

# Declining ethnic relations in post-war Liberia: The transmission of violent memories

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## Abstract

*More than ten years after the Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) released its Final Report, there has been no implementation of the recommendations proffered. This article focuses on post-conflict memorialization, the TRC's strategy to engender collective remembering, and a set of State-led actions designed to teach future generations about the past violence with a view to preventing relapse into violent conflict. Both the constructive and destructive patterns of remembering that have evolved in the wake of the government's silence since the release of the recommendations will be analyzed.*

**Keywords:** violent memories, transmission, ethnonationalism, ethnonationalist.



## Introduction

On 30 March 2018, the United Nations (UN) Mission in Liberia ended nearly fifteen years of peacekeeping operations in Liberia, undoubtedly one of the longest international peacekeeping efforts in recent history. In retrospect, the UN peacekeeping efforts have amounted to something of a success story, from managing the transition from war to peace, to supervising and facilitating three democratic elections in Liberia, including the elections of Africa's first female president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, in 2006, and George Weah, Africa's legendary soccer icon, in 2018. However, this success story is not unblemished: it is soiled by the failure to facilitate acceptable levels of national healing and reconciliation after the Liberian Civil War, which fragmented society and in which an estimated 250,000 people were killed.

In the country's search to address the unprecedented scale of violence, efforts to uncover the truth culminated in the release of Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Final Report.<sup>1</sup> The TRC Final Report determined that the violence was pervasive and that all Liberians, whether directly or indirectly, were victimized by the conflict.<sup>2</sup> It holds Liberia's political elites (past and present) responsible for planning and orchestrating the violence.<sup>3</sup> Since its release, the Final Report has been perceived as stigmatizing the elites through naming and shaming and seeking to prosecute those most responsible for organizing the violence and providing financial support.<sup>4</sup> In the ranks of Liberia's elite and their sympathizers, the TRC Final Report is rejected and considered a forbidden text that should be purged.<sup>5</sup>

Historically, silence and collective amnesia has followed abuses and unspeakable horrors.<sup>6</sup> Express public support of the TRC is frowned upon, and

1 TRC, *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia*, Vol. 2, 2009 (TRC Final Report), pp. xxxiii–xxv. Page citations in this article are taken from the original, hard-copy version of the Final Report; a shortened online version is available at: <https://tinyurl.com/y3ldsku6> (Vol. 1), <https://tinyurl.com/y6qbkp9o> (Vol. 2).

2 *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, pp. 213–256. On the number of victims and violations per county, see *ibid.*, Vol. 2, pp. 257–259.

3 *Ibid.*

4 In the TRC Final Report (*ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 361), the TRC recommends forty-nine individuals, most of them senior officials of government (past and present), for public sanction. Initial investigation into the list of these forty-nine prominent Liberians revealed that some allegedly provided military assistance while others provided direct financial support to warring factions. Those included on the list include former president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf; Kabineh Ja'neh, former associate justice of Liberia's Supreme Court (Constitutional Court); and Isaac Nyenabo, former president of the Senate and now Liberia's ambassador to the European Union.

5 For information regarding strengths and weaknesses of the TRC Final Report, see Paul James Allen, Lizzie Goodfriend and Aaron Weah, *Beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report: Transitional Justice Options for Liberia*, International Center for Transitional Justice, 2010, available at: [www.ictj.org/publication/beyond-truth-and-reconciliation-commission-transitional-justice-options-liberia](http://www.ictj.org/publication/beyond-truth-and-reconciliation-commission-transitional-justice-options-liberia).

6 See all of Liberia's 13 peace agreements, 1990–96; see also League of Nations, International Commission of Inquiry on Liberia, *Commission's Report*, Geneva, 15 December 1930. For example, the Nete Sie Brownell Commission's 1979 report on the 14 April 1979 Rice Riot, an incident that foreshadowed the violent military takeover of 12 April 1980, was never released to the public. Constructive discourse on what happened and who was responsible was not encouraged. Likewise, the 1930 League of Nations Commission of Inquiry over allegation of slavery and forced labour practices was handled in a similar

the narrative that suggests perpetrators should be judged not by their past but by their present, and by their promise to do better, is preferred.<sup>7</sup> The appropriation of this narrative in a country where the government is the biggest employer has brought about a new form of patronage. Some civil servants, including senior officials of government who support implementation of the TRC but are aware of the political elites' hostility towards it, have since learned to avoid the subject, especially in government circles. Yet, in instances where some are pushed to offer a pro-government opinion about the Report, the TRC is criticized or vague ideas about reconciliation are advanced.<sup>8</sup> Conversely, those who express public support for the TRC are often scorned and referred to as vindictive, lazy people who are incapable of "reconciling".<sup>9</sup> The undercurrent to this discourse is a form of post-TRC revisionism in which political elites and their sympathizers favour a script of collective amnesia that carries the capability of dismantling the official narrative.<sup>10</sup> In a context where the TRC Final Report stands as the official narrative to which there is no other accepted version of history that is embraced by the majority of Liberians, the legitimacy of the report is contested by a powerful minority.<sup>11</sup> Memoirs and books providing alternative viewpoints have been written,<sup>12</sup> and unstructured oral accounts of the conflict are being purveyed as alternative truth.

The TRC Final Report provides a framework for remembering the Liberian Civil War – a strategy that enables those who lived through the war, and successive generations, to remember the violence in a context that is controlled, constructive and pedagogical. The failure to implement the report is allowing other tendencies to manifest, robbing the nation of an opportunity for collective remembrance. Unless the State directs the process of post-war memorialization advanced by the TRC, unfiltered memories of the war will be passed down to successive generations and consequently, residual ethnic cleavages will be ignited, thereby creating reduced levels of cooperation across ethnic groups.

The 2016 Social Cohesion and Reconciliation Index (SCORE) nationwide survey, conducted by Search for Common Ground and the Centre for Sustainable

fashion. In the case of the League of Nations, a certain level of participation of ordinary citizens was allowed and the inquiry report was eventually released to the League of Nations and the Liberian public.

7 Aaron Weah, "Post-Truth and Reconciliation Commission Revisionism in Liberia", *Front Page Africa*, 4 August 2016, available at: <https://frontpageafricaonline.com/opinion/post-truth-and-reconciliation-commission-revisionism-in-liberia/>.

