

Owning the Peace: The Role of Self-Help Organizations in Peacemaking in Eastern Sierra Leone

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Abstract

Peacemaking is a universal construct. It is entrenched in the cultural milieu of every society and plays a critical role in shaping and defining human interactions and endeavours. Every society has its own unique way of conducting its affairs, and has developed defined strategies and structures for preventing, managing and resolving conflicts with the view to guarding the integrity of the community and maintaining social order. In most cases, these have been achieved with the establishment of self-help organizations whose members adopt the principles of sharing, compassion, empathy and cooperation that are essential ingredients of humanity. The main thrust of this article is to explore the hidden and untapped approaches, mechanisms and strategies for preventing, maintaining and sustaining peace in traditional societies in the Eastern Region of Sierra Leone. The article argues that the utilization of self-help organizations enables societies to transcend the bitterness, hatred and suspicion of the past and to make the transition to a more stable political order and socio-economic reengineering.

Keywords: Peacemaking, Reconciliation, Cooperation, Self-help, Communitarianism

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1. Introduction

Peacemaking and conflict management practices do exist in traditional Africa today. These practices precede the long years of colonialism and the reprehensible slave trade that had looted the continent of its young and productive population, talents and resources. There were traditional institutional mechanisms as well as cultural sources that knit communities and peoples together and upheld the values of peace, acceptability, tolerance and solidarity (Momoh 2019, Ayyiteh 2014). These structures were responsible for peace education, confidence-building, peacemaking, peacebuilding, conflict monitoring, conflict prevention, conflict management, and conflict resolution (Ademowo, 2015). In very many ways, these mechanisms were effective in responding to community and individual conflicts because they reflected the traditional African socio-cultural ethos and political mindset that emphasized living together in peace and harmony. In villages and towns, men and women would organize themselves into small groups to undertake a common cause of action such as helping one another during farming season or when a disaster affected group members.

Closely tied to the above are the crucial roles of traditional leaders who serve as custodians of the customs, land and the people. In Eastern Sierra Leone, Paramount Chiefs (PCs), section chiefs and other sub-chiefs, religious leaders, elders, Mammy Queens etc. are instrumental in guiding and shaping the *modus operandi* of individuals and groups, especially in the preservation of peace and harmony. As guardians of the people and land, PCs/Chiefs play an important role in bringing harmony and order to the community after disruption by conflict or dispute. Chiefs employ various traditional approaches such as mediation, reconciliation, negotiation and adjudication to make peace, resolve conflicts and reconcile conflicting parties.

Momoh (2022) postulates that although Africa experienced an encumbering slave trade, and a century of excruciating European colonization during which many of its indigenous institutions and practices were systematically weakened, usurped and, in some cases rendered redundant, traditional processes of peacemaking remain part of the people's *modus vivendi* especially in localities that were impermeable to the hegemonic colonial project. This postulation is buttressed by Zartman's (2000) contention that despite the influence of modernization, traditional mechanisms are still being used in most African countries with the view to keeping communities in harmony, while imported overlays such as states and currencies are collapsing in conflicts around them (Zartman, 2000). Zartman (2000) and Deng (2000) further argue that in traditional African societies, the understanding of conflict was based on the disaffection between the humans and the supernatural (e.g. supreme beings, deities and ancestors). Traditional peacemaking and conflict management place a lot of importance on reconciling conflicting parties and bringing harmony to the community, as opposed to the individuals in conflict. It is also less expensive and based on the principle of maintaining relationships (Osaghae, 2000).

