeople remember Savage by some of the worst atrocities recorded in a conflict already infamous around the world for its unimaginable horrors: property destruction, mass killings, physical and psychological torture, amputations, and forced cannibalism. He was now there to take responsibility for the crimes, apologize to the community and beg for forgiveness.

According to Sierra Leoneans living in Kono district, Tombodu is a small town, although with no more than 1,000 inhabitants one might call it a village. It is, however, a central town and a home to the Paramount chief of the Kamaa chiefdom. A trip to Tombodu is a ten hour ride from the capital Freetown on an overcrowded bus or a dingy small van with wooden benches called “poda-poda” that stops in Koidu – the capital of Kono district. After that it is another half hour on motorbike over dirt roads.

The roads are in a bad condition for two reasons: one is neglect by the central government in Freetown, which repaired highways all the way from the Western peninsula and into the continent, but stopped at the eastern districts of Kono and Kailahun, now in many ways detached from the rest of the country. The second reason is military tactics – whichever faction (SLA, AFRC, RUF) was occupying Kono it dug trenches in roads to slow down the enemy barging into the district. Kono was a crucial territory to get a hold of since the ground was full of diamonds. Tombodu was no exception. The town is surrounded by pits filled with shallow water where locals were forced to labor until the diamond fields were almost completely exhausted.

In this thesis I will analyze the reconciliation ceremony that took place in November 2010 in

Tombodu on which Savage apologized for war-time crimes that is locally called the Savage bonfire. I will also draw from extensive data about the everyday family life in Tombodu and Koidu, practices of the Fambul Tok organization around the country, as well as the discourses on forgiveness and reconciliation in other towns and villages in Kono district. Before I do that however I need to locate my topic in the (mostly) anthropological literature of Sierra Leone and the country's transitional justice process.

Sierra Leone and its transitional justice efforts

Until recently Sierra Leone was at the top of the international community's to-do list for post-conflict reconstruction and implementation of transitional justice mechanisms. In 2002 a Special Court for Sierra Leone was established in Freetown by the country's government and the United Nations to prosecute those deemed most responsible for the 11-year long civil war, mainly leaders of different warring factions. Out of the 13 indicted, 8 were convicted and are serving their sentence, 3 passed away, one was recently convicted and at the moment is waiting for his sentence, and one is still at large (although presumed dead)¹. All other perpetrators were given general amnesty, and a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was set up, following the reasoning that most of the perpetrators were young men and children drawn into the conflict against their own will. These initiatives were followed by an extensive campaign put in motion by the Freetown administration parallel to the TRC and adopted by a number of local and international non-governmental organizations, with the goal of spreading the message that vengeance is wrong and that time has arrived to forgive and move on.

Fambul Tok is one more attempt of reconciliation in Sierra Leone, this time a local one, more specifically, on the community level. The NGO is organizing evening bonfires in villages where victims and perpetrators of violence gather around, face each other, and speak openly about their war experiences. Victims tell of their suffering, and perpetrators explain their conduct and beg for forgiveness. In their own words, it is a “face-to-face community-owned program that brings together perpetrators and victims of the violence (...) [It] is built upon Sierra Leone's 'family talk' tradition of discussing and resolving issues within the security of the family circle” (Terry et al. 2011:6-7). The bonfires are followed by different cleansing ceremonies suggested by the community. The idea is to break the tension between victims and perpetrators that might be living close to one another and strengthen solidarity in the community.

Many academic writers from various scientific disciplines, ranging from anthropology, conflict studies, development studies, international relations, and international law studies, have written extensively on Sierra Leone. The recent academic literature on the country can be divided in three relatively separate but highly intertwined thematic categories: the civil war, the post-war justice process, and the culture (social studies not directly concerning the conflict).

Some of the academics (e.g. Richards 1996; Hoffman 2011; Peters 2011) have focused in their work on the role of the youth in the conflict, understandably so since most of the combatants and often even commanders were young boys or teenagers. Richards (1996) argues that one of the main causes for their participation (other than being kidnapped from their families by one of the warring factions and being forced to fight as child soldiers) is their marginalization and frustration with state patrimonialism and what they perceived as archaic culture of corruption and nepotism (an argument also adopted by Peters (2011)). Hoffman (2011) makes an argument that everyday social life in Sierra Leone and Liberia was (or perhaps is) a breeding ground for young men who were being prepared for all sorts of dangerous labor both in unregulated industries such as diamond mining, as well as in the battlefield, starting from community defense organizations and moving to mercenary work. Even today, a fear of the possibility of violence by secretly hired young men during the upcoming 2012 elections expressed by many local and international NGOs shows the immense vulnerability of youth that is still present in the otherwise stable country^{2,3}.

The experts in international law and transitional justice have to a large extent concentrated on

the peculiar experiment of Sierra Leone that is a combination between the ideals of retributive justice (practiced by the Special Court) and restorative justice (appropriated in general amnesty and TRC), as well as a mix of international and local (mainly governmental) ideas and actors. In his ethnographic analysis of the proceedings of the Special Court of Sierra Leone, Kelsall (2009) argues that the court was highly insensitive to the local culture and notions of accountability and justice: its Western-oriented emphasis on establishing material “facts” and ascribing criminal command responsibility was, according to him, ineffective, as well as its emphasis on witness testimonies and truth-telling which is contrary to local ideals of secrecy and ambiguity. Kelsall proposes a more culturally nuanced “dialogical approach” (2009:259) to justice. In an earlier article, Kelsall (2005) also questions the cultural appropriateness of practices of public truth-telling of both victims and perpetrators of violence in the TRC process of taking testimonies and confessions.⁴

The Sierra Leoneans' culture of secrecy and ambiguity has also been recognized by some anthropologists whose work was in no way directly connected to the conflict or the transitional justice process. Mariane Ferme (2001) puts it most clearly: “Here a person who communicates directly what he or she desires or thinks, or who draws unmediated inferences from sensory data and texts, is considered an idiot or no better than a child. Instead, ambivalence is praised. Great value is attached to verbal artistry that couches meanings in puns, riddles, and cautionary tales and to unusual powers of understanding that enable people to both produce and unmask highly ambiguous meanings” (2001:6-7). Adding to this body of literature and these arguments are Rosalind Shaw's work on collective memory in Sierra Leone, on one hand ritual and historical memory of the slave trade (2002), and on the other (and of more direct interest to this thesis) on “memory frictions” (2007) concerning the TRC. She argues that the public verbalization of the past suffering opposed the local “arts of forgetting” (Shaw 2007:194) and displacement of memories in practices such as prayers, ritual healing and church services, thus intensifying “memory frictions” (2007:196) between international and local ideals and practices.

Traditional justice and reconciliation practices in Sierra Leone did not receive any substantial recognition in the literature, understandably so since there were no observable coherent local movements for community post-war reconciliation before Fambul Tok started in 2009. There, were, however, and still are, recognized potentials in local traditional justice practices among different ethnic groups, and Alie (2008) has analyzed these through the case study of the Kpaa Mende people from the southern Sierra Leone. These practices include truth-telling, reintegration rituals and reconciliation ceremonies on community level in the presence of local chiefs (land custodians and dispute settlers). According to Alie (2008), local modes of justice among the Kpaa Mende have reconciliation as their primary goal, and “[f]or reconciliation to be successful, meaningful and long-lasting, it has to be done at the community level and by the people of the community themselves” (2008:142). These are, however, only opportunities, as these methods have not been able to deal with the crimes committed during the war (Alie 2008:143).

Through the analysis of the Savage bonfire, in the context of Fambul Tok activities and daily and family life in Kono district, I intend to make a contribution to the small body of literature that is concerned with traditional local community reconciliation practices in Sierra Leone. Firstly, I will consider the ritualistic nature of the bonfire that is so characteristic for African community justice practices (Huyse 2008:14-15) and show how the tradition and culture of the everyday is being re-imagined in reconciliation rituals. Secondly, I will consider the victims' testimonies and experiences of the bonfire to gain some insight into the emotional side of the truth-telling process, but also the role of local authorities who play a key role in the establishment of harmony in the community through preaching of forgiveness. Finally, in the third part I will consider the apology of the perpetrator, analyzing both his speech and his performance in order to explain the importance and origin of his bodily practice, as well as the limits of the ritual set by the gravity of the horrific crimes that are being addressed.

