

Trust Building in Post-Conflict Sierra Leone

Shelby Carpenter

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My first morning in Freetown, Sierra Leone, was punctuated by literally running over a boy's body. Eager to check out the beach, explore the neighborhood, and stretch my legs after my flight the night before from Banjul, The Gambia (my other field site), I decided to jog the 1.5 miles to Lumley Beach from Lumley Road where my temporary host family lived. As I approached the busy roundabout near Lumley Police Station on this bright, crisp morning of December 23, 2004, I saw a boy lying face down on the side of the road. At first glance, he looked about 12 years old and was wearing only shorts. It was about 8:00 and morning rush hour was in full swing. People were bustling back and forth to catch the *poda poda* (public transport) on their way to work. I asked a man if he knew what had happened. He thought the boy was passed out and said something about drinking and youth. I too thought perhaps he was passed out and sleeping, and I continued jogging through the intersection to the beach.

When I jogged past the roundabout an hour later, the boy was still there. That is when I realized he might be seriously hurt. I was confused about how so many could walk right past or around him as he lay sprawled half in the street and half on the sidewalk. I asked people if they thought he was dead but they seemed uninterested. I said that we should check whether he was still alive and that we should get help. A man bent down to listen to his mouth and chest and announced that he was not breathing. One woman said that it was not good to touch a dead body. I asked why no one was moving him and whether they knew anything about the accident. It was getting hotter and hotter as the sun rose, and his exposed body had been in the sun for at least an hour and a half. A neighbor came out and said he knew the boy. He said he had seen him wandering around the night before and that he was crazy. That he lacked sense. I wondered how being mentally troubled could kill him. I said that maybe he had been hit by a car at night and left to die on the road. But others kept saying that he was known in the neighborhood as a *kraz pikin* (a crazy child), and indicated he might have been taking drugs. At the time, I was unaware of how prevalent cheap street drugs like *brown brown* (crack-cocaine) were in Freetown. Still, nobody seemed interested enough to get involved. In fact, when I asked if anyone would

go with me across the street to the police station to report the death, a few people protested that it would be a very bad idea because we might get in trouble since we knew nothing about the circumstances. Finally, a man volunteered to go to the police station and tell them there was a body in the street.

That was my first day in Freetown. I was profoundly shocked by seeing the dead boy. I wondered how common such a sight was and if I would see more corpses in the street during my field study. When I got home I told my Sierra Leonean host family. The mother of the family said, “No, it isn’t too common, but after the war anything can happen.” Then she launched into stories about kidnappings and disappearing bodies sold for organs and killed by outsiders as sacrifices. She told me to be careful and never to go out at night alone. My anxieties were not calmed by these stories, but I was familiar with similar stories of witches and *jiins* (evil spirits) that come out at night to do unknown harm. I thought perhaps her stories were more urban myths especially well suited for young children and outsiders.

What troubled me more was the fact that dozens of people walked around the nearly naked boy’s body for hours and did not stop. What did that say about personal responsibility? What did it say about their sense of trust in the authorities that they were unwilling to go to the police station to seek help or report the body? Why were they reluctant to acknowledge that he was dead and lying in the middle of the road? In some ways, Freetown is the hallmark city of over-crowded war-torn urban West Africa, which Robert Kaplan so famously described in his introduction to *The Coming Anarchy*.^[1]

The civil war (1991-2002) had ended only two years prior to my arrival, and it had touched the lives of everyone in some way or another. Perhaps this story tells about the erosion of the bonds that bring people together. Death usually galvanizes the living into cooperative action. In this case, it did not. It led only to indifference.

If common humanity and death were not strong enough to unite people, then I wanted to know what ties of commonality could make a difference in Freetown. In other words, what ties people to other people? When do Sierra Leoneans decide to act together, to trust one another, and why? What do those threads of trust look like in Freetown and in urban Gambia among Sierra Leoneans?