This emphasis on relationship intends to restore unanimity among disputants and also provide a means of restitution through apology and compensation, especially where damages have been caused to an injured party (Nwolise 2001). Thus, the goal of traditional mechanism is based on restitution rather than retribution (Deng 2000). More importantly, the traditional peacemaking methods are aimed at resolving conflicts and not necessarily pronouncing judgments. This is based on the philosophy of promoting reconciliation and peace settlement between

the parties rather than acrimony (Ayyiteh 2014, Momoh 2022). The traditional dispute resolution method is also very effective in deterring future offenders because the offence is usually seen as against the community rather than the individual. For instance, Ayyiteh (2014) noted that Africans believe in the concept of communalism because of their belief that the individual is not alone, but under an umbrella of the community. Communities take responsibility for individual mistakes because the individual goes through the process of socialization - from the family to peers; from school in the community to secret societies to community elders; and are exposed to the practices of that community. During this period, the individual instinctively or otherwise imbibes what obtains in the community. As such, efforts are made by the community to rehabilitate rather than exclude wrongdoers who fail to abide by the social norms and the community's *modus operandi*.

In Eastern Sierra Leone where the Mende are the dominant ethnic group, there is an overwhelming consciousness and sense of belongingness, communalism and sharing with the sole intent of maintaining a shared identity and preserving the peace of the community. These are existential attributes of how the people live, work and interact with one another. It is about their personhood, which serves as a great cultural asset to them. Personhood, as a philosophy, means "to be is to belong; everybody in and no one out; we are because we belong". It speaks to the very essence of being human. It is about inclusivity, tolerance, tolerability and acceptability. Or as the proverbial adage goes "no man is an island, or no man stands alone". It is that sense of belongingness and the agency of being a part that makes the Mende believe that "*Ngo yia mia ar towabla*" literally interpreted as "collective effort makes a difficult work lighter". This article attempts to explore some of the unused approaches, mechanisms and strategies for preventing, maintaining and sustaining peace that are lurked in traditional societies in the Eastern Region of Sierra Leone.

1.2 The Role of Self-Help Organizations

The concept of self-help and cooperative organizations at the micro-level predates colonialism. Self-help organizations are part of the African communal practice embedded in its socio-cultural make-up. The philosophy is supposed to enable community members to be self-reliant and to aggregate their ideas for group and communal benefits. It also refers to the African principle of voluntarily helping and assisting a brother, sister, community member, friend and or relative in need (Osabo-Kle 1985). Self-help voluntary organizations locate both the felt and induced needs of the people, and identify community resources, knowledge and skills to overcome them. Reliance on what is available at the community level and getting every segment of the community to make contributions to the project reveal the salience of self-help organizations as a key to grassroots peacemaking and development.

The guiding philosophies that define self-help organizations, especially at the grassroots level, are voluntary participation, fairness, responsiveness, equality and equity. Voluntary participation produces integration of individuals, communities and societies by providing effectual support, implementing values and supporting the normative order (Durkhiem, 1933). Individuals and groups are mobilized and adapt to the problems they face and are shown using concrete examples that their joint, common and concerted efforts can contribute to overcoming them. In this way, they are galvanized to take action to further their advantages in the existing social order of their communities (Oshage 2000).

1.2.1 Cooperative Work or *Borme*

Borme, a Mende word for cooperative work, is deeply rooted in Mende cosmology. In *borme*, people come together to work as a unit in a show of solidarity. It is about communal effort, increasing numbers that could yield more results. People cooperate and work together to increase productivity such as in rice production, cleaning and tilling the land and harvesting. This practice is very common in the traditional settings of Eastern and Southern Sierra Leone. The Mende, like other ethnic groups in Sierra Leone, naturally believe in communal integration where people think, feel and work as a union. The rationale is *ngo-yila mia ar towa blah*, literally translated, as "concerted effort yields positive results." Instead of adhering to the old cliché of "too many hands spoil the broth," it is conceived that collective effort, mutual assistance and integration have more of a multiplier effect on human undertakings than individualistic projects. That is, productivity increases alongside a common bond in a collectivist society than in an individualistic society (Durkhiem, 1933). Culturally, these communities are oriented toward group dynamics, community sharing and kinship ties, which define how they live and govern their *modus operandi*.