In order to do this, I need to look into some key concepts and ideas in the literature on post-conflict reconciliation.

How can forgiveness be reached?

According to Daly and Sarkin (2007), reconciliation can be best described as the process of “coming together” (2007:5). More precisely, in a post-conflict setting, it is a question of individual, communal and national strategies of reconstructing social relations that existed in the period before the conflict or transform the current conflict-torn society to reach a more sustainable social cohesion, i.e. seeking either restorative (Capeheart and Milovanovic 2007:55) or transformative justice (Capeheart and Milovanovic 2007:61).

Alternatively, reconciliation can be understood as “an ongoing process of replacing antagonistic memories with memories of previous social bonds – and of replacing a recent history of fratricidal violence with a history that recalls longstanding practices that condemned the taking of human life” (Theidon 2006:456). This temporal vision of reconciliation will be useful when analyzing the re-invention of culture through ritual in Sierra Leone and the way the ritual affects the reconciliation process.

Reconciliation is usually understood as a process rather than a goal (Daly and Sarkin 2007:156). If this is so, reconciliation can be broken down in several stages or steps. Daly and Sarkin (2007) place forgiveness at the top of the ladder as the last step on the road to reconciliation. Forgiveness is hard to define. It is a term usually understood as one laden with moral judgment. While understanding the notions of forgiveness and justice as two opposite reactions to the dispute would be an oversimplification, it is useful to, as Daly and Sarkin do (2007:152), juxtapose them in order to understand them better. In forgiveness, both victim and perpetrator should recognize their shared humanity and the perpetrator should be allowed to be taken back into society on both factual and moral grounds. With justice, especially the extreme form of retributive justice, the perpetrator is punished by isolation, separation from the society he harmed. Forgiveness is an attempt of separating the perpetrator from his deeds, i.e. separating the person from the behavior, in order to recognize his humanity. With justice, a perpetrator is defined by his deed and punished for his behavior. These are, however, the two extremes, and reconciliation, while it may be said its final goal is forgiveness, as a process and a practice “is not comfortable at either extreme: it does not require that perpetrators of the grossest human rights abuses be embraced like brothers and sisters, but neither does it allow a society to deem them so monstrous that they are beyond the human pale” (Daly and Sarkin 2007:152). The ethnographic part of the thesis will look into the bonfire ritual as a part of the reconciliation process.

On the road of reconciliation towards forgiveness Daly and Sarkin (2007) recognize two more steps, less ambitious goals that can serve as stepping stones to the final one. One of them is compassion, meaning recognizing the existence of humanity in another person without the necessity of too much speaking or coming too close to him/her. The other one, even a smaller step, is recognition. Recognition of the perpetrator can mean acknowledging he has a place in the society and the community, which does not require compassion, only non-aggression. It can also have a meaning similar to empathy, i.e. recognizing oneself in the perpetrator. Finally, it can mean understanding the perpetrator in a different way, mainly for what he can become instead of what he has done (Daly and Sarkin 2007:156-157). The concept of recognition will be especially useful in the analysis of the role of authorities at the reconciliation bonfire.

In the practice and theory of reconciliation a special place is given to the element of truth-telling and truth-seeking. In his analysis of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Wilson (2001:37) recognized two major paradigms of truth that were being sought in the testimonies of victims and perpetrators: forensic truth, that focused on fact finding for the sake of creating the final national report of the commission; and the narrative truth, that was to capture the subjectivity of the experience of suffering. The role of the narrative truth was mainly to induce emotional catharsis of individuals

(Wilson 2001:37). Emotional involvement through testifying and truth-telling about the suffering and the crimes is an important element of the reconciliation process, according to psychological, political and cultural arguments that individual healing is best done through truth-telling: “To be healed or reconciled, is to *come to terms* with the trauma, literally to find the words” (Daly and Sarkin 2007:53). This notion, as I have shown before, has been criticized by anthropologists who claim that some people, especially Africans including Sierra Leone, find emotional catharsis in rituals rather than truth-telling (Kelsall 2005) because of the importance of secrecy and ambiguity that pervades their culture (Ferme 2001). The position of truth-telling will be addressed in the ethnography when discussing testimonies of the victims at the bonfire, but also when discussing the limitations of exhuming and challenging the truth at the moment when the offender speaks to the victims.

If forgiveness is to be given, more often than not it first needs to be asked for. Turning again to Daly and Sarkin (2007:161-166), they suggest that the perpetrator has three ways to ask for forgiveness, each of them arguably bringing him closer to the victim and the community and to the final goal. First comes acknowledgment, which, beside affirming the truth of the event, means the perpetrator is taking responsibility for his actions. Secondly, there is apology, which indicates that the offender believes the actions were wrongful and he would not repeat them. Finally, the one that arguably brings the victim and the perpetrator closest together, is atonement, which puts future development in front of the past and where apologetic words of the offender are supported by actions – returning the stolen goods, paying for material or psychological damage, helping in farm work for a period of time, etc. In the last part of my ethnographic analysis I focus on apology that Savage offered on the ceremony, but I move slightly away from the usual consideration of apology as “first and foremost a speech act” (Tavuchis 1991:22) and put slightly bigger focus on bodily performance in his ritualistic way of apologizing. In order to do that, I seek help from Connerton (1989:71) who notices the importance of habituated bodily performance in ceremonies that communicates the message, in this case the one of apology, most clearly.

Asking, looking, taking part

The methods I have applied in this research are the classical methods of anthropology. I have collected the bulk of the data through semi-structured and ethnographic interviews and participant observation. Concerning the Savage bonfire I did interviews with the participators in the event. I applied participant observation with the staff of the Fambul Tok NGO by living with them and following them on their visits to villages around Kono district. I also participated in some settles of local family disputes in Koidu. Other ethnographic interviews were made all around Kono district, mainly in towns of Tombodu and Koidu, and also in the surrounding villages of Teya, Kuchero and Samadu, in order to get a clearer perspective. Also, video materials have been analyzed: recordings of the Savage bonfire, as well as a documentary following Fambul Tok made by a journalist Sara Terry for Catalyst for Peace.

To reflect briefly on the substance of my interviews and the people: while asking questions about the painful past was never easy, I was stunned by the immediate openness and emotional involvement that many of my informants showed me by sharing some of their most traumatic moments with me. Their sincerity and courage has made my data richer and my instinct for Sierra Leonean mentality sharper.

Part 1: Preparing for the ceremony

“What has been done cannot be undone”, said Raymond Komba, deputy chief of Kamaa chiefdom and executive member of Fambul Tok, into a megaphone, addressing the crowd gathered around the bonfire in front of the Tombodu courtyard. Around 500 people from four sections of the chiefdom came to witness the public appearance of former captain Mohamed Savage who they hold responsible for most of the atrocities committed in and around the town. They came to put the face to the name, in this case the name of the chief perpetrator who allegedly ordered killings, looting and destruction of their homes 12 years before, during the Sierra Leone civil war. The atmosphere was

tense and no one was certain how it would all play out.

“This bonfire did not just come about easily”, remembers Tamba Kamanda, Fambul Tok coordinator for Kono district, at his home in Tombodu a year after the bonfire. “It started in 2009, when Sara [Terry, journalist/film-maker] came here, and the story came up, the one of Tamba Joe, who killed 17 or 18 of his relatives in Foindor [village 30 minutes walking from Tombodu]. So that story became interesting to them and they started shooting. We were tracing Tamba Joe.”