I had come to Sierra Leone and The Gambia on a Fulbright-Hays grant to research my dissertation thesis that Sierra Leonean emulations of *Hunting*, that is, young men’s masquerade societies borrowed from the Yoruba in neighboring Nigeria, represent an urban ritual response to trauma in the face of low institutional social support. I wanted to investigate how refugee identity and ritual performance are linked to Sierra Leoneans’ chronic adjustment difficulties and profound sense of alienation from their own culture, a condition Eisenbruch terms “cultural bereavement” ^[2]. When I arrived and started talking to people, however, they were not interested in discussing the “trauma” of war. In fact, trauma was a not a word used by Sierra Leoneans to describe their emotions or feelings of frustration about the war and about life. It was not an indigenous phrase in the Krio language but one they had learned to use when talking to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to show their distress and request financial support. It had become

a buzzword. They had learned that “trauma” meant something significant to the West, and could be used as a magical appeal for help. But when the aid agencies were not around, or had met their quotas, locked their doors, and gone home, Sierra Leoneans were much more interested in discussing their dilemmas and frustrations through the vocabulary and cultural lens of trust.

Clearly many Sierra Leoneans had undergone significant “traumatic” episodes during the war, but the vocabulary of trust and mistrust immediately took on greater significance in my research because it was the way that Sierra Leoneans described the world around them. It was the way they often understood their interactions with the State and with one another in personal relationships. Distrust was a topic of constant chatter and concern. Whom to trust? How to trust? They described a world where virtually no one can be trusted, not even fathers. In such a context, how do people live their lives and how does anything get accomplished? My dissertation therefore examines the development of trust in two settings: Freetown, Sierra Leone, and the greater Banjul suburbs of Serekunda, The Gambia. It involves Sierra Leoneans who have been marked by long-term endemic warfare where distrust has been characteristic and trust hard to find.

Literature Review on Trust and Distrust

A central problem with conceptualizing trust and distrust is that they are essentially cognitive and emotional assessments of the trustworthiness of the other party and may therefore be mistaken.[3] Trust usually refers to a judgment that one can rely on another party’s word or promise at the risk of a bad outcome should the other cheat or renege.[4] On the flip side, distrust is a judgment that one cannot depend on the other’s actions or promise because the other has an interest in cheating or wishes to cause one harm. Contrary to the conventional view of distrust as an irrational reaction, distrust is often a sensible response to potential dangers.[5] Distrust may also be an emotional response that coincides with unease and fear. Distrust and trust are culturally filtered expectations, judgments and emotions that are historically pre-conditioned. By this I mean that cultural values and history play a role in society’s judgment of trustworthiness. In the case of Sierra Leone, there were real potential dangers during its 400 years of slavery in the region, coupled with real cases of kidnappings and beliefs in witchcraft and poisonings during colonial times and post-colonial independence.[6] The 11-year civil war added to these high levels of distrust and served to exacerbate the cultural norm of distrust. In these incidences, distrust was often a safe collective response before acting.

Trust and power have a close relationship. If neither party to a relationship had power to withdraw from the relationship, their necessary mutual reliance would be sufficient to explain their cooperation, and neither would need to trust the other. Often this is the case in small, face-to-face societies in which kinship ties are very strong and binding, and people are more or less stuck with one another and are subject to sanctions, such as shunning from all others, if they behave badly.[7] Evans-Pritchard famously explained witchcraft among the Azande as a socially sanctioned practice used to control and organize small-scale societies to cooperation. It seems that many small-scale societies can achieve mutual cooperation without trust, as Barth[8] has argued among the Swat in

Pakistan. Barth notes how men agreed to join the leader's army in exchange for rewards such as the use of land, other material awards, and hospitality from landlords, who in turn owed fealty to the leader or Wali because of his role as a mediator in their disputes. According to Barth, few people in Swat society trusted anyone or acted on the basis of morally grounded decisions. They instead used fear and respect to make others obey. Most importantly, they acted strategically to increase their power over others by making others dependent on them. They distrusted those with whom they cooperated, but they cooperated as long as they perceived they would eventually individually benefit from the relationship. They also used strategic and minute readings of other people's facial cues, physical body language, voice, stance, and movement to decipher whether someone was trustworthy.[9] Indeed, in many small-scale communities and societies high levels of distrust are the norm.[10]