8 *Ibid.*

9 This comes from the author's observations of attitudes and behaviours of civil society, victims' groups and other relevant actors informing perception around the TRC Final Report. For more, see *ibid.*

10 See *ibid.*

11 The Liberia TRC process collected more than 20,000 statements, conducted 800 public hearings and gathered hundreds of declassified materials. In 2009, when the Final Report was released, Liberians celebrated the Report and its findings. In a recent Social Cohesion and Reconciliation Index (SCORE) survey, more than 80% of respondents interviewed supported the implementation of the Report. See: [www.scoreforpeace.org/en/liberia](http://www.scoreforpeace.org/en/liberia).

12 Nvaskie N. Konneh, *The Land of My Father's Birth: Memoir of the Liberian Civil War*; Royal House Communication Consortium, 2013; Lekpele M. Nyamalon, *Scary Dreams: An Anthology of The Liberian Civil War*, Forte Publishing, Monrovia, 2017; Helen Cooper, *The House at Sugar Beach: In Search of a Lost African Childhood*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2009.

Peace and Democratic Development (SeeD), reveals negative inter-group attitudes which tend to challenge the perception of social cohesion by sizable proportions of the population.<sup>13</sup> For example, the study revealed that ethnic Krahn in Grand Gedeh, Mandingos (a dispersed ethnic group located in several counties), and Gios in Nimba County are thought to be violent. In terms of acceptance of intermarriage among different groups, the study showed that intermarriage is rejected in most cases when it comes to Muslims (39%), Mandingos (45%) and Gios (30%).<sup>14</sup> The survey also demonstrates that civil society organizations and non-State institutions receive the highest level of trust from people, whereas local authorities and governmental bodies such as the Legislature, the Supreme Court, Magisterial Courts and police are mistrusted to some degree by over 50% of the population. The organs of the State are perceived to be comprised of political elites and their sympathizers.<sup>15</sup> The sample size interviewed for this study was 2,213 people (against an estimated 4 million total population), and the percentages cited above reflect the views of Liberians nationwide.

The attitudes captured in this study are inextricably linked to how the conflict is being remembered and affects inter-group relations. Ethnonationalists manipulate the truth about the Civil War to enable them to exact political power,<sup>16</sup> while ethnic-based households with insecurities from the war and residual ethnic cleavages are engaged in a daily transmission of the same wartime memories. Studies reveal that transmission of violent memories carries the “lived experience of parents which becomes the existential reality of the succeeding generation”.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, unresolved trauma and the weight of the moral burden to act are passed along in the transmission of these memories.<sup>18</sup> The rise of ethnonationalist moods in post-war Liberia has happened at the expense of improving inter-group cooperation, repairing damaged ethnic relations and engendering the long-term process of nation-building.

This article draws on the author’s fourteen-year-long research activities on transitional justice in Liberia and the truth and reconciliation process more specifically. The results presented below were obtained through research conducted during the author’s work with victims’ communities while at Search

13 SCORE Index for Liberia, 2016, available at: <http://scoreforpeace.org/en/liberia/2016-General%20population-1>. SCORE is a robust diagnostic and predictive tool used to examine inter-group relations and measure social distance across ethnic groups. The indicators mentioned can be found under “Other Indicators”, labelled “Confidence in ...”.

14 SCORE Index for Liberia, 2018, available at: [www.scoreforpeace.org/en/liberia/2018-General%20population-0](http://www.scoreforpeace.org/en/liberia/2018-General%20population-0); Search for Common Ground, *Preventing Election Violence through Early Warning and Early Response in Guinea and Liberia*, July 2016.

15 SCORE Index for Liberia, 2018, available at: [www.scoreforpeace.org/en/liberia/2018-General%20population-0](http://www.scoreforpeace.org/en/liberia/2018-General%20population-0).

16 Aaron Weah, “Hopes and Uncertainties: Liberia’s Journey to End Impunity”, *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2012, pp. 341–342. Also see Amos Sawyer, “Emerging Patterns in Liberia’s Post-Conflict Politics: Observations from the 2005 Elections”, *African Affairs*, Vol. 107, No. 427, 2008.

17 Ereshnee Naidu and Cyril Adonis, *History on Their Own Terms: The Relevance of the Past for a New Generation*, Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, February 2007.

18 *Ibid.*

for Common Ground, as well as interactions with victims' groups and two years' work at the Governance Commission developing the Strategic Roadmap for National Healing, Peacebuilding and Reconciliation. The author has also made systematic observations of victims' response to wartime memories. Key informant interviews were conducted and were followed by communication with a number of community members. The author endeavoured to observe national attitudes and responses to transitional justice and to the TRC Final Report more specifically.

## Memory discourse: A comparative review

Studies of memory and violent conflict tend to discuss victimization in the ideological context.<sup>19</sup> The ways in which memory is constructed in such a context reveal a struggle over the past and show how memory is represented in the present.<sup>20</sup> In Mozambique, for example, the struggle over the ideological and political legitimacy of the "short-lived" socialist revolution remains a continued battle between the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique and the Mozambican National Resistance, even long after the armed conflict.<sup>21</sup> Even though there is an official silence about the past, memory is used as a weapon to deny the ideological legitimacy of the armed struggle, and in parliament both sides have accused one another of committing atrocities – therefore, neither of them seems to have a moral claim to legitimacy.<sup>22</sup> In Rwanda, the Rwandan Patriotic Front-backed government maintains a strong grip on how memories of the genocide are interpreted. This has led to the construction of a new ethnic identity, and only this single identity is permitted. While there are other nuances to remembering the genocide, the popular account acknowledges that ethnic Hutus organized and perpetrated the genocide against ethnic Tutsis and moderate Hutus, while ethnic Tutsis won the war. Nonetheless, the memorials in Rwanda have been criticized for oversimplifying the narrative through the dynamics of manipulated and enforced memories.<sup>23</sup> A reconstructed single ethnic identity, Banyarwanda, as the new post-genocidal

- 19 Elizabeth Jelin and Susana G. Kaufman, "Layers of Memories: Twenty Years After in Argentina", in T. G. Ashpalnt, Graham Dawson and Michael Roper (eds), *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration*, Routledge, London and New York, 2015. See also Elizabeth Jelin, "Public Memorialization in Perspective: Truth, Justice and Memory of Past Repression in Southern Cone of South America", *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2007.
- 20 Patrick Devine-Wright, "A Theoretical Overview of Memory and Conflict", in Ed Cairns and Michael D. Roe (eds), *The Role of Memory in Ethnic Conflict*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2003; Rachel Ibreck, "The Politics of Mourning: Survivor Contributions to Memorials in Post-Genocide Rwanda", *Memory Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 4, 2010.
- 21 Victor Igreja, "Memories as Weapons: The Politics of Peace and Silence in Post-Civil War Mozambique", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 3, 2008.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 Rene Lemarchand, "The Politics of Memory in Post-Genocide Rwanda", in Philip Clark and Zachary D. Kaufman (eds), *After Genocide: Transitional Justice, Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Reconciliation in Rwanda and Beyond*, Hurst, London, 2008.

identity of Rwanda suggests a predominant role of the State in how the violence is being remembered.<sup>24</sup> Despite the complicated process of memory formation, the State's actions have led to a process of remembering, ensuring that the preventative value of "never again" is not lost.