Tamba Joe is the name behind one of the many harrowing wartime memories of the people of Kono district. They remember him as one of their own, their neighbor, who after being captured by the rebels turned against his own family. In one house in Foindor that was subsequently burnt together with all the other houses, he shot 18 men, women and children of his close family. He then beheaded them, collected their heads in a bag, and took it to Tombodu to present to a person he viewed as his superior and his commander. That was Mohamed Savage, who in 1998 entered Tombodu leading the government soldiers and later, after the military coup in Freetown, found himself having to collaborate with local rebel forces. The commander took the bag of heads and, along with many other dead bodies, threw it into a pit of water near the village motorbike parking ground, a place that is now infamously called “the Savage pit”.

This and many other stories are still spoken about from time to time by the survivors and their families living in and around Tombodu a decade after the conflict. Some of the stories are about killings and looting done by young boys and civilians kidnapped by the rebels. Others are about Mohamed Savage himself, stories of him personally performing amputations, forcing cannibalism and disposing of dead bodies. Whether they be about young civilians turned rebels or the captain himself, all of them are pointing to Mohamed Savage as the one responsible for all the atrocities and suffering, since he was the man in charge.

The idea of Mohamed Savage facing the people in Tombodu came about through the initiative of Fambul Tok founder and director John Caulker who, while searching with his team for the above mentioned Tamba Joe, instead found the former captain who was just released from prison after serving a nine year sentence. The concept of Fambul Tok as a reconciliation initiative was presented to the commander who, after some hesitation, decided that appearing before the community that holds him guilty for all the war-time atrocities is the right thing for him to do. His main motive at the beginning of the process was not to challenge what people might be saying about him, but still to “shed some light”⁵ on the war-time events for which he considers himself not in all instances directly guilty, but for the most part responsible. Shedding some light on the events would therefore mean confronting the truth both by the captain and the community in a face-to-face dialogue. In the captain's own (still militant) words, “you must say the truth, the truth is the weapon of everything”⁶. Soon enough, the drive behind the organization of the reconciliation bonfire turned from Fambul Tok director's initiative to captain's continued pushing and insisting that he “need[s] to reconcile with my [his] people”⁷.

1.1. Setting up the bonfire

On the early afternoon of November 12th 2010 Tombodu started organizing for the big evening event. People came from four sections of the chiefdom, most of them traveling with local motorbike riders, bringing in wood for the big bonfire. Men were given the task of gathering the wood and some benches for sitting and taking these to the front of the courtyard, the twenty foot long concrete open structure, with no walls, only roof and pillars. This is where the big meetings are held when the whole populace is invited to be present, when the ideas for the community

development are being discussed and larger scale disputes are being settled by the local authorities, most often land disputes. The place chosen for the bonfire was not the courtyard though, but the thirty foot wide open space in front of it, the largest open space in town, big enough to accommodate a couple of hundred people and a big fire. This space does not have any specific use in the local social life, but it was the obvious and most practical place for one of the largest events the people would ever see in their town. Women were in charge of preparing the food for the community. There were many newcomers to the town, so most of the cooking was done in public spaces on the sides of the small paths as women would organize themselves according to the sections they came from. Some women that resided in Tombodu prepared the rice and the sauce the usual way, on the verandas and in the backyards of their own homes, but nevertheless cooking was largely a public communal effort and the food was shared among everyone present.

In the late afternoon people started gathering around the pile of wood set up in front of the courtyard. Everyone was invited to the event: young men, young boys, girls, women, the elderly. Several benches were reserved for the “stakeholders”, the “big men”, the people of authority in the community: Paramount chief, Speaker (Deputy paramount chief), Section chiefs, Town chiefs, Pastors, Imams, Traditional healers, men from some wealthier families, and Mommy queens (leaders of women). Differently from most of the people, the stakeholders were dressed somewhat smarter, with Africana dresses and shirts that are most of the time used for more formal ceremonies and meetings. The ceremony started with some “cultural events”: a local magician was there to perform, and so did the women of the Bundu society, the biggest female secret society in Sierra Leone. Some of them were dressed in traditional Africana dresses, some of them in skirts made of straw used only in rituals linked to this secret society. Most of them had either their faces or ankles covered in white rice flour. During the performances Savage was brought in, with a small entourage consisting of Fambul Tok directors and a few journalists. As night fell, the large bonfire was lit by the townsmen and the ceremony was ready to start. Through cultural dances that are ordinarily reserved for the secret society ceremonies, through gathering of all relevant formally dressed authorities in one place, and through a bonfire bigger than any that most of the participators have ever seen, a special ritual space has been created in the center of the village where out-of-the-ordinary events can take place.

Ethnographic accounts and anthropological literature on traditional justice in Africa largely emphasize its ritualistic nature. Some of the best known examples are the studies of the Mato Oput ceremonies of Northern Uganda, in which the perpetrator and the victim at the ceremony drink a mix of an alcohol drink and an extract from the root of the oput tree from the same vessel, after which they perform a “stepping on the egg” ceremony or some variant of a cleansing ceremony (Latigo 2008:104-107). Cleansing ceremonies are observed in several other post-conflict African states, such as Angola, Mozambique and Sierra Leone (Latigo 2008:107). In East Africa, after the conflict among the Turkana, elders called upon traditional peace conferences as meetings led by local stories, proverbs, songs, dance, invoking of the spirits and animal sacrifice (Daly and Sarkin 2007:87). Similar ceremonies were organized in Kenya after a conflict between the Luo and the Maasai (Daly and Sarkin 2007:87). Most of the bonfires organized by Fambul Tok are also followed by some kind of a cleansing ceremony that is suggested by the community, and the bonfires themselves are also rituals in a sense that they are intended to create a space for behavior that is different than the one of everyday life or with a different meaning, in this case speaking openly about the injustices and grievances, only this time about those normally rarely mentioned that took place during the war.

All the studies on traditional justice mechanisms in Africa mentioned emphasize the centrality of the creation of the ritual space for the community reconciliation and establishment of justice that is sustainable and heart-felt. The central idea in most of the studies however is that the

reconciliation rituals performed by the people are important because they originate in the local culture and everyday practices which are familiar to the people. Fambul Tok bonfires and the Savage bonfire are, in a way, the case in point. Consider this excerpt where Lilian, a Fambul Tok fieldworker in Kono district, remembers the bonfires from her childhood years long before the war and its place in the everyday life of the people in Kono district:

“When I was a small girl, I remember there was a place in the middle of the town. Every day people would come back from their farms carrying logs of wood on their heads. They would bring this wood and put it in that particular place and at night the young people would put on a fire. People were used to it, you would see children playing around it, roasting cassava to eat, plantains, bananas... Some would be sitting and telling stories of what happened in the farm, some stories about what happened in the past. That would be just around the daybreak, only then people could meet after being in the farm the whole day. After the children have played for some time they would go to bed early, so they would just disappear. Then you could see the elder men coming out to settle disputes. Some women would also come. The elders would then summon the people and say 'let's sit down and settle this between this person and this person'. Then they would come and both explain [...] They would stand up and argue and argue, but at the end they must settle the dispute. If the case was hard and they couldn't settle they would then call the chief”.

A bonfire, according to Lilian, had three roles in the social life of Sierra Leoneans: to bring young people from the village together to socialize and have fun; to give space to the community to preserve its culture and identity through passing the stories of past times to young generations; and to settle local disputes, such as land disputes and family issues, by intervention of the elders and chiefs. All the three functions merge into one, which is the preservation of harmony and sense of belonging in the community.

Most of the Sierra Leoneans in Kono district however, excluding some of the elders and the chiefs, do not remember the bonfires as an important part of their daily lives. Those who do never fail to recognize they have not been performed for a very long time and that even in the more remote villages of Kono district where tradition and culture are better preserved the bonfires are a rare sight.⁸ During my four-month stay in Kono district, traveling and staying in both larger towns and off-the-beaten-path villages, while I have seen several instances of settling disputes intra and inter families and communities, I have not witnessed one bonfire, nor did any of the villagers mention it to me as a part of their everyday lives.