In rural communities, young men and women of the same age (age-sets) come together as a group to cooperatively undertake farming projects to address a labor shortage, to increase food productivity and more significantly, to forge and cement brotherhood/sisterhood that translates into community cohesion. The partnership functions based on equality, trust and integrity and is guided by certain regulations that bind members to be responsible and accountable to one another. There is no formal leadership structure, but *ad hoc* committees exist to check members who, for instance, fail to turn up for work, and to enforce the rules agreed upon by all and coordinate the activities of the group. The group undertakes different projects ranging from rice cultivation and cocoa and coffee production to soap-making depending on what each individual invests in.

Cooperative work is done by rotation, pooling communal labor to work acres of land that is not easily

achievable under normal circumstances. For instance, if a group of twenty works for an individual 'A' today, his/her turn would come only when all the other members have received the same assistance. What is crucial in this situation is that the work done by the twenty men/women in a day cannot be equivalent to an individual undertaking the same work in twenty working days. In short, an increase in labor force is proportionate to the increase in productivity. Work is normally conducted on a daily basis with some days set aside for rest.

Voluntary organizations have played a significant role in community livelihood. First, it creates employment for people not provided by the state. Unemployment, especially among the youth population, is one of the critical issues that affect rural communities. An objective of the RUF when it struck in 1991 was to convert the idle, unemployed and alienated youth population into foot soldiers. The RUF basically succeeded in overrunning the country because the countryside was populated by unemployed youth who were literally loiterers and idlers. The absence of self-help organizations that provided incentives for youths to be employed and productively engaged provided a fertile breeding ground for miscreants and unruly youth groups prepared to wreak havoc on society. The central government and the world market undermined these organizations when world prices for local agricultural products dropped, and farmers were underpaid for their products by the government. And because human beings are naturally motivated to seek income, people moved to the diamond fields of Kono and Tongo as a substitute to the low income accrued from agricultural production in the rural areas. The revival of these organizations in the post-war era would increase employment and productivity, thereby reducing unemployment and underemployment, increasing the earning powers of locals and transforming the youths into a productive working force much needed for post-war reconstruction, peaceful co-existence and sustainable development.

More significantly, voluntary organizations lessen deprivation, hunger and petty envy that characterize communities in the throes of socio-economic malaise. When the population is gainfully employed and is productively engaged, the community livelihood improves and by extension, prevents conflicts and disputes that normally arise from poverty and want. It does not only satisfy basic human needs like shelter, food and clothing but also socio-psychological human needs such as security, recognition, participation, identity and autonomy (Burton 1990). Conflicts result from ignoring or suppressing such developmental needs which "must be satisfied and catered for by institutions, if these institutions are to be stable, and if societies are to be significantly free of conflicts" (Burton 1990, p. 23). Reconstructing local organizations to cater for peoples' freedom from coercion, to recognize potentials and talents, and to participate in the affairs that affect their lives are crucial in designing a peaceful, stable and progressive post-war situation.

Equally compelling is the possibility of generating surplus capital accrued from cooperative work. In most rural areas, enterprising youths have the opportunity to accumulate wealth from cooperative work and to invest in other economic activities. For instance, an enterprising individual may decide to sell the surplus products and make huge profits. Profits accumulated over time empower an individual to undertake other economic activities. The profit accumulated does not, in practice, belong to an individual because he is obliged to share the surplus with other members of the community. For example, a local entrepreneur is obliged to aid his kith and kin during lean periods and bad harvests or when there is a natural disaster. This type of wealth accumulation in a typical traditional setting could be described as capitalism with a communal orientation.

The revival and adaptation of these organizations in the post-war era would greatly increase the capacity of the people, ensure employment and lessen the burden on government expenditure. More salient, self-help organizations forge community solidarity and cohesiveness, satisfy socio-psychological needs of the people and transform unruly idle youth into a productive work force that can contribute to the development and stability of their communities.

Community self-help organizations help to make society more secure by pre-empting, preventing and avoiding situations that could be potentially threatening to the security of the community. They basically try to nip potential problems in the bud and control conflicts, disputes and instability that would otherwise consume the society. The resuscitation of these organizations in the aftermath of the conflict would certainly be of enormous assistance to the central government that is wholly dependent on external sources of funding to operate. Second, it will further help identify the warning signs from local residents normally ignored by the central government when it tries to centralize authority and power. Third, it protects and secures individuals and groups and preserves the social order needed for communal solidarity and cohesiveness. It has an offensive and defensive posture. Although some of these still exist in remote communities, they need to be reactivated and re-empowered throughout the country so that people own their peace.

Self-help organizations are critical in reinforcing a cultural distinctiveness that serve as advocacy groups in furthering their wider interests in the community. They provide some measure of local participation and involvement and perform certain linkage roles, which make it possible to reach the wider community. With the ever increasing personal and administrative requirements and the rapidly rising costs of government institutions, there is an urgency to revive traditional voluntary self-help organizations to provide much needed social support in rural communities.

1.2.2 Community Policing

Community policing is another form of self-help project found in localities deprived of state security. The first major responsibility of any chief in traditional societies is to provide security for his/her people. The task of providing security transcends merely waging war on aggressive neighbors or bringing potential enemies under control. It involves proactively maintaining internal security and peace by erecting structures and mechanisms that confront and control law-breakers, monitoring strangers that sneak into the community to wreak havoc and keeping track of individuals that collude with external parties to wreak havoc on communities. The chief, therefore, operates as the community's security agent. In the pre-colonial period, community policing was an effective tool in effecting security. The situation was undermined by colonialism, neo-colonialism and the advent of the modern police system.

1.2.2.1 The Spying System of Intelligence Gathering

The spy (*tutujia-gamui*) or spies-people who provide intelligence (*tutujia-gabla*) are community members assigned to 'spy over' the town or village during the day when everyone else is in the bush farming or engaged in other businesses. They surveill the community and provide intelligence to safeguard the well-being of the community. Colonialism and post-independence government eroded the effectiveness of the spying system as a mechanism for conflict prevention. Their duty is to observe and spy on individuals or groups behaving suspiciously or movements that could be a security threat to the community. If and when such information is gathered, an intelligence report is made to the chief who alerts his council and members of the community to deal with the situation. The essence is to secure property, to protect drinking wells from being contaminated/poisoned by enemies, to rid the community of would-be adversaries, to locate idlers and loiterers, and to pre-empt enemy attacks and other security concerns.

The revitalization of this communal practice in local communities cannot be more apt and germane in today's global and national economic uncertainties and crises, that continue to increase poverty and give birth to malcontents and disgruntled youths with the concomitant escalation of insecurity. The advantages are manifold. First, it is cost-effective. The 'spies' are not paid for the services they provide. As a result, government reduces its expenditure on the police which is much required during this period of economic austerity. Such funds can be redirected to other growth sectors of the economy such as improving educational and health facilities in rural communities. However, one can also argue that the security challenges of the modern day are too complex and convoluted for a village 'spy system' alone to succeed. As such, the spy system can only be used to complement government's effort in providing the much-needed security in the communities.

Second, the system could serve as a source of identifying criminals and would-be troublemakers in the society. Osabu-Kle (1985, p. 105) argues that "The local people know who the criminals in the community are but are always discouraged from exposing them for the simple fear that the corrupt, western-oriented and salaried-minded police are allied with the troublemakers." The reintroduction of the spying system at the local level could discourage the regular police from cooperating with criminals and contribute to the reduction of criminal activities. Moreover, pre-empting troublemakers, locating idlers and loiterers, and identifying suspicious strangers mitigates the potential for low-level disputes and conflicts.