In Sierra Leone, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) – a class of lumpen proletariats who started a peasant revolution – lost its unity of purpose to a barbarous reign of maiming, torture and extra-judicial killings. In the standard academic texts on Sierra Leone, there are mixed views about the RUF. On the one hand, its armed struggle is viewed as a "rational rebellion against a failed and bankrupt patrimonial state by a group of 'embittered pedagogues' ... who aimed to replace that state with a 'revolutionary egalitarian' one".<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, it is also viewed as "a case of organised mass delinquency ... mainly aimed at criminal appropriation, not social protest".<sup>26</sup> In contrast to the RUF, the Civil Defence Forces (CDF) resistance is viewed as the "militarization of a social network"<sup>27</sup> appropriated to defend local communities against the RUF. In the collective memory of Sierra Leoneans, the CDF enjoys greater ideological legitimacy than the RUF. While the government has yet to advance an official memorial policy, the conflict is remembered through the outcomes of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Special Court for Sierra Leone. In 2013, the Court successfully completed its mandate and was able to bring to trial ten persons, nine of which were sentenced to 15–52 years in prison.<sup>28</sup> Today, a Peace Museum stands outside the Special Court. The Museum serves as a repository of the Special Court files as well as materials from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Unlike the three cases above, the Liberian conflict was not ideological and does not enjoy any level of political legitimacy. Prior to the Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement, Liberia had thirteen peace agreements. All of these agreements were committed to a power-sharing arrangement in which warlords granted themselves amnesty. The notion that the war's aim was to restore democracy and prevent atrocities based on ethnic origin was a pretext to acquiring power and wealth. The fact that the war was organized by the elites and not the lumpen class renders the resolution of the conflict problematic because the TRC identified the elites in power as those responsible, but they happen to be the same fraction of society that is supposed to implement the TRC Final Report.

24 Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Becomes Killers: Colonialism, Nativism and Genocide in Rwanda*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2002. See also R. Lemarchand, above note 23.

25 Lansana Gberie, *A Dirty War in West Africa: The RUF and Destruction of Sierra Leone*, Hurst, London, 2005, p. vii. In this quote, Gberie is paraphrasing Paul Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Resources and Youth in Sierra Leone*, Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH, 1996. See also Ibrahim Abdullah, "Bush Path to Destruction: The Origin and Character of the Revolutionary United Front", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 2, 1998.

26 L. Gberie, above note 25, p. 8.

27 Danny Hoffman, "The Meaning of a Militia: Understanding the Civil Defense Force of Sierra Leone", *African Affairs*, Vol. 106, No. 425, 2007.

28 For more information about the Sierra Leone Peace Museum, see: [www.rscsl.org](http://www.rscsl.org).

## The scale of violence during the Liberian Civil War

The TRC Final Report documented an estimated 203 sites of massacres and mass graves across the country.<sup>29</sup> This number revealed an unprecedented level of staggering and widespread violence touching every single county or region of the country. The Final Report demonstrates that on average there are thirteen sites of massacres or mass graves in each county of Liberia, though the impact is much higher in some regions or counties than others.<sup>30</sup> In Lofa County (northern Liberia), for example, there are thirty-two sites of massacres; in Rivercess (southeastern Liberia), thirty; in Grand Cape Mount (western Liberia), twenty-four; in Gbarpolu (western Liberia), eighteen; in Maryland (southeastern Liberia), eleven; and in Grand Gedeh (southeastern Liberia), twelve. Sites of massacres and mass graves are scattered across the country in such proximity that every village or town is either a host of a massacre site or is located close to one. In this context, proximity looms large, as it becomes virtually impossible for a child born many years after the conflict to be raised outside of such violent memory. This geography of violence suggests that every child is naturally subjected to a form of everyday storytelling while growing up. What is more important is how the memory is passed down and what is being learned or taught.

## Flirting with the present: The life of younger generations after the conflict

According to Liberia's Housing and Population Census, in 2008 65% of the population was comprised of those aged 35 or below.<sup>31</sup> Further disaggregation of this figure reveals that more than 50% of those were born between 1990 and 2003. This faction of the population does not have an independent view of the conflict, for they were too young to understand and process what was happening around them. Also, the unprocessed narrative and unresolved trauma that is being bequeathed to them is not only placing a moral burden on them, but also imposing a sense of dual reality. A young motorbike rider helped this author to see the destructive pattern of the transmission of violent memory on the younger generation. In August 2017, the author had an encounter with Boima, a 22-year-old motorbike taxi driver. The author had known Boima for some time prior to this encounter, and he always seemed to be cheerful and energetic. On this occasion, however, after the author had hired Boima for a ride home, for the first few minutes he was quiet and appeared to be distressed. It turned out that Boima's father had been killed, and that the man who killed him had been relocated to Boima's community.

29 TRC Final Report, above note 1, Vol. 2, pp. 213–256, and for number of victims and violation by county, pp. 257–259.

30 *Ibid.*

31 Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services, available at: [www.lisgis.net](http://www.lisgis.net).

Boima's story is not unique. Nearly every Liberian of his generation is likely to be living proof of the country's post-war contradiction: both young and old pretend to be living in the present, but they only flirt with the present because much of their existential being is domiciled in the past. Flirtation with the present is constantly disrupted by the memoryscape and what it invokes. Boima's daily routine was disrupted when he learned about the sudden reappearance of his father's murderer, but had that not happened, he would have appeared to be the same lively lad the author has always known. The ability of the past to resurface tends to subject people to a duality that is perhaps not so much like schizophrenia, but a dichotomy that allows the existence of two realities, the past and the present, simultaneously.<sup>32</sup> On some occasions, the past can be demonstrably more dominant and can hold sway over the present. Locked in such conflict between present and past, Boima will be thinking constantly about where his life would have been had his father still been alive, and whether there is any course of action he should take to "put things right". Boima's story provides a critical insight into the reality of children born during the Civil War and memories that are being passed down to them. This situation draws attention to two critical developments. Firstly, the history of the conflict is not taught in primary schools, but the transmission of violent memories of the war has become a ritual in Liberian households. Secondly, the silence and failure of the State to direct what to learn, and how to learn it, is enabling destructive memories to thrive.

## Memorialization in Liberia

### Recommendations of the TRC

The TRC Final Report on memorialization is detailed and comprehensive. It is prescriptive in so far as what the role of the State in memorialization ought to be. The recommendations cover national measures to account for individual and collective memory, but there is also space for the State to remember West African nationals, as well as other "foreign nations", that came to Liberia's aid during the war.<sup>33</sup> The TRC recommends public apologies to foreign governments who lost their citizens in the conflict as the appropriate form of action.<sup>34</sup>

The Final Report recommends that death certificates "adorned with national colors" be issued to the surviving heirs of all those who lost their lives during the

32 Observations here are based on conversations between the author and Peterson Sonyah, chairman of the Liberia Massacre Survivors Association (LIMASA), who is himself a survivor of the St Peter's Lutheran Church Massacre of 29–30 July 1990, one of Liberia's most destructive massacres. These conversations spanned several months. To understand Boima's dilemma, the author also shared Boima's story with Sonyah, with the aim of assessing Sonyah's personal experience of trauma and how Boima's story may be similar to those of others in the survivor community. In response, Sonyah talked about how he has become incapable of living a "regular life", how the past has become the new present, and how the present is a borrowed reality.

33 TRC Final Report, above note 1, Vol. 2, pp. 379–381.

34 *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, pp. 380–381.



violence in Liberia from 1979 to 2003.<sup>35</sup> Regarding missing persons, it is recommended that those who have not maintained contact with relatives or friends for seven years should be declared dead and issued a death certificate. The Report maintains that wartime memorials should be erected in the capital city of each county and on the site of each mass grave or massacre. For atonement and cleansing, the Report recommends cultural ceremonies in order to lay the spirit of the dead to rest. It also recommends that government provide direct assistance to rebuild sacred places that were desecrated. In addition, the Report suggests having a national holiday to commemorate victims of hostilities by changing National Unification Day to National Unification and Memorial Day. It is also maintained that the State should issue public apologies to the nation and that befitting graves be erected to honour the memory and tragic deaths of two of Liberia's presidents, William Tolbert and Samuel Doe. Both Tolbert and Doe were not properly buried as there are no markers over where their remains are interred.

There have been some attempts to erect memorials on sites of massacres and mass graves, but these leave much to be desired. None of the recommendations outlined above have been implemented to date. The recommendations have, however, raised huge expectations among victims and survivors across ethnic regions of the country.

### Alternative influential narratives

Some unofficial narratives of the war were written prior to the release of the TRC Final Report, and more have been written since. These accounts, whether complementary or contradictory, coexist with the official narrative of the TRC Final Report. In a context where the past is being subjected to new forms of story-telling and reinterpretation of the violence, the views expressed in these accounts should not be seen as passive, but as ones that could appeal to ethnic stereotypes or sensibilities, and invoke emotions, anger or memories of the war. Some of the notable books reflecting such narratives are *The House at Sugar Beach* by Helen Cooper, *The Land of My Father's Birth* by Nvasekie Konneh, *Scary Dreams* by Lekpele Nyamalon, and *This Child Will Be Great* by Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.<sup>36</sup>

In Cooper's book, the author retraces her steps as a privileged child born of Americo-Liberian ancestry. While her memoirs present an innocent picture of a teenager, her privileged life serves as a grim reminder of some of the underlying causes that led to political violence and ultimately to the war.

Konneh's book asserts that the persecution of Mandingos happened as a result of national conspiracy.<sup>37</sup> In retaliation, ethnic Mandingo elites organized a

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> H. Cooper, above note 12; N. N. Konneh, above note 12; L. M. Nyamalon, above note 12; Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, *This Child Will Be Great: Memoir of a Remarkable Life by Africa's First Woman President*, Recorded Books, Prince Frederick, MD, 2010.

<sup>37</sup> Mandingos are a critical part of Liberia's ethnic linguistic groups and were systematically targeted and executed during the course of the Liberian conflict.

warring faction that committed systematic violations across the country.<sup>38</sup> Konneh's work leans more on victims' memory of Mandingos rather than examining both perpetrators' and victims' memories.

Nyamalon's book is an anthology of poems. Though the author was only six years old when the war started, the book provides a vivid recollection of memories in poetry. The author's work captures the trauma endured by a six-year-old boy, and represents a victim's account of the Civil War.

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's work deals extensively with her childhood and victimization as a woman during Samuel Doe's administration. She provides deep insight into her experience as a public servant; in particular, she recalls her role in the Commission on National Reconstruction (CNR) that was headed by Nete Sie Brownell. The CNR was organized to investigate the mass killings of Liberians that resulted from a protest over the price of rice, dubbed the Rice Riot, in 1979. Sirleaf served as one of the thirty-one commissioners appointed by former president Tolbert. In her memoir, she reflects:

What is tragic, I believe, is that had Tolbert instead implemented the major report recommendations of the Commission on National Reconstruction, things might well have turned out different. Had the Government seized the opportunity to make major changes, it could have turned the whole thing around and avoided all the bloodshed to come.<sup>39</sup>

For a moment, Sirleaf's reflection on the CNR renewed hope that the TRC's recommendations would be implemented. Her failure to follow through on the TRC Final Report reinforced the perception that social amnesia is a deeply entrenched tradition among Liberia's elites.

For the most part, the narratives portrayed in these books have come to shape the attitudes of many groups in society, especially the intelligentsia.<sup>40</sup>

## Use of destructive patterns of remembering: Division along ethnic lines

The formation of Liberia over the years has predominantly followed the path of State-building alone, rather than both State- and nation-building, where the establishment of legitimacy would play an important role. The social glue that holds countries together in terms of national identity is far less cohesive in Liberia.<sup>41</sup> Hence, Liberia's sense of nationhood is fragmented, and ethnic identity appears to be much stronger than any cohesive national identity. In the Civil War and immediate post-war years, group memories became more prominent

38 TRC Final Report, above note 1.

39 E. Johnson Sirleaf, above note 36, p. 90.

40 Liberia is predominantly an illiterate society, and the books described in this section were therefore used mostly by Liberia's intelligentsia and not the uneducated masses. For more information, see: <https://countryeconomy.com/demography/literacy-rate/liberia>.

41 Joseph Saye Guannu, "The Political History of Liberia and the Civil War", in Kenneth C. Omeje, *War to Peace Transition: Conflict Intervention and Peacebuilding in Liberia*, University Press of America, Lanham, MD, 2009.

and had the capacity to undermine the collective search for justice and accountability. Hence, there is a correlation between the scale of violence that occurred and the influential narratives existing today. The proximity of mass graves and casual exposure to fresh memory makes it impossible to forget the past. It also makes conditions of trauma and transmission of such memory a particularly vicious circle. Individual victims and survivors are left with a strong feeling of neglect and abandonment, while reality reflects a constant mood swing which essentially condemns them to living a life that is locked in the past.<sup>42</sup> In 2005, during Liberia's first post-war elections, politicians used the memory of war in their campaigns. Prior to the successful 2003 Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement,<sup>43</sup> all thirteen peace agreements had failed to maintain peace or bring stability to Liberia. Several alleged perpetrators, many of whom are mentioned in the TRC Final Report, declared their intention to run in the elections.<sup>44</sup> To strengthen their chances, candidates exploited sensitivities around the widespread awareness of the failed peace agreements in Liberia, and announced that unless they won the elections, they could not guarantee the protection of their respective ethnic populations in the event of a return to violent conflict.<sup>45</sup> Nearly every alleged perpetrator who campaigned with this message of war and insecurity consequently won in the elections.<sup>46</sup> In the 2011 election campaign, though the TRC had released its Final Report two years earlier, the politicians again exploited the ethnic biases of their compatriots. Some indicated that the TRC itself was biased and was only targeting certain individuals because of their ethnic status. In an environment where group identity is much stronger than national identity, this rhetoric held sway, and perpetrators were once again elected through the exploitation of ethnonationalist sentiment. The dynamics between ethnic groups and the ways in which the memory of conflicts is used for political gain are explored below through the example of the Kru and Sarpo groups.

### *Dynamics between the Kru and Sarpo ethnic groups*

“The Kru take all the positions and during the elections, they elect their sons.”<sup>47</sup> So said one member of the Sarpo ethnic group in a focus group held in January 2018. The Sarpo and the Grebo have the overall perception that the Kru have all the privileges when it comes to the election of representatives and senators (in the Legislature), given their large number.<sup>48</sup> People vote along ethnic lines, and as

42 Interview with Peterson Sonyah, Chairman, LIMASA, March 2018, May 2018 and June 2018, at the Search for Common Ground Offices in Monrovia.

43 Comprehensive Peace Agreement Between the Government of Liberia and the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) and Political Parties, Accra, 18 August 2018, available at: [www.pul.org.lr/doc/Peace%20Agreements%20Digital%20Collection.pdf](http://www.pul.org.lr/doc/Peace%20Agreements%20Digital%20Collection.pdf).

44 See A. Weah, above note 16.

45 A. Sawyer, above note 16.

46 *Ibid.*; see also A. Weah, above note 16.

47 Focus Group Discussion on Reconciliation, Women's Center, Greenville, Sinoe County, 15 January 2018; the meeting was organized by Search for Common Ground and SeeD.

the Kru represent the majority, they have a stronger chance of winning elections. The Kru then appoint members of their families or their ethnic group to hold offices.<sup>49</sup>

The Kru, Sarpo and Grebo are three ethnic groups based in Sinoe County, located in southeastern Liberia. The Krus and Sarpos have a long history of disputes. While the actual origin of the conflict is difficult to trace, much of it appears to stem from the State-building process that led to the formation of the county.<sup>50</sup> Internal dynamics put the Krus and their settler compatriots at the centre of the county's formation. In the county's popular history, the Krus and settlers are regarded as the moral guarantors of the county.<sup>51</sup> In return, Sarpos have regarded ethnic Krus as being arrogant and as pretending to be more civilized and educated.<sup>52</sup> For much of the county's existence, the perception that Sarpos are less important to the well-being and strategic development of the county and that Krus pretend to be more civilized has promoted negative stereotypes on both sides, deepening inter-tribal feuds and further undermining the potential for cooperation. The fragility of this inter-group relationship fully displayed itself during the Liberian Civil War when the Pratt Farm Massacre occurred. According to the TRC Final Report, Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia committed the massacre<sup>53</sup> and forty-two persons believed to be ethnic Sarpos were slaughtered. The massacre is believed by some to have been aided and abetted by Krus, who took the opportunity to retaliate against their old tribal rival.<sup>54</sup> The story of this massacre and other acts of aggression forms a significant part of the Sarpos' collective memory about the Liberian conflict.<sup>55</sup>

Due to the lack of trust on both sides, every election year, ethnic Krus vote systematically for Kru representatives and senators while the Sarpos vote for representatives of their own ethnic group. In the 2014 mid-term senatorial elections, ethnic Sarpos lost to their Kru compatriots. For the Sarpos, this defeat meant a lack of representation in the Legislature.<sup>56</sup> In response, some prominent members of the Sarpo community initiated calls for the division of the county.

48 *Ibid.*

49 *Ibid.*

50 There is a dearth of literature on the origin of counties in Liberia; much of what is available are oral sources. The oral history of Sinoe County suggest a hegemonic history that privileged the ethnic Kru and the earlier settlers over their Sarpo and Grebo compatriots. A county conflict history for Sinoe County was undertaken to explore a more inclusive narrative, with the view to demolishing what appears to be a divisive hegemonic oral history. Information about the tribal feud between the two groups was obtained from a Search for Common Ground six-month reconciliation dialogue in Sinoe County, September 2017 to January 2018. The outcome of this dialogue has led to the design of a five-year county Reconciliation Plan. These plans are affixed as annexes to the Strategic Road Map for National Reconciliation and Healing. On 12 December 2012, the Liberia National Vision was promulgated at the Gbarnga, Bong County National Vision Conference and the Road Map was conceived as an outgrowth of Liberia's long-term strategy document.

51 The ethnic nations of Kru comprise the total of forty-eight sections while Sarpos comprise only six sections of the country.

52 Focus Group Discussion, above note 47.

53 TRC Final Report, above note 1, Vol. 2, p. 254.

54 Interview with Stephen Norman, Royal Hotel, Monrovia, 19 April 2019. On file with author.

55 Focus Group Discussion, above note 47.

56 "Ethnic Conflict Looms in Sinoe", *Daily Observer*, 18 August 2015, available at: [www.liberianobserver.com/news/ethnic-conflict-looms-in-sinoe/](http://www.liberianobserver.com/news/ethnic-conflict-looms-in-sinoe/).

The ethnic feuds between the two groups are reinforced by the establishment of a distinct ethnic Kru Association and Sarpo Association. Due to feuds between Krus and Sarpos, today the identity of both groups is grounded in violent memories and negative stereotypes against each other. Both the Sarpos and Krus have tribal associations whose survival is based on the mutual stereotyping of the other. Demolition of these tribal associations is critical to repairing the damaged relations. As noted by one “prominent citizen” of Sinoe,<sup>57</sup> the county should move away from loyalty to tribal hierarchies and the traditional way of life and instead espouse democratic governance structure and values.<sup>58</sup> Also, Sinoe needs to envision a more inclusive culture that celebrates the diversity of the country. Otherwise, as one focus group member put it, “when elections come, division comes”.<sup>59</sup> The dynamics between ethnic Sarpos and Krus are not unique and resemble those between Gios and Manos, and between ethnic Mandingos and Krahn.

### Building “never again”? Liberia’s memorials

The TRC has recommended that a memorial be erected at each site of a massacre or mass grave. While the recommendation may be ambitious, the intention is to promote learning and reflection over what happened. The primary objective of learning about violent conflict is to deter future acts of aggression. It is also intended to put distance between future generations and the generation of victims by knowing what happened, the underlying causes and why it is important to avoid recurrence. This learning process carries a preventative value of “never again”. In Liberia, there are few such places that provide the opportunity to reflect on the war and learn from the mistakes of the past. This section will endeavour to analyze both controversial and constructive memorialization efforts in Liberia.

#### *Controversial memorialization? The example of Prince Johnson’s monument*

In Nimba County, Prince Yormie Johnson’s towering monument in the town of Granta, on the stretch of road to Sacleapea (see Fig. 1), looms large in everyday life as it does in the country’s post-war ethnic politics. The monument, entitled “Touch of Freedom”, has the following engraved on a marble stone:

Here stands the lasting memory of the Revolutionary Hero of Nimba County, General Prince Yormie Johnson, a statesman, politician and evangelist of the Gospel of Jesus Christ who freed the people of Nimba County and Liberia.

The monument stands in defiance of the TRC Final Report, which declared Johnson one of the most notorious perpetrators of the Civil War. According to the TRC, the

57 T. Saye Goinleh, “Sinoe Citizen Stresses Reconciliation in Caucus”, *New Republic Liberia*, 12 July 2018, available at: <http://newrepublicliberia.com/sinoe-citizen-stresses-reconciliation-in-caucus/>.

58 See D, *SCORE Liberia Policy Brief: Addressing Political Tribalism*, 2017, p. 1, available at: [www.scoreforpeace.org/files/publication/pub\\_file/49/Policy%20Brief\\_Liberia\\_Political%20Tribalism\\_Final.pdf](http://www.scoreforpeace.org/files/publication/pub_file/49/Policy%20Brief_Liberia_Political%20Tribalism_Final.pdf).

59 Focus Group Discussion, above note 47.



Figure 1. The monument to Prince Yormie Johnson. Photograph © Allen Kollie.

Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL) created by Johnson accounts for 2% of all violations, which amounts to 2,588 violations in total.<sup>60</sup> The story of Prince Johnson and how he rose to prominence began after the 1980 military takeover. Sharing a brief history of the evolution of ethnic groups is critical for understanding the background of ethnic relations in Nimba and the controversy of the monument.

60 TRC Final Report, above note 1, Vol. 2, p. 264.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Gios and Manos that formed part of the Mande ethno-linguistic group migrated to Liberia after the collapse of the Sudan empire. The Mandingos, who are also a part of Mande group, are believed to have migrated to Liberia about the same time as the Gios and Manos, but their life of trade and commerce rendered them economic nomads. In the nineteenth century the Mandingos are reported to have migrated to Nimba in pursuit of commercial opportunities.<sup>61</sup>

Mandingo, Gio and Mano integration flourished primarily around trade and commerce. Mandingos tended to demonstrate acumen for business, while Gios and Manos were agriculturalists tilling the land. Naturally, the connections between Gios and Mano on the one hand and Mandingos on the other transformed into a symbiotic relationship.

Socially, Mandingo men married into Gio and Mano households. However, Gio and Mano men were not permitted to marry into Mandingo households because of a restriction posed by Islam: non-Muslims could not marry into Islamic households. Children born unto Gio and Mano women in Mandingo households would be raised primarily in the Mandingo patrilineal system, in which the Gio and Mano culture was often not acknowledged except in a few isolated cases. This has often been the cause of friction in the social interactions between these ethnic groups.<sup>62</sup>

In light of the history of integration and intermarriage, the Gios and Manos felt betrayed by the Mandingos: there was a feeling that they were not only bystanders in the ethnic purge against Gios and Manos but were part of the system. However, like ethnic Krahns, Mandingos were at the same time targeted and eliminated by INPFL forces. Samuel Doe, an ethnic Krahn who favoured Mandingos, was captured, tortured and executed by the INPFL (led by Prince Johnson) in 1990, and ethnic Mandingos were hunted down and killed in Nimba and elsewhere.<sup>63</sup>

It's on the violent memories between these ethnic groups that Prince Johnson has built his political career. His rhetoric has maintained that Mandingos are foreigners and should not own land, and that Gios and Manos are free today because his forces executed Samuel Doe.<sup>64</sup>

In stark contrast to the memorials described below, Prince Johnson's monument is an example of memorialization which does not necessarily have the aim of reconciling society over contentious issues. One can therefore sense a thin line between the variety of aims underlying memorialization efforts in a given context.

61 Augustine Konneh, *Religion, Commerce and the Integration of the Mandingo in Liberia*, University Press of America, Lanham, MD, 1996, pp. 97–117.

62 For further reading, see Stephen Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy: The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of an African Civil War*, New York University Press, New York, 2006; N. N. Konneh, above note 12; Aaron Sleh, Samuel Toe and Aaron Weah, *Impunity Under Attack: The Evolution and Imperatives of the Liberian Truth Commission*, Civic Initiative, Monrovia, 2008.

63 See A. Sleh, S. Toe and A. Weah, above note 62.

64 Author's observations. See also Yomi Johnson, *The Rise and Fall of President Samuel Doe: A Time to Heal and Rebuild Liberia*, Soma Associates, Lagos, 2003.



Figure 2. The Liberian National Museum. Photograph © Theresa Rodriguez.

## Some constructive patterns of memorialization

### *The Liberian National Museum*

The Liberian National Museum (see [Fig. 2](#)) was established by an act of the Legislature in 1958 during the administration of President William Tubman. Beyond the National Museum, located in central Monrovia, there is no other museum in the country. The primary goal of the National Museum was to obtain, collect and preserve cultural artefacts and other historical elements which depict the country's heritage. During the Civil War, the National Museum was deeply affected and some artefacts were looted and sold. Despite this, the Museum was recovered and is now operational again. Unlike other war museums, especially in countries emerging from violent conflict or authoritarian regimes, the Liberian National Museum's collection on the war is limited and doesn't devote much space to discussion of the past; instead, the collection is mixed and focuses on a variety of themes. Importantly, it provides a space for viewing, reflection and learning. Nonetheless, some observers have placed the Museum's collection in a context of subtle revisionism which tends to avoid controversial materials that could raise questions and trigger debates about the



past. Its focus on the past is selective: it determines what specifically needs to be remembered, with some details of political significance being left out.<sup>65</sup>

### *The Lutheran Church*

On 29 and 30 July 1990, about 600 Liberians were massacred at St Peter's Lutheran Church in Sinkor, Monrovia.<sup>66</sup> All victims of the massacre were quickly buried in two mass graves in the church compound. In commemoration of this tragedy, the Lutheran Church observes a one-day annual requiem mass for the victims and survivors. This has become one of the few moments of mourning and reflection in Liberia.

### *The Duport Road memorial*

The Duport Road community was among the worst affected during the Liberian conflict. It was the scene of two horrific massacres and is the site of several mass graves. In 1990, the Charles Taylor-led National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) allegedly arrested, tortured and summarily executed many people who were perceived to belong to the Krahn and Mandingo ethnic groups.<sup>67</sup> Most of the killings were carried out at the end of Duport Road known as the Waterside; some of those killed were first arrested at the notorious checkpoint known as the God Bless You Gate. Four years later, the community was attacked again.<sup>68</sup> In December 1994, more than forty-four people were massacred, allegedly by forces of the NPFL, on the part of Duport Road known as the Cow Field<sup>69</sup>. The victims included men, women, children and the elderly. At the edge of the Waterside area, a signpost was erected in memory of those killed in the first of these massacres. The signpost was made out of a corrugated metal barrel. It featured a plain flat surface, approximately two feet high, painted with a white background. Printed in black against the white background in bold letters were these commemorative words: "Innocent victims of the Liberian Civil War, 1990, killed because of the tribe they belong to." Due to neglect, the signpost fell into disrepair in 2009.

In 2017, the Independent National Human Rights Commission of Liberia erected a new memorial on Duport Road (see Fig. 3). In 2008, the local community had engaged in an extensive consultative memorial process and

65 Interview with Augustine Konneh PhD, African Methodist Episcopal University, Camp Johnson Road, 5 February 2018. On file with author.

66 A. Sleh, S. Toe and A. Weah, above note 62, pp. 1–8; "Lutheran Church Massacre Survivors Seek US Justice", 12 February 2018, available at: [www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-42996851](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-42996851); Lennart Doddoo, Liberia: Reparation, Cry for Justice Dominate Lutheran Massacre Memorial", *Front Page Africa*, 3 August 2018, available at: <https://frontpageafricaonline.com/liberia-war-crimes-trial/liberia-reparation-cry-for-justice-dominate-lutheran-massacre-memorial/>.

67 Aaron Weah, "Post-Conflict Memorialization in Liberia: Progress and Challenges", *Journal of Conflict, Religion and Peace*, Vol. 5, No. 1–2, 2011–12.

68 *Ibid.*

69 TRC Final Report, above note 1, Vol. 2, pp. 213–256. See also A. Weah, above note 67.



Figure 3. The Duport Road memorial. Photograph © Aaron Weah.

fundraising exercise; on the question of what type of memorial to erect, the community decided on a memorial with a particular architectural design<sup>70</sup> and features.<sup>71</sup> The Commission's work ignored the suggestions of the community. As a result, the efforts to build a memorial were poorly received, as the community was not fully involved in the decision-making process; community engagement in erecting memorials is considered standard practice to ensure inclusive participation and engagement.<sup>72</sup> Nonetheless, the monument serves as a powerful reminder of the atrocities committed on Duport Road, and its erection should be seen as part of a wider campaign to remember the conflict in ways that prevent relapse.

### *The Samay memorial*

Samay is a remote village in central Liberia that lost about thirty-seven members of its community to violence in 1993 and later organized and erected a memorial. Today the memorial is used as an important site for learning about war and violence more broadly. The site is managed by a school teacher who typically takes his students there, quizzes them about key events in the Liberian conflict, and discusses why it is important to learn about it. The villagers also gather around the memorial during Decoration Day, Liberia's day of the dead.<sup>73</sup> A few

70 For a description of the architectural design of the community's preferred memorial, see A. Weah, above note 67.

71 Aaron Weah, "Duport Road: Remembering Wartime Atrocities", *The Perspective*, 12 June 2009, available at: [www.liberiaitech.com/theperspective/2009/0612200902.html](http://www.liberiaitech.com/theperspective/2009/0612200902.html).

72 International Center for Transitional Justice, Memo to the Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Monrovia, April 2009.

73 For more details, see A. Weah, above note 67.

years after the memorial was built, the community acquired further resources to expand the existing structure. For example, a library was built to collect materials about the Liberian war and the Samay memorial more specifically. Reverend William R. Tolbert, Liberia's peace ambassador, makes regular visits there.