The founders and fieldworkers of Fambul Tok do not deny that the bonfires and most of the other ritual practices they help organize in the communities are no longer part of the Sierra Leonean everyday life. Quite the contrary, they are proud to facilitate the indigenous practices and rituals that have not been performed for decades. Here it is important to emphasize that Fambul Tok is a Sierra Leonean idea, and, even though the organization is mainly funded by money from the United States, it is thought up, founded and practiced both on a national and local level almost exclusively by Sierra Leoneans. This point is important, because it makes the effort clearly distinctive from international transitional justice mechanisms, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

The literature on traditional community justice mechanisms and rituals does not thoroughly address the dynamics that takes place when they are being implemented. The complexity of this dynamics is only being hinted at by some authors, e.g. Alie: “The term ‘traditional’ with its Eurocentric connotations often tends to suggest profoundly internalized normative structures, patterns followed from ‘time out of mind’ in static economic and social circumstances. It must be borne in mind that African institutions, whether political, economic or social, have never been inert. They respond to changes resulting from several factors and forces. [...] The word ‘traditional’ [...] implies a dynamic process” (2008:133). Most of the literature, while some of it recognizing the difference between what justice rituals used to be and what they are now (e.g. Latigo 2008, Ingelaere 2008), consider

community post-war reconciliation justice ritual practices as simply implementation of traditional rituals to a new setting. This is an over-simplified interpretation. Based on the ethnographic data I have collected, I would argue that Fambul Tok reconciliation bonfires as rituals, including the Savage bonfire, are practices that are transferred from partially remembered and partially imagined daily lives of Sierra Leoneans to a ritualistic space. The daily life of the community has been re-imagined and re-introduced into the society in the form of a ritual. There are two main reasons for this. One is to address the issues that are new in the communities: severe crimes committed during the war. These issues were left unaddressed due to national policy of general amnesty and the government's promotion of "forgive and forget" way of thinking; and the inability of local everyday mechanisms that are confined to land and family disputes to address crimes as severe as murder, rape, amputation and torture. It is impossible to imagine Savage returning to Tombodu to face the people without the creation of the ritualistic space reserved for extraordinary events. The second reason is that it is an attempt at consolidation and strengthening of partially forgotten or lost communal identity that is laden with motifs of forgiveness, harmony and peace. As Connerton (1989) writes about the commemorative ceremonies: "What, then, is being remembered in commemorative ceremonies? Part of the answer is that a community is reminded of its identity as represented and told in a master narrative [...] Its master narrative is more than a story told and reflected on; it is a cult enacted" (1989:70). While the Savage bonfire was not a commemorative ceremony but a ritual performance, this argument still stands: the ritual of the bonfire as it was thought out by Fambul Tok was an attempt to restore the people's sense of identity through, in one way reminding them, and in another producing what might be their forgotten culture.

This argument will grow further on in the thesis and will be clearer after I address the problem of past and bodily practice at the bonfire. We should, however, consider the events in the order they were happening to get the full story. The ceremony started with victims' testimonies.

Part 2: Testimonies at the bonfire

"The floor is now open", said the Deputy Chief, inviting anyone from the crowd gathered around the bonfire in Tombodu who wishes to speak about the past injustices they feel have been inflicted upon them during the war. Victims' testimonies are one of the key elements of bonfires organized by Fambul Tok. The bonfires are designed so that the testimonies are entirely voluntary, and no one is expected, let alone forced, to speak at the bonfire. "When the day of the bonfire comes, we never know what is going to happen. So many times we were surprised and shocked about what we had heard and what people have spoken", says Abubakkarr of Fambul Tok.

In this part of the thesis I will focus on experiences of some of the victims of war-time atrocities in Tombodu. Two of the women, Kumba Bundema and Sia Bundema, have spoken at the bonfire, testifying about the wrongs that have been inflicted upon them, while the third one, a man, Tamba Mansaray, has not, but his experience and his view on the event gives us good insight for the analysis of the ceremony.⁹

It should be said at this point that everyone living in Tombodu today is a victim of war. Almost all the houses have been burnt; almost whole town's population has been displaced, i.e. forced to live in the bush for months hiding from the rebels and soldiers or making a run for the border with Guinea; those few that stayed in town were forced to physical work such as carrying loads or mining diamonds and some of them were beaten and molested; and everyone has a story of a parent, a child or a relative being tortured, kidnapped or killed during the war. I have chosen to focus in this thesis on the three people I have mentioned above mainly because they have participated or give an interesting insight to the Savage bonfire.

2.1. *"I plead, let us forgive Savage": authorities in the process of reconciliation*

That night in Tombodu three people decided to speak of their past experiences. The first person to come forward and speak about her war-time experience was Kumba Bundema, one of the more influential women in Kono. Her older sister is a Mommy queen -- a women leader -- in Tombodu, she is herself a woman leader in a neighborhood in Koidu (the capital of Kono district), and an active member of a political party. "I was the first person the Paramount Chief called to talk about what happened to me and to my family, and I accepted", she says. She was also experienced at giving statements about her war experiences, as she spoke at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission several years before.

As Kumba Bundema "took the floor", she repeated the story of her experiences that everyone in the village had already heard. She resolutely stepped in front of the crowd gathered in a circle around the bonfire and spoke into the megaphone so as to be heard by around 500 men, women and children. "I am one of the people who felt the hardest pinch of Savage from what he did to me", she spoke in Krio, and a man shouted a translation in Kono language after her every sentence. The story was about her brother being beaten to death in front of her by Savage himself, and her being shot in the foot by one of the rebels. Her speech was laden with pronounced determination, engagement and dramatization.

For the second part of her speech Kumba Bundema took up a different role: the one of a respected stakeholder in the Tombodu community. Not only did she forgive Savage while speaking at the bonfire, but went to such an extent as to plead on his behalf.

"Today because of the war I don't have any money to pay the school fees for my children. But if they put Savage in front of me so I can cut him, will that do for me, will it bring me money? No. So please, I plead to all of you sitting here, my mothers, my fathers, my small and big brothers. If we hurt him, we will do harm before God. We need to forgive him. So as I'm here with all of you my brothers today, despite all the bitterness in my heart, I am ready to forgive him this night. That is for my own sake, but also because the Paramount Chief has told us to forgive that man. Even though the chief already talked, still on behalf of me and the Paramount Chief and all the other chiefs again I plead, let us forgive Savage."¹⁰

Kumba Bundema set out to make an example of herself: she was a woman who went through enormous suffering and trauma; she knew Savage from very early childhood (Savage was born in Kono district) and was appalled to have him cause so much pain to her during the war; and yet she managed to forgive the perpetrator and accept him. The purpose of her speech was to promote forgiveness among the people, especially the women among whom she had large influence, and she has done that through playing a double role: the one of person of authority, which is to encourage, lead and inspire people for certain action and behavior; and the one of victim, which makes her credible to speak about suffering and forgiveness.

This occasion shows how even though forgiveness and reconciliation are meant to happen after both a victim and an offender have made their cases, the offender apologized and the victim accepted the apology, as is usually presented in traditional communal justice practices that conclude with reconciliation rituals (Alie 2008, Latigo 2008), the narrative of forgiveness and reconciliation start earlier. In fact, that narrative begins the very moment the two parties have agreed to settle their case on a local level, by local meaning either in the community or in the family. What happened at the Savage bonfire was not an exceptional case, but the usual practice in local settlements of disputes. In the settling of a theft case among the family members in Koidu in which I had an opportunity to take part in, from the beginning of the process it was fairly clear to me and to other participants that it will almost certainly go towards the restoration of harmonious relationship and a

certain level of forgiveness on the victim's part. Anything else, including a stand-alone punishment of the offender, would be considered a failure. And, as the settling of the dispute was indeed based on discussion and conversation in a controlled social setting led by summoned local chiefs where both parties were given the time, space and even an obligation to speak openly about the issue, the narrative of forgiveness was from the beginning at the front of discussion. The local chiefs have a double role here: the first one is to solve the case, meaning to establish the factual truth and the guilt or innocence of the accused and perhaps an appropriate punishment; and the second is to rebuild a social relationship that has been broken by ensuring that the victim will forgive the offender and accept him as his brother if he apologizes and repents. One does not go without the other. This is the reason many Sierra Leoneans prefer this way of settling disputes: they claim the police and the judicial process push people apart, while settling the case in the circle of family or community led by family elders or local chiefs bring the people together. To reach the goals of reintegration and restoration of the harmonious community start with the narrative of forgiveness and reconciliation right at the beginning of every case settling.

