

## Telling and Showing

### Witnesses Represent Sierra Leone's War Atrocities in Court and Onstage

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#### Introduction

In the aftermath of massive war atrocities, the artistic representation of traumatic experiences can be ameliorative. Often, there is an inherent sense of relief and solace in giving form to an experience that has remained unformulated, even when this is done in solitude. In the act of bringing forth what has been purely internal, psychological transformation can occur. Further, artistic representation opens up the possibility of being understood by others. According to Judith Herman (1992), isolation is one of the core components of trauma. When experiences are kept hidden and are not represented, victims are deprived of important sources of acknowledgement, emotional validation, and social support. By contrast, when traumatic experiences are channeled into language, or shared with sensitive audience members through drama, dance, and ritual, psychological repair becomes possible. As the psychologist for the Special Court for Sierra Leone, West Africa, from May 2005 through August 2007, I worked with victims of large-scale, severe human rights violations and have repeatedly observed this potential for healing.

#### Historical Background

Sierra Leone had its origins in a settlement for repatriated and rescued slaves established in Freetown by British abolitionists in 1787. During the 19th century, the territory became a British colony and then, along with the surrounding areas, a British protectorate. Sierra Leone gained independence from Britain in 1961. In the late 1960s there were two military coups, and during much of the 1970s and 1980s, Sierra Leone was essentially a repressive, one-party state.

The contemporary history of Sierra Leone is largely intertwined with that of Liberia. The oldest republic in Africa, Liberia was founded by freed American slaves in 1847 and enjoyed relative peace and stability until 1980 when, in the aftermath of riots over a proposed increase in the price of rice, army sergeant Samuel Doe staged a military coup and publicly executed the then-president and his aides, suspended the constitution, and assumed full power. Forces led by

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Charles Taylor launched an uprising against the Doe government in 1989, and in 1990 rebels from a splinter group murdered Doe and Liberia descended into a chaotic civil war. For the next 15 years, there were several attempted ceasefires followