Chapter 5
Restorative Peacebuilding in Liberia:
Traditional Practices of Mourning and Reconciliation

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how traditional Liberian communities decimated by colonization, multi-generational trauma, and war found healing through ancient wisdom and ritual. The events related here highlight some of the ways that guidance from other-than-human realms, particularly from nature and the dead, makes quantum healing possible by restoring respectful relationships with all life as well as with the unseen world that is its source. The discussion highlights the urgency for international peacebuilding and foreign aid policy to re-examine the erroneous assumption that outside experts and money will solve the dilemmas caused by colonization, commodification, and greed. In the experiences related here, the authors show how dreaming, divination, ritual, offerings, and community councils helped divided communities work together for the sake of peace. The unexpected appearance of elephants—traditionally understood to be harbingers of peace—reawakened an ancient understanding of how to work in alliance with the natural world. The mysterious, interwoven events related here reveal new ways of working collaboratively across cultures and beyond the human realm. This suggests an innovative role for outsiders wishing to support the efforts of traditional communities seeking peace and stability after war, with the awareness that impending global extinction requires an unprecedented cultural shift to re-invigorate lived reciprocity within and beyond the human community for the sake of all life.

INTRODUCTION

In many traditional cultures, dreams are understood as a way for the spirits, the animals, and the ancestors to be in conversation with living human beings. It is only within the last century – and only in the West – that dreams have come to be dismissed as superstition or an expression of individual neuroses and, therefore, dismissed as pathology. Traditional Liberians understand that dreams often come to individuals on behalf of the community, carrying specific guidance and information. Sometimes those recipients are the least likely to receive such a message, a kind of confirmation that the dream material could not easily have been contrived by the dreamer's psyche. In addition to paying attention to dreams, other Indigenous technologies come into play, including divination, honoring the dead and the ancestors, and observing signs from the Natural World. This chapter explores how a mixed Liberian and American team from the non-profit peacebuilding organization, *everyday gandhis (*www.everydaygandhis.org*)* has been working with traditional communities in Northwest Liberia to support peace and reconciliation following the Liberian civil war of 1989-2004. As founding director of the organization, I worked closely with Liberian and American colleagues and with the grassroots community peacebuilders who so graciously welcomed us, and patiently helped us to understand what was going on.

BACKGROUND

Literature Review and Methodology

During our initial years working in Liberia there was little by way of research or literature to orient us to traditional Liberian rites of mourning and reconciliation, nor to the potential role of outsiders from the U.S. at such a gathering. As the events described here were unfolding, we didn't have time to do extensive research. We already knew that our experiences didn't fit into any pre-existing peacebuilding or research protocols.

In traditional communities in Liberia, social relations function as an ecosystem, analogous in complexity to biological systems. In ways that are both tangible and mysterious, these social ecosystems include the spirits, the ancestors and the natural world. The multi-dimensionality of the social ecosystem in itself, as well as its real-world implications for peacebuilding, trauma healing and research, add to the challenges of fitting our work into customary protocols. Nonetheless, we also realized that our work might be applicable or at least resonant for peacebuilders in similar settings, but it has taken several lifetimes, it seems, to make sense of the many threads of the story and weave them into a useful narrative.

Though war is an ancient scourge, the Liberian civil war was particularly brutal in its shocking excesses, particularly the widespread exploitation of child soldiers. The deeply complex and interwoven social relations that had functioned as a social safety net prior to the war were manipulated by cynical and corrupt leaders in ways that exacerbated the violence when war broke out. As in many traditional cultures, Liberia has many ways of safeguarding social cohesion, and for reconciling when conflicts arise. However, as in most colonized societies, extreme multi-generational trauma permeates Liberian history, finding expression in the atrocities that became the norm during the height of the conflict. Though traditional forms of healing and reconciliation have not yet been adapted to the aftermath of modern warfare, it seems apparent that these ancient practices have much to teach us now.

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