Two main points can be analyzed here. Firstly, the narrative of forgiveness and the issue of forgiveness itself. The closest kind of narrative that can be found in literature on reconciliation is the one that Wilson (2001) identified in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a “religious-redemptive” kind that “pursued a substantive notion of reconciliation as a common good, defined by confession, forgiveness and redemption, and the exclusion of vengeance” (Wilson 2001:109). Among the Sierra Leoneans, this kind of narrative is pursued by the authorities and the elders, who from the very beginning give a clear incentive, even pressure, to the victim that he (or she) needs to forgive, mostly for the good of the community. In the Savage bonfire, Kumba Bundema was combining her roles of authoritative person to influence the behavior of people and of victim to make herself an example of what could and needs to be done to insure harmony in the community.

But, to be fair, was it indeed forgiveness that Kumba was asking from her brothers, sisters and neighbors so early in the process of reconciliation? Daly and Sarkin (2007), who juxtapose forgiveness with (mainly retributive) justice, characterize forgiveness as a point of recognition of the “common humanity of perpetrator and victim”, when “embracing the perpetrator back into society's fold” takes place, and when “the perpetrator is separated from his deed” (2007:152). This sounds like an awful lot to ask from a victim on a single night of reconciliation (or at all for that matter) and indeed is not what Kumba pleaded for. It is more useful at this point to, as Daly and Sarkin (2007) do, conceptualize reconciliation as a process, and forgiveness as its last step (2007:156). The authors offer two stepping stones before reaching forgiveness, the lower of the two being recognition (2007:156-157). Recognition can mean several things: it might be acknowledging that a perpetrator has a place in the society as well and accepting his place, therefore requiring only acceptance and non-aggression; secondly, it can mean empathizing with a perpetrator, recognizing him as someone who is familiar; or thirdly, to see him not for what he has done, but for what he is and could become (Daly and Sarkin 2007:156-157). It can be said that it is exactly recognition that Kumba (or, more generally, Kono authorities) pleaded for at the bonfire, be it recognizing Savage as a human being, as a Sierra Leonean and a Kono native, or as someone potentially useful for the community. It is still, however, important, that the narrative comes to the forefront at the very beginning of the bonfire/dispute settlement, since it shows the local understanding that reconciliation is a long and hard process that needs to be worked on for a long time and that the goal of forgiveness is clearly defined from the start.

Second point that can be made here is the one of authority and community. Fambul Tok bonfires and dispute settling practices are forms of community adjudication and reconciliation. According to Allott (quoted in Daly and Sarkin 2007): “At the heart of African adjudication lies the

notion of reconciliation or the restoration of harmony. The job of a court or an arbitrator is less to find the facts, state the rules of law, and apply them to the facts than to set right a wrong in such a way as to restore harmony within the disturbed community.” (2007:80). How is this harmony being restored among the Sierra Leoneans? Generally speaking, communities can come in many shapes and sizes, can be based on race, ethnicity, religion or some other shared trait, and most of the individuals belong to many communities at once (Daly and Sarkin 2007:81). But for most Sierra Leoneans communities are, simply, a “group of people living and working together”¹¹, that is neighbors and family members usually from the same village or part of town; but also, importantly, communities are defined by the elders and local chiefs, whose authority is almost unquestionable and are given high respect. Every time I have asked a Sierra Leonean to show me his/her community, I would be immediately taken to the local chief responsible for the area, street or village so he can show me around and introduce me to people. Harmony in the community is practically equated with the respect for elders and local chiefs. Tamba Kamanda, a staff member of Fambul Tok from Tombodu, articulates it best: “We believe that elders are not as old as God, but that they have been staying with him for a long time”.¹² Every effort of community reconciliation and the restoration of harmony in the community has to involve the appreciation of the almost unquestionable authority of the elders and local chiefs, and a dispute settlement is an opportunity for elders and local chiefs to assert their authority; even, it seems, when it comes to forgiving almost unimaginable war crimes.

Drawing upon ethnographic data that I have collected, it can be easily argued that every attempt at dispute settlement, including war-related community justice ceremonies such as Fambul Tok bonfires, is a confirmation and re-establishment of local authority figures, which in turn, for Sierra Leoneans, leads to a more harmonious community.

2.2. *“It is not good to keep things in your heart”: healing through truth-telling*

The second victim who spoke at the bonfire was Kumba's older sister Sia Bundema, who shocked many of the villagers who have never heard her terrifying story. I will not go into details of her war-time experience in this thesis as analyzing it would have to involve enormous emotional involvement and still would not lead to substantial insight into the topic of this thesis. I will just mention that it is one of the hardly imaginable stories of atrocities that the conflict in Sierra Leone was notorious for that have been largely documented by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report (TRCSL 2004), including physical and psychological torture through rape and forced cannibalism. According to villager's recollections, differently from Kumba's speech, Sia's testimony was laden with intense emotions and tears.

I asked Sia Bundema how she experienced the bonfire and testifying in front of the community. As I explained to her the topic of my research, I witnessed a tornado of mixed emotions pointed at me, ranging from overwhelming hatred from bringing up her painful memories all over again, to eventually thanking me for paying attention.

“It gets me upset, but I'm glad to see you. It's not good to keep things in your heart. [...] I'm often alone, and it's not good to be alone when you have a problem like this. When I'm by myself it is not good for me.”

Today, Sia Bundema relies on the good will of her community and family in her everyday life, as they provide her with shelter and food and support her in her latest endeavor to go back to school and earn a teachers' degree.

During our interview, even though Sia Bundema was visibly shaken and had an extremely hard time remembering anything about Savage or war, she eventually seemed quite keen on telling

me her story. In fact, I was having a very hard time steering the interview back to the topic of bonfire as she would always keep going back to her war-time experience with Savage.

It is very hard to argue for either the benefits or the costs of truth-telling and testimonies at reconciliation practices and appropriations of transitional justice mechanisms in Sierra Leone. Truth-telling is the cornerstone of most reconciliation mechanisms, following the argument that truth-telling leads to individual healing, and eventually to a reconciled society (Minow, in Wilson 2003:371). The argument can be psychological, political and cultural. Some psychologists believe that trauma is recorded nonverbally, that it is unspeakable, too horrible to talk about (Herman, quoted in Daly and Sarkin 2007:52), and as such remains a heavy psychological burden for the individual. On the political side, some layers of societies after the conflict might try to impede truth-telling to avoid certain political circumstances that would harm them if the truth was to come out. Culturally, some societies foster the culture of secrecy and ambiguity, as Ferme (2001) argues is the case for Sierra Leone. All of these elements hint that then the key to cure trauma is speech, i.e. articulating the memory and sharing it in order to own it. “To be healed or reconciled, is to *come to terms* with the trauma, literally to find the words. [...] Truth-telling can reverse the disempowerment because, in the telling, it becomes the survivor's own story which she can tell in her own words, in her own say” (Daly and Sarkin 2007:53). The argument is also emotional: Wilson (2001), who recognized four types of truth in the South African TRC process, claimed that the narrative truth – coming from the open-ended individual testimonies – was the one that played the main role in inducing the emotional catharsis of individuals (Wilson 2001:37).

On the other hand, the critique of the approach of truth-telling as healing and reconciliation often refer to African states as examples of cultural inappropriateness, where justice rituals are more fitting, and Sierra Leone is a case in point. The argument is usually made in literature that analyzes the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings. Tim Kelsall (2005) reports that truth-telling was not at all the most important part of the healing-through-reconciliation process at the TRC. Telling the truth in public did not evoke many strong feelings during the TRC hearings. Only during the last day of the series of hearings, where no truth was told but only reconciliation ceremony took place, some emotional catharsis was finally reached. “The ceremony had a remarkable impact on the hearings, transforming the atmosphere from one of virtual crisis and farce, to one of emotional release and reconciliation” (Kelsall 2005:378). Shaw (2007) argues that the Sierra Leoneans have developed alternative memory techniques which have been unappreciated at the TRC hearings (2007:206), that most of her informants told her that reconciliation depends on forgetting rather than truth-telling (2007:184), and that the Sierra Leoneans' “art of forgetting” is closely related to their focus on the future (2007:196).