Societies in which distrust is prevalent may share some other similar characteristics; they may be societies that are fragmented, with scarce resources and no protective social net, effective authority or legitimate political institution, and in which violence is rife, fear pervasive, and hope rare. When confronted with these characteristics we find that trust is, after all, a luxury.

In contrast, there is a relationship between power and trust: if one partner has a reliable networking resource pool available and a panoply of alternative partners or little need of the other partner's continued cooperation, that party's power must disrupt the possibility of trust and trustworthiness and may even instill distrust. Modest power entails the possibility of trust, while great power asymmetry may commonly entail active distrust, and lack of power by either party blocks concern with trust altogether.[11] This is particularly relevant in voluntary associations in which membership roles are hierarchical but allow for movement either up or down the ladder. If associational participation is based on merit, a philosophy of brotherhood, and is open to all economic classes and ethnic backgrounds, then the open spaces created allow for a certain creativity to defy cultural norms of distrust and may actually work in favor of building trust.

Moreover, if there is a moderate asymmetry of power, the powerful party may be able to trust the weaker party more (and over a wider range of issues) while the weaker party can also trust the more powerful one. This is one way that power is important in almost all relationships of trust. For example, senior Hunters can entrust junior Hunters with a variety of tasks and skills, because their reputation and goodwill are on the line. Trust is useful not only in coercive relationships but also in fairly straightforward exchange relationships. In West Africa, there are many examples of patron-client relationships that help to build either healthy, protective relationships of trust, or coercive, destructive relationships of distrust. The restriction of resources among patron-client relationships is often described as one of the reasons that the Sierra Leonean government was weakened and destabilized to such an extent that it was unable to effectively govern and prevent the civil war from occurring.[12]

In contrast, modest power within associational life, such as occurs in Hunting societies, [13] means that there is protection to be gained if individuals stay in the relationship. Farrell [14] essentially measures the cost of withdrawing from a relationship as inversely

proportional to power. Low cost of withdrawal implies high power; high cost implies low power. And this may be one of the many reasons why Sierra Leoneans decide to initiate and often remain members throughout their entire lives. The power offered through associating with hunting is hard to find elsewhere in the fragmented society and so members stay put, enjoying and working toward building greater trust and reciprocity. In return they gain valuable access to a network of brothers as well as protection.[15] Understanding how trust develops in situations where mistrust is endemic is critical for the mitigation of ethnic and religious tensions.

One thing that is key to understanding relationships of trust is reciprocity. Multiple studies tell us that cooperation is not essential to the foundation of trustworthy relationships; rather, reciprocity is key.[16] There is an intimate relationship between trust and expectations of reciprocity. In this regard, I am using the sociological definition of trust networks as those “based on achieved role expectations, united by organic forms of solidarity where the obligations of mutual reciprocity are based on contractual relationships rather than status attributes.”[17] These networks may have a greater chance of longevity when they are based on reciprocal bonds, because trust is the forging of unconditional bonds with entities that are by their very nature actually highly conditioned either by time, the nature of the relationship, or the object or labor of exchange. This paradox is disguised in multiple fashions to appear as unconditional faith even though, in reality, trust is far from unconditional. According to Seligman, we trust others as a result of our knowledge about the others’ reputation and act accordingly. Defining trust by reciprocal obligations of relationships predicated by certain customs and conditions makes the nature of reciprocity a key element to understanding how trust is formed.