If the intelligence collected by the spies warranted the intervention of the state machinery, the chief communicates the information to the Local Councils who directly oversee the chiefdoms in his district. For instance, before the rebels struck most villages and towns in the Kailahun District in 1991, chiefs and other chiefdom notables immediately notified authorities in Freetown about the imminent security threat posed to their communities.¹ Former President J. S. Momoh, who said the army was a peace-time military force, asked Kailahun chiefs to resort to local vigilantism to repel the rebels. Abraham (2001) argues that the government was convinced that the rebellion was a plot by local anti-APC inhabitants who had invited the rebels to overthrow the government. This clearly demonstrates that although the traditional system of spying had become redundant in most villages and towns, the chiefs still viewed it as part of their responsibility to their people.

1.2.2.2 Stranger Registration

The phenomenon that the chief should be informed of any stranger or new-comer (*hotei*) entering his village or town existed before colonialism and continues in most traditional settings today. It was only formalized during colonial rule (through an indirect rule system where chiefs ruled at the behest of their colonial masters) and adapted as a system to maintain law and order in local communities. Stranger registration was an integral part of the socio-cultural and political system that underscored the point that the chief was on top of the situation in his community. In pre-colonial communities, chiefs were supposed to know their subjects and all those who resided in their dominion either by name, identification or association. Since these communities were small villages and or towns, it was pretty much easy for everyone to know one another.

A stranger, *hotei*, who entered a community, would be obliged to identify one personality of the village as

¹ When the PCs and other sub-chiefs informed government in 1991 about the security threat to their communities, the government paid lip service to the information because it felt the war was waged by SLPP adherents who wanted to overthrow the APC.

his/her host, *hotakei*. The host was duty bound to present the stranger to the chief by 'putting a cola' as a sign of contract that he/she was responsible for whatever the stranger did in the village throughout his/her stay. If the stranger proved useful to the community, for example, if he was a learned Islamic scholar, or a mason or carpenter and the village people wanted to enlist his/her services, the host was immediately contacted. The host became the point man for whatever happened to the stranger. In like manner, if the stranger proved to be a criminal the host/hotakei was held responsible for his/her actions/inactions. In this way, authorities were able to weed out bad elements in society or at least have access to them. This process kept communities immune to a lot of mishaps and engendered security and stability.

In the same vein, if an unmarried woman visited a village and stayed for a couple of days without presenting herself to a chief, she was immediately summoned by the chief and investigated. The chief would ask for her host or hostess. If she stayed with a boyfriend, that boyfriend was introduced to the chiefs for future reference. In case men fought over the woman, which was commonplace in rural communities, the boyfriend that was initially named and introduced to the chiefs had the rightful claim to the woman. This process had many ramifications. First, it avoided conflict over individuals. Second, it controlled prostitution which was abhorred, repudiated and scorned in traditional Sierra Leone. Third, it protected a woman from being harmed by a gang of boyfriends. Last and perhaps more significantly, it was a form of social control to maintain social order in the community.

1.2.2.3 Initiation of Youths by Paramount Chiefs

Another periodic self-help program undertaken for the welfare of the society is the initiation of boys, *maha-halei* (*Poro society*), and of girls, *maha-njadei* (*Sande/Bondo society*), by Paramount Chiefs (PCs). As custodians of everything traditional and cultural in rural communities, PCs owe their people the responsibility of sharing part of the accumulated wealth accrued from fines, tributes and gifts. This customary responsibility stretches beyond sharing food and giving out alms and personal gifts to the poor and needy, but it also includes the graduation of boys and girls into the community of responsible elders.

PCs periodically undertake to initiate boys and or girls into Poro or Bondo/Sande societies as a goodwill gesture to assist community members who face hardship during, for instance, lean periods. This is normally done at the time when there is a bad harvest and/or a natural disaster or when the PC deems it fit to undertake the project. The PC foots the bill of all the initiates. The initiation attracts many boys and girls whose parents are poor, disabled, and unemployed. At the community level, it is open to all members and encourages all and sundry to take advantage of the PC's generosity.