My subjective experience coming from both semi-structured interviews and impersonal encounters with many victims of war in Kono district is that Sierra Leoneans, while becoming very emotionally involved when being asked questions about the painful past, generally do not shy away from speaking about it and occasionally even steer the conversation in that direction. At times it would be a long detailed description of war-time happenings, at other times a short sentence summing up what has been lost – a child, a parent, a relative, a house, a limb. This is shown above with the example of Sia Bundema, but I also found it present in many encounters I have had both in larger towns and in more remote villages in Kono district. Whether this is a long-standing cultural trait or a strong influence of very active national and international non-governmental apparatus (including Fambul Tok) that usually promotes healing through truth-telling in different forms is hard for me to judge.

One thing can be observed though from the interviews: almost every narrative of the past is accompanied and often overwhelmed by a narrative of the present: past injustices are always referred to in context of present suffering. In the case of Sia Bundema, it is loneliness. In many other cases it is poverty, or a feeling of being lost as a consequence of a devastating war. Suffering of today is more real

and to be dealt with for a Sierra Leonean, and I feel that Shaw (2007) makes a strong point when claiming that resources for rebuilding lives would bring about true healing, rather than insisting on the articulation of the past suffering (2007:205).

2.3. *“Bonfires are not for criminals like this”: when past and past collide*

Sia Bundema has said many times -- to the Fambul Tok staff, to me, and to Savage himself -- that she has forgiven the commander from the bottom of her heart. To what extent this can be credited to Fambul Tok and the bonfire is impossible to accurately tell, but today she is in good relationship with the local staff that she sees from time to time. Sia Bundema's participation was indeed entirely voluntary, she herself made the choice to be there and speak. However, it must be noted that her heroic stance did not come about without the immense emotional involvement, and it is questionable if facing the commander in the context of the bonfire was necessary and the right way for her to deal with the emotions. I asked her what she remembered most clearly about the ceremony and how she felt. She said:

“What I remember from that day is the fire. When I saw that fire, I remember, it is the same kind of fire that they put on my child. They killed him and put him on fire because he didn't want to do the rebel work. Hey! I held my breast like this. May god forgive them.”

While many of the villagers in Tombodu are of opinion that the bonfire was an important and fine event they will be retelling their children, Sia Bundema was not at all the only victim who found the bonfire a preposterous way of organizing such an event. Another one is 50-year-old Tamba Mansaray. Tamba's right hand is now deformed and almost useless because a rebel used a blunt cutlass in an attempt to cut it off.¹³ He is one of the few people who for one reason or the other stayed in Tombodu almost the whole time during the occupation, witnessing the burning, looting and killing that took place in the village. Tamba was pretty much disgusted and annoyed by the idea to use bonfire for this kind of ceremony:

“We used to gather around bonfires before, when I was a young boy, and we would be dancing, and if I saw a girl over there I would go to her”, he says, standing up and showing me how he would approach a girl that he fancied during the bonfire in his youth. “But to bring a man like this to a bonfire! No... Bonfires are places where you can have fun, enjoy yourself, not bring criminals like this”.

Differently from Sia, Tamba never said he could forgive Savage, nor that he ever wants to see him again near Tombodu, simply because his crimes were too serious.

Both for Sia Bundema and Tamba Mansaray, direct victims of physical and psychological torture, a bonfire triggered a memory of the past, but a different kind of memory for each of them: for Sia it meant revisiting the darkest moments of her past through painful flashbacks, forcing her to suffer through remembering and try to deal heads-on with her pain; for Tamba, it was a perversion and corruption of the memory of a joyful time long gone and tradition no longer practiced. For Sia, the past re-invoked was the one of suffering and tragedy; for Tamba it was the reminder of a better past. To better understand these two different narratives of the past, Theidon's (2006) temporal perspective on reconciliation is useful. For her, reconciliation is “an ongoing process of replacing antagonistic memories with memories of previous social bonds – and of replacing a recent history of fratricidal violence with a history that recalls longstanding practices that condemned the taking of human life” (Theidon 2006:456). These correspond to two kinds of memories that this reconciliation process is attempting to bring to surface: one of war-time pain that is to be dealt with, and the other of forgotten tradition, joy and communal spirit that is to be re-sparkled. In the Savage bonfire (and, for that matter, other Fambul Tok reconciliation ceremonies) the war-time memories can be localized in the content of

the ceremony – victims' and perpetrators' speeches and physical presence; while the memories of forgotten social bonds and traditional life are situated in the form – the bonfire as a discussion platform (with all additional cultural material providing context).

The examples of Sia Bundema and Tamba Mansaray show that these two different narratives of the past -- the one of war-time suffering and the one of joyful youth-hood -- are for them still unresolved and what a challenge it is to any reconciliation effort to deal with these two conflicting narratives of the past. The reaction of Tamba Mansaray is especially telling, even though it is not a typical reaction that Sierra Leoneans in Tombodu have about the bonfire. It shows how a narrative of the joyful past can even be potentially contaminated if intertwined with the memories of terrible crimes and suffering.

Part 3. “As I kneel down, I ask for forgiveness”: apology as performance and speech

“Now, Savage wants to respond to what he has heard”, shouted the Deputy Chief into the megaphone. Testimonies lasted longer than expected, and even though quite a few people raised their hand wanting to speak, time was running out and people were becoming restless. It was time for the main event of the evening: the accused was about to address the crowd.

There was not the least bit of hesitation when the former commander stepped into the circle towards the bonfire. There was commotion and anticipation in the crowd as he took the megaphone to speak. Next to him, now standing, was the Paramount Chief. Savage presented him with a collection of kola nuts for the chiefs, mommy queens and youth leaders that are customarily given to authorities as a sign of respect and appreciation, whether when one is for the first time entering the community or attempting to summon the authorities for the settlement of a case. Kola nuts in Sierra Leone as tools for summoning the chiefs have been decades ago replaced by money, but they are still fairly often given as symbolic tokens to show respect, gratitude and humility. They are also used when seeking forgiveness.

He then began to speak:

“This kola that I am giving to you is not to bribe you. As I swear to the Paramount Chief before us, I want to beg this chieftom in front of him and show respect.

I was with thousands of men here as a soldier. When war came to this country, we roamed all over. But today, I am the only one who has come before you to beg because of what happened. So as we talk, let us talk the truth and remember that there is God. ”

Immediately, on the mention of truth and God in the same sentence, the crowd became aggravated and noise overcame the speaker. “You were not thinking about God while you were here during the war, you never knew he was there until today!” the people responded, as I learned from the interviews¹⁴. As he was trying to speak commotion in the crowd kept interrupting him, and the Paramount Chief felt the need to calm the people down. He asked them to “exercise patience” so Savage can “explain himself”, and, similarly as Kumba Bundema before, he vouched for the commander: “With all that Savage did, it is really hard for such a man to come forward to meet the people that he wronged and ask for forgiveness”. The people were now silent and the megaphone was again in Savage's hands.

He went on to say he never intended to hurt the people he took the oath to protect when he became a soldier as a young boy. He claimed nothing good came out of him joining the army and that he regretted it. He said he could have joined the government security apparatus without showing remorse, but even though he spent more than eight years in jail his heart was still aching and conscience bothering as he knew the people of Tombodu are retelling horrible stories about him. He insisted that, even though he was the commander and everyone points the finger at him, all his “boys”, meaning soldiers and rebels, did whatever they wished and he had no control over them.

He accepted responsibility for the crimes that took place twelve years before. “There are people here whose father died. Their mother, sister, brother died. [...] And we were responsible for the killings in this war.”

He then went down on his knees.