This brings me to a discussion about friendship networks and trust in urban, poor West Africa. Keith Hart[18] writes an astonishing portrayal of how trust works among the Frafra community in Accra, Ghana. The Frafra migrants face the problem of establishing economic forms and durable relations of partnership and hierarchy in the city slum. Traditional means offer little confidence in outcomes established by contract or through kinship networks, and instead the Frafras fall back on associations, most notably the act of goodwill through the sphere of social life that people, perhaps friends, make out of their free-floating associations.[19] At times the Frafras organize themselves along friendship ties, sometimes for illicit purposes, or in order to receive and collect loans. Overall, they use friends as a means to create an informal economy in a society where their marginal status excludes them from other forms of participation.

Hart’s article draws upon two points that I wish to make concerning my research of networks of trust in Sierra Leone. The first is that not all forms of trust are necessarily good in themselves or good for society. The trust established among bands of thieves and mafioso families are but two such examples of networks of trust that are socially corrosive. Nonetheless, thieves and Mafias require relations of trust in order to carry out economic transactions from simple to complex. Without trust, the success of their enterprises would be improbable. Sierra Leonean activities in secret urban Hunting societies have been (dubiously) portrayed as negative and have been linked to State

corruption and state-sponsored violence, as well as to fighting during the recent war to protect civilians. For them too, mutual trust is an important aspect in all of their activities, from sharing secrets to masquerades and obligatory reciprocal bonds.

My second point is that sometimes secret societies are friendship associations and relations of trust offer alternatives to kinship and contract. If these secret societies are well entrenched in cultural norms and leak into political and economic structures (illicit or not), then they in turn create potential networks of trust – providing a convincing institution for both bonding and bridging forms of trust. This is a line of argument I will flesh out in my dissertation.

Being unable to trust someone need not imply active distrust. One might lack enough information about someone to make a decision, and therefore simply not act. Time is also an important factor and generally we find that trust, like reciprocity, is an on-going, cyclical process that tends to repeat itself. If there is a lag or conflict, the trusting relationship suffers. In Sierra Leone, familiarity with someone, even a family member, is not sufficient to enable trust. This is due in part to the deep feelings of disappointment many Sierra Leoneans experienced with the breakdown of traditional family structures because of long-term forced migration and war. During the 11-year civil war, more than half a million people died in the fighting, victims of systematic mutilation. Rebels raped, pillaged, and cut the limbs off of thousands of civilians. Out of a total population of 4 million Sierra Leoneans, two-thirds became refugees outside the country's borders or were forced to leave their villages to escape the rebels. As a result, families were separated over and over again in the episodic guerilla warfare. An estimated 100,000 children were abducted, drugged with crack-cocaine, and forced to become child soldiers. During the war, no one really knew who was a rebel or a child, who was a civilian or a killer. Soldiers changed sides to join rebel forces, and Nigerian Peacekeepers raped and killed civilians.

In the most brutal form of “dirty war” the “civilian stands at the heart – and on the frontline – of war”[20], and mass confusion and the struggle for survival prevail. Nordstrom writes that in dirty wars combatants do not gain victory through military or battlefield strategies but through terrorizing the civilian population to enforce political acquiescence. The torture and killing of one person are not intended solely to destroy an individual's body but to destroy the whole ‘body politic’. Rape, mutilation, and murder are used as public performance to inspire dread and construct a “culture of terror”. [21] Thus, the absurdity of Sierra Leone's own dirty war was heightened by the merging of victim and perpetrator and the uncertainty of who the next victim might be. Many civilians did not even know what the fighting was about or why it was directed against them.

In the environment of Sierra Leone's civil war and the post-war context, children grew up either running from every stranger, or challenging every stranger to see what they could get from the often dangerous, short-term relationship. Many families were split in the years of fighting and even after being reunited with kin, the economic and psychological strains were great and indefinite. Many Sierra Leoneans were left weary of trusting and relying upon family members for support. Families that were able to reunite after the war were unable to provide for even the most basic needs of their members. As in my own fictive family in Freetown, most young adults and children had left their own families in

search of more reliable and stable relationships. The years of conflict had not only broken down the political and economic institutions in the country, but as I will argue, seriously challenged family structures as well. From my own observations, by the time young adults reached 20 years of age, they were already so disillusioned and disappointed with broken promises and failure of kin relations' to provide stability and safety that family became just another example of a fragile and unreliable support network.