This activity has a far-reaching effect on the chief, the initiates and the community as a whole. It enhances the chief's popularity and generosity and increases his legitimacy among his people. The chief's performance is measured by how much he is prepared to sacrifice for the community. This is surely a litmus test for the chief's kindness, love and generosity. It brings the chief closer to the day-to-day problems of his people and creates an environment where they articulate their ideas toward finding solutions.

At the community level, it works toward furthering a cooperative spirit and cultural reinforcement. When young people are made to live, feel and benefit from the same source, it increases their common commitment toward themselves and to the community. Shared benefit is an important source of group mobilization toward communal integration. Beneficiaries of the PC's initiation largesse are given a renewed hope that regardless of their backgrounds, they belong to a community that caters for the interest of all its members. As a consequence, they become more receptive to new ideas about community solidarity and change. They also become more loyal and law-abiding citizens.

Conclusion

The responsibility for bringing about durable and sustainable peace in societies torn apart by intense violence especially in the post-Cold-War era remains herculean and extraordinarily challenging. Aside from the fact that some of the strategies adopted by the international community (as in Somalia and DRC) have proven to be strikingly deficient in ushering an enduring peace in Africa, there is also an overwhelming neglect on the part of the political elites and the governing class to recognize the relevance of indigenous processes of peacemaking that are easily available, people-centric, culture sensitive and deeply rooted in the mores and traditions of the people. With shrinking resources, and in some cases, unfavorable policies adopted in the 1990s toward Africa's civil wars, Africa is presented with a challenge to reinvent itself by first, rediscovering the creative mechanisms of peacemaking that have remained untapped or underutilized, and second, raise awareness, develop a political voice and mobilize public opinion around the argument that Africa has the capacity to manage its conflicts (Osaghe 2000).

Every traditional and cultural milieu has its own unique mechanism for managing conflicts and making peace. For instance, while the police in the developed world take responsibility for detecting crime, countries in Africa rely on oath-taking to getting at the truth. Regardless of the fact that African societies are increasingly becoming more modern and westernized, these practices have not withered away. As indicated earlier, Africans rely heavily on chiefs, other traditional leaders, the council of chiefs, chiefs' courts, the poro society and precedence to settle

disputes and promote peaceful resolution. Such a system, which is largely unwritten, is seen as inexpensive, people-driven, custom-based, and is easily accessible by the people. In developed countries, premium is placed on constitutionality particularly the judicial system presided over by judges and lawyers.

This article has demonstrated the significant role played by self-help organizations, cultural processes, institutions, and values in peace-making in Eastern Sierra Leone. Although modernization is the vogue, and many of the communities in the region are moving toward and accepting modern ways of doing business, it is evident that most individuals, families and communities prefer indigenous conflict prevention and resolution processes because they are the closest and easily accessible mechanism for resolving conflicts; they are much cheaper and can speedily settle disputes before they spiral into major conflicts; they are people-centered and custom-based. Moreover, peacemaking in traditional societies is based on cultural concepts, values, and procedures that are understood, practiced and accepted by all citizens.

The researcher also notes that times are fast changing, and young women and men are ‘infected’ by ideas from the outside world and are often no longer willing to subordinate themselves to gerontocratic rule and/or old ways of conducting business. Of course, the severity of this problem depends on the specific circumstances in the given community: in communities where young men and women also have a say in community affairs or where custom is adaptable, the situation is more relaxed than in rigidly patriarchal or gerontocratic circumstances. Because of these changing times and the fact that society has significantly evolved over the years, the needs and responses are not necessarily the same. As such, the author concedes that community-based organizations can best serve a complementary role to modern-day state peace initiatives and approaches. This, without doubt, would produce an optimal effect for today’s Sierra Leone.

Declaration: I declare that this article is original and is not being considered elsewhere. There is also no conflict of interest.

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