“I now call on the Chief, Mommy Queen, pastor, imam, tribal chiefs, and youths. As I kneel down, I ask for forgiveness. For everything that has been mentioned against me. I know that it hurts, but I also have pain in my heart and this is not easy for me. [...] Anything that any man does in this world has to come out in the light. But I am alone tonight before you, and I ask for forgiveness“.

Daly and Sarkin (2007) propose a theory that, if an offender wishes to signal that he is asking for forgiveness, he has three possibilities: acknowledgment, apology and atonement (2007:161). Each of them is another step on the path to reconciliation, as each of them further empowers the victim to make a decision whether to forgive. Acknowledgment, beside the affirmation of the truth of the events, adds a moral dimension in that the perpetrator accepts the responsibility for them (Daly and Sarkin 2007:161). Apology adds another layer of morality, as it recognizes the events as wrongful. According to Tavuchis (1991) apology is “concerned with the fundamental sociological question of the grounds for membership in a designated moral community” (1991:7). Apology, then, is a key step that can transform the coexistence in the physical community to a more substantial membership in the moral one. Finally, atonement means transforming words into action or expressing repentance through actions, usually in a form of restitution, compensation or reparation (Daly and Sarkin 2007:164). In the case of this Fambul Tok bonfire, Savage went for the first two, as he acknowledged his responsibility for the events, recognized them as wrongful and asked for forgiveness. If we consider again a claim by Shaw (2007) that healing for the Sierra Leonean victims would be best brought about through offering resources and tangible possibilities to rebuild lives in present and future (2007:205), we can argue that atonement would be considered the crucial step towards reconciliation in a Sierra Leonean setting. The bonfire, however, is a ritual space intended for truth-telling, confession, apology and acceptance, and only one step in a long reconciliation process. Apology is not enough, but at this point it was a big step and the limit for this ceremony.

Additionally, it is important to consider the way Savage apologized and ask why he did it in the described way. To answer that question we need to peek into the everyday life of Sierra Leoneans and learn how apology “works” in the family setting. Consider this excerpt from an interview with Abubakkarr from Koidu town, a Fambul Tok fieldworker, who remembers how exactly he asked for forgiveness when he was a child:

“When I was a kid, maybe sixteen years old, I was very stubborn. My father, to punish me, would stop talking to me. They [family members] would then call my uncle, who was a very strict Muslim. He would whip me with a cane twelve times and make me go before my father. I would have to go before him so my belly touched the ground, hold his foot, and repeat 'daddy, forgive me, I beg'. My father would refuse three or four times. Then my uncle and other family members would start persuading him, telling him like: 'he will never grow and learn if you don't forgive him, he is your son', things like that. My mother would start crying. Then he would finally touch me on the shoulder [while I was begging him on my belly] and that meant he has forgiven me.”

Notable in this example are the prominent bodily practices in the act of apologizing: Abubakkarr on his belly in front of his father, and Savage on his knees in front of the Paramount Chief.¹⁵ For Tavuchis (1991) apology is “first and foremost a speech act” (1991:22), but the bodily performance should not be neglected. Connerton (1989) writes about the body in commemorative ceremonies, but his argument can be applied to any ritual performance, including this one. He writes: “[I]f the ceremonies are to work for their participants, if they are persuasive to them, then those

participants must be not simply cognitively competent to execute the performance; they must be habituated to those performances. This habituation is to be found [...] in the bodily substrate of the performance” (Connerton 1989:71). Savage, following the advice given to him by the Fambul Tok staff on how to go about his apology, at the bonfire referred to the described bodily performance that villagers, drawing from their everyday experiences in a family life, instinctively associate with humility and apology. His intent was to send a strong message of repentance, and he recognized that the best way to do it was through bodily demonstration. It is hard to judge how effective it was, but recollections of a few villagers can give us an idea: “It was funny to see him like that, a man who did so many bad things, now he is so small on his knees in front of the Chief who is so big”.¹⁶

As an addition to describing and analyzing what has been said and done at the bonfire that night, it is equally important to consider what has been left out. Savage was indeed given by the authorities (and through them by the community) a decent amount of space and time to explain himself. He was the one to choose what he wanted to say and how he wanted to do it, in the spirit of Fambul Tok practice where perpetrators and victims come forward willingly. In fact, the whole ceremony was organized on his insistence. Importantly, Savage did not address the individual stories of atrocities that the victims have accused him of at the bonfire. He never directly responded to Kumba Bundema or Sia Bundema, which would be expected to happen at the usual Fambul Tok bonfire. He instead spoke in more general terms. In fact, even though he did and does take responsibility for his actions accepting the villagers view that he was the commander and therefore the responsible one, Savage never explicitly confessed that he committed the atrocities and he still does not: “If you believe me, I never did any of those things [...] I would never order such a horrible thing”, he told me in an interview in his rented apartment in Freetown. He insists that he was unable to get a handle on his troops and rebels in the area which might have wrecked havoc among the civilians without him knowing or approving it.

At the bonfire in Tombodu the villagers were very clear in demonstrating that there are limits to their tolerance towards the commander who had the guts to take a walk between the new modest houses built on the ruins of the burnt ones twelve years before and to show his face in front of the people who suffered immense war trauma. On every hint of Savage's attempt to slightly dodge his guilt by saying there were many soldiers in the district and he was not operating alone, or whenever he would attempt to reach higher moral ground by mentioning truth or God in his speech, he was warned by the murmur and unrest of the people that they will be having none of that. While villagers have different memories of what exactly happened that night, almost all of those I have spoken to (excluding the authorities) agree that Savage was provoking the people. Consider this recollection by a 24-year-old school teacher whose father had been killed by the rebels: “He used one term, he said: 'People used to say that rebels have tail and they are monkeys, but then they saw them', to say, rebel is not a monkey [but a human being]. So, when he used that provocative term, people became angry.” The tension and the emotions were clearly high.

The bonfire was indeed not the place or time to discuss factual truth: what did and what did not happen during the war, who was tortured, who was killed, who gave the order and why. The stories of the events and memories and interpretations of them were not to be questioned. If nothing else, the Tombodu narrative of wartime suffering is standing on the shoulders of personal first-hand stories of witnesses and survivors of these horrors. The same goes for the guilt: today, most of the villagers accept that Savage did not have control over all his troops and most of the direct atrocities have been committed by young soldiers and rebels, but the commander was undoubtedly the one responsible. This stand is not negotiable, and the blame cannot be avoided or shifted to someone else. Savage understood this: he started the journey of reconciliation with an idea of finding the truth, he even suggested to make the ceremony in the daytime so he can finger-point the boys who were fighting under his command and might have been present at the bonfire;¹⁷ one year after the

ceremony however he says that was unnecessary and the whole event was done only to make peace sit firm in the country, not challenge it.¹⁸

Even though Tavuchis (1991) as a sociologist writes about the act of apology from a standpoint of the Western world and his analysis should not be taken for granted when applying it to African contexts, it is useful to consider his view that the modern meaning of apology has considerably changed throughout the course of time. The word is derived from the ancient Greek *apologia*, and it used to mean “oral or written defense” (Tavuchis 1991:15), meaning that it involved defending a position after some sort of accusation. The contemporary literature on reconciliation hints towards the finding that if an apology is given packed with some sort of justification or explanation, such as “everyone did it”, “we never knew”, “we were given orders from above” it can be easily interpreted by victims as a way for an offender to lift the part of the guilt off his chest. Victims can be offended by this attempt of stepping away from the guilt and putting it in larger social context, as they can interpret it as denial of the crimes committed. Attempts of defense and justification can reduce the effectiveness of the apology (Daly and Sarkin 2007:162). On the other hand, a lack of explanation can leave the victims feeling empty and with a lack of sense of closure since he/she has not heard the other side of the argument, is never certain what has been going on in the mind of the perpetrator, and is not sure whether there are parts of the story he/she does not know about. This kind of split is present in Tombodu today: many villagers praise Fambul Tok, the Paramount Chief and Savage for the bravery to step up and organize such an event, and emphasize that Savage was there only to accept his responsibility and beg for forgiveness; but some feel it was a shame that some stories have not been cleared up. What happened to Tamba Joe, their former neighbor who slaughtered his family and took the heads to Savage? How did the commander take this gesture? Did he reward him for it or was he shocked by it? These questions are still on the mind of some of the people in Tombodu.