There are few opportunities to learn about the war and violence in Liberia from an objective perspective. Though memorial sites like Duport Road are examples of constructive patterns of remembering, Samay village demonstrates a much stronger and more innovative approach toward teaching the younger generation and transmitting positive memories.

The pattern of memorials demonstrated above does not reveal much in terms of systematic community learning. Instead, it tries to treat individual memories of the war as collective ones. In communities with a strong sense of ethnonationalism such as Nimba, the Samay memorial, located in Bong County, Central Liberia, provides a blueprint for how to move away from destructive remembering as it tends to open up a space for broader and more inclusive debate about the past and those who are listed as perpetrators in the TRC Final Report.

## Conclusion

Liberia has been locked in a vortex of deadly conflicts for much of its existence, and attempts to systematically address them have yielded little or no results.<sup>74</sup> The Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement, which called for the establishment of the TRC, emerged as the latest strategy to address the underlying causes of Liberia's perennial conflict.<sup>75</sup> Earlier events such as the Fernando Po slave labour scandal of the 1930s and the Rice Riot of 1979 were investigated, as a result of which a report was released to Liberia's governing elite but was never implemented. In turn, the State has been responding with either official silence or rhetoric of "reconciliation". The recommendations of the 1930 League of Nations report<sup>76</sup> demonstrating Liberia's complicity in conditions analogous to slavery and forced labour, which essentially focused on reorganizing the State and addressing deep ethnic cleavages between native and settler Liberians, were never implemented. Consequently, violent memories of that period festered and impacted ethnic Krus and Grebos, the groups that were affected the most. Charles Johnson, an academic and one of the three commissioners appointed by the League of Nations, wrote a compelling account which was a repudiation of that era, outlining the settlers' failed mission of establishing a black republic. In particular, Johnson accused the settlers of "crushing the native spirit" of creativity and entrepreneurship. In his book, *Bitter Canaan*, he published the lyrics of a victim's

74 Jeremy Levitt, *The Evolution of Deadly Conflict in Liberia: From Paternalitarianism to State Collapse*, Carolina Academic Press, Durham, NC, 2005.

75 League of Nations, above note 6.

76 *Ibid.*

song: “Allen Yancy, where are our sons, husbands and fathers?” He lamented that the sad song was a “fresh and pertinent legend”.<sup>77</sup> Johnson’s work highlights the fact that grievances prior to the Civil War were never addressed and that the transmission of violent memories has become more complicated due to layers of memories across different temporalities.

The TRC Final Report was released a decade ago. The commemoration of this date will once again reveal many missed opportunities and serve as another reminder that the Final Report’s recommendations have not been implemented. Even though the Report proffered more than 200 recommendations, its implementation has been overshadowed by measures of criminal accountability. In addition to the recommendations regarding criminal accountability or establishing a war crimes court, there are other measures designed to support community rehabilitation, improve inter-group relations and restore victims’ dignity. For example, recommendations on the issuance of public apologies are designed to enable the government to acknowledge the complicity of the Liberian State in the destruction of lives and properties. Commemorating an official holiday is another critical recommendation advanced by the TRC. This recommendation is intended to undo Decoration Day’s public holiday, which is observed every second Wednesday of March. The tradition around Decoration Day allows every Liberian to visit the grave site of loved ones, mourn, share a meal or drink with the dead, and clean up the site. But the majority of Liberians killed during the conflict don’t have grave sites. Since the end of the war, Liberians from different walks of life have complained that the holiday is insensitive to those who were summarily executed and dumped in mass graves. From the list of 203 sites of massacres and mass graves, one can imagine that nearly everyone killed was not properly buried. Hence, establishing an official public commemoration holiday and erecting country-wide memorials will undoubtedly provide an inclusive space for mourning, as it would raise important existential questions about what happened, who committed the atrocities and how the government facilitates closure. If implemented, such country-wide memorial activity is likely to counter opportunistic ethnonationalist manipulations of collective memory.

Recent efforts to rewrite a general and comprehensive history of Liberia by some of Liberia’s leading academics have failed to materialize. The Organizing Conference of May 2013 was aimed at discussing issues of periodization, themes and scholars to undertake the writing assignment.<sup>78</sup> There was one central

77 Charles Johnson, *Bitter Canaan: The Story of the Negro Republic*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, NJ, 1987 (first written in 1930), p. 214. Allen Yancy was vice-president of Liberia (1928–1930) under former president Charles D. B. King (1920–1930); both resigned as a result of the League of Nations report.

78 Organizing Conference, *Proposal for the Establishment of a Liberian National History Project (Conference Report)*, Governance Commission, Republic of Liberia, 13–16 May 2013. The author served as the note-taker for this event. The Liberia TRC recommended writing an inclusive and general history of Liberia to facilitate genuine reconciliation. Following the launch of the Liberia National Vision 2030 and Reconciliation Road Map as post-TRC instruments, the Governance Commission spearheaded the Organizing Conference as the first step to writing Liberia’s general and comprehensive history. The

question that delegates to the conference had to grapple with: what kind of history would Liberia need? In a two-sided debate, one side, largely comprising Liberian academics and historians, maintained that it is critical to have a history-writing process that focuses on the evidence.<sup>79</sup> The other side argued that a revisionist history was more desirable because evidence-based history is likely to uncover new truths which would challenge people's notions about reconciliation.<sup>80</sup> Finally, it was agreed that a five-volume history would be written over a period of five years. This author has later learned why the productive outcome of the Conference was never taken forward. Augustine Konneh, one of Liberia's foremost historians and the head of the Expert Panel of Historians, informed the author that the administration at the time was more interested in a revisionist history-writing exercise than an evidence-based approach.<sup>81</sup> Konneh's assessment of the failed history-writing process is consistent with the desire of Liberia's elites for reinvention rather than a deliberate and substantive process of reconciliation and accountability.

event brought together historians, anthropologists, journalists, political scientists and development scholars, among others, to discuss the priority of writing Liberia's history and technical modalities. The four-day conference agreed on periodization, themes and that the history writing process should commence from 500 years before 1822, the date of arrival of the settlers. The history would be written over a period of five years.

79 *Ibid.*

80 *Ibid.*

81 Interview with Augustine Konneh, above note 65. Augustine Konneh is one of Liberia's leading historians and head of the panel of experts that was in charge of Liberia History Project. At the time of the history conference, the author worked for the Governance Commission, the leading entity tasked with organizing the event.