In fact, in Sierra Leone, sometimes the closer the kin the more dangerous they are and the less likely one is to trust them with important information and secrets. Often too much familiarity with extended family or kin prompted distrust. Children are taught not to trust anyone, not even their parents, in order to ensure safety and to protect themselves against betrayal. This fear correlates with the prevalent belief in witchcraft and the pervasive fear of jealousy. I was privy to numerous stories of witchcraft and use of "the witch gun" by close family members in order to seek revenge or attack other family members whom they feared or saw as successful. As the nearest to you, family members know the most about you and become embroiled in deep family secrets or battles and may well wish to do you harm. They also might have more reasons to be jealous than outsiders or to carry a grudge or to harbor ill feelings and resentment against you. If they decide to act on these feelings, they are already in dangerously close proximity and can engage in witchcraft, spells, and curses. These might be administered through your food or drink or put on your person unbeknownst to you. Therefore, while extended family members and siblings are probably the closest to you within the family, they may also be the most fragile trustworthy relations as well because of potential harm through witchcraft and because of potential betrayal through multiple disappointments due to the uncertainty of life after the war.

Thus, trusting and trustworthy behavior and attitudes are not unchanging and universal attributes of individuals or of families but are the result of multiple contextual and individual attributes. Understanding trust and the conditions that are conducive to trust in Sierra Leone is a challenging task, but for many Sierra Leoneans trust is not predicated by kin relations, or contract,^[22] but rather activated through a process of emotionally meaningful and reciprocal relationships of friendship networks such as those found in the norms, values, and practices of Hunting societies.

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Notes:

1. Kaplan, 2000.

2. Eisenbruch, 1991, 1992.

3. Larson, 2004.

4. Deutsch, 1958; Luhmann, 1979:25, 1988:97; Coleman, 1990:91; Hardin, 1993: 516; Dasgupta, 1988:51- 52; Luhmann, 1988:97; Gambetta, 1988b:217.

5. Larson, 2004:35.

6. Porter, 1963.

7. Cook and Hardin, 2001; Hardin, 1999.

8. Barth, 1985.

9. Lindholm, 1982.

10. Gregor, 1987.

11. Farrell, 2004.

12. Richards, 1996.

13. I use the Krio term *Hunting* to mean the urban hunting societies of the Yoruba diaspora. If I refer to traditional hunting societies, I will use the Mende word *Kamajors*. *Hunting* adopted its Krio name in the early 1800s from *Odelay*, translated from Yoruba as lay societies of *Odeh* (literally animal or fish catcher). Trust is also the Krio term used to describe roughly its English equivalent. Henceforth, when referring to these societies or their members, I will use capital letters to distinguish from the general categories of hunting and hunters.

14. Farrell, 2004.

15. Sierra Leoneans view protection as both that which is provided from within the network and protection from the Hunter's herbal knowledge used to ward off evil spirits or bewitching spells, and for medicinal purposes.

16. Ostrom and Walker, 2005; Seligman, 2000; Shipton, 2007, McCabe, 2005.

17. Seligman, 2000:4.

18. Hart, 1988.

19. Hart, 1988:189.

20. Nordstrom, 1991:6.

21. Nordstrom 1992: 263.

22. Most anthropologists and sociologists who write about "contract" in opposition to "kinship" are still grounding their distinction in Henry Maine's discussion of "status" and "contract," in his classic *Ancient Law* (1861). To him, it meant (something like) any sort of agreement you enter voluntarily, rather than being born into (this is what he called a "status" relationship or position). I am using a narrower definition of "contract" to mean a formal, written agreement between individuals, or between individuals and institutions.

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