One might argue that the Fambul Tok bonfire is first and foremost a community reconciliation ritual, similar to that of Mato Oput of northern Uganda, that has the main role of bringing people together rather than exhuming the painful past (Latigo 2008). While the bonfire is indeed a ritual space as I have shown in this thesis, and while, as Kelsall (2009) argues, strict court-like fact finding is in many ways in contrast to the culture of Sierra Leone, Fambul Tok bonfires are in fact rituals that involve discussion between the two sides. On most of the bonfires perpetrators do offer an explanation: “they made me do it” and “I had no choice but to join them” is often heard at the ceremonies. But what was the *differentia specifica* in the case of Savage was the gravity and the magnitude of the crimes he is being accused of. Sierra Leoneans recognize a big difference between a boy or a teenager that is being kidnapped and forced to kill and a commander in charge of the troops that wrecked havoc. I would, therefore, argue, that it was not the nature of the ritual that inhibited the discussion, nor was it the vague notion of Sierra Leonean culture, but simply the gravity of the crimes Savage is being accused of and the amount of suffering the people of Tombodu have went through for which they put responsibility on this person.

Conclusion

Similarly as the literature on local reconciliation practices (Alie 2008, Latigo 2008, Daly and Sarkin 2007), especially in African settings, informs us, the practice of Fambul Tok and the Savage bonfire shows that the key to post-conflict local community reconciliation is the ritual. This is the case because the creation of the ritualistic space as a context for addressing the crimes in a community setting enables all the actors in it -- victims, perpetrators, authorities, even the Fambul Tok staff made of locals -- to participate in an event that allows them to reconstruct the “memories of previous social bonds” (Theidon 2006:456) and re-imagine and re-produce their identity as a community through both speech acts and habituated bodily practices (Connerton 1989:71). The dynamics between the culture and the ritual is more complex than simple implementation of traditional practices, since the bonfire is

also a vessel for introduction of culture of forgiveness and social harmony into the community.

The most important elements of this ritual are the involvement of the authorities, whose role is to encourage the people and plead for forgiveness, which in both ritualistic and everyday settings reaffirms their high status in the community; the victims' testimonies, i.e. the process of truth-telling as a way of reaching emotional catharsis (Wilson 2001:37) and individual healing (Daly and Sarkin 2007:53); and the ceremonial apology of the perpetrator, who through speech and performance shows humility to the community and the authorities in order to ask for membership in a given moral community (Tavuchis 1991:7).

That being said, the ritual is not free of challenges and shortcomings that have been shown in the ethnographic analysis. As Daly and Sarkin (2007:156-157) show, recognition, meaning acceptance which requires only non-aggression without the need for longer contact or relationship, is only the first step a victim can make on the path to reconciliation. From the side of the perpetrator, apology, even when perceived as heart-felt, is hardly enough when the words are not supported by actions that contribute to the rehabilitation of the victims and the community, mainly reparations, restitution or compensation (Daly and Sarkin 2007:164), especially in a country where the suffering of the past is always lived through the suffering of the present (poverty, loneliness, sense of loss) and where resources for rebuilding lives can bring about more meaningful healing (Shaw 2007:205). Here, however, we should take into account that reconciliation is a long process (Daly and Sarkin 2007:156) and takes continuous time and effort, and that the bonfire ceremony is only one step, albeit an important one. As most of the Fambul Tok staff would say: "The bonfire is only the beginning".

However, the Savage bonfire shows us that the biggest challenge for local reconciliation practices such as this one and reconciliation in general is the gravity of the committed crimes. A long time needs to pass and many houses and lives need to be rebuilt before true healing and forgiveness comes around.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my thesis supervisor Antonius C. G.. M. Robben for valuable feedback and unreserved support during the writing process. Your insightful comments made the writing of this thesis a challenge and a pleasure.

My gratitude also goes to the kind people of Fambul Tok who made my stay in Sierra Leone the most pleasant one. I especially want to thank the staff in Kono district: Tamba Kamanda, Lilian Morsay and Abubakkarr Foday for being my family during my four month stay in Kono. I bow down to your efforts and thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Notes

- ¹ <http://www.sc-sl.org> (Accessed on May 6th 2012).
- ² Informal interview with John Caulker, October 2012.
- ³ A ton of literature has been written on the civil war and corruption in Sierra Leone from many different angles. For a thorough analysis of the conflict see Gberie (2005) and Keen (2005), and for corruption see Reno (2008).
- ⁴ For a legal analysis of the relationship between the Special Court and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, see Schabas (2003; 2004; 2004).
- ⁵ From "Fambul Tok" (2010), a documentary by Sara Terry.
- ⁶ From "Fambul Tok" (2010), a documentary by Sara Terry.
- ⁷ From "Fambul Tok" (2010), a documentary by Sara Terry.
- ⁸ Interviews with Paramount Chief Aiah Ngekia, Deputy Chief Raymond Komba, Tamba Mansaray, and a few other interviews, October-December 2011.
- ⁹ Names of the victims have been changed in this thesis in order to protect their identities. Kumba and Sia are common names given to Kono girls, meaning respectively the third and the first daughter

from the same father. Tamba is a male Kono name, signifying a second son. Bundema and Mansaray are fairly common family names among the Kono people.

- ¹⁰ Taken from the video recorded by some of the staff of Fambul Tok International on the day of the bonfire.
- ¹¹ From several interviews with people around the country.
- ¹² Informal interview with Tamba Kamanda, October 2011.
- ¹³ Amputations were a common practice of torturing and terrorizing civilian population during the war in Sierra Leone. For an analysis of amputations see Park (2007).
- ¹⁴ Interview with Tamba Kamanda, January 2012.
- ¹⁵ Muslim religious authorities (imams) actually frown upon this kind of practice as, according to them, one is not to kneel for anyone except Allah, but still it is highly spread among the Sierra Leoneans in Kono district among all religious and ethnic groups.
- ¹⁶ From several interviews with the villagers, December 2011 – January 2012.
- ¹⁷ Interview with Tamba Kamanda, October 2011.
- ¹⁸ Interview with Mohamed Savage, January 2012.

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Summary

Twelve years after their village of Tombodu has been pillaged and their relatives killed in a decade long civil war in Sierra Leone, the people of Kono district meet the perpetrator they hold responsible for most of the deaths and looting. The former commander returns with a peace-preaching NGO Fambul Tok to beg for forgiveness at a reconciliation ceremony in the village centre.

The ceremony, centered around a bonfire, is an attempt of playing out familiar everyday practices of community dispute settlement and apologies in the family. The practices are performed in the form of a ritual, enabling such a serious (alleged) offender to appear before the people.

From the very start of the ceremony, the local authorities -- elders, chiefs and mommy queens (leaders of women) -- plead for the offender, asking the people to forgive him and leave the bitterness in the past. Just like in family and community dispute settlements about land ownership or theft, they plead for recognition of the offender as a human being to start the process of reconciliation towards forgiveness.

The victims, then, speak of their past suffering, but not with a goal of establishing the forensic truth as in many courts and truth commissions, but in order to reach emotional catharsis by participating in a ritual. The victims speak more about how war affects their lives today than how they suffered in the past.

Finally, the commander apologizes. He begs the chiefs and the people for forgiveness on his knees, similarly as a Sierra Leonean child who goes low down on the ground to beg his father or an elder.

The ritual is a way of partly remembering, but also for a large part producing the morality of forgiveness, acceptance and communal identity. Everyday life is lifted to a level of the ritual so the

community can deal with horrendous crimes that are new to their lives. The bonfire as a ritual is only a part of the process of forgiveness, the one where accusations and apologies happen, but restoration and forgiveness is yet to come, with time and effort and rebuilding of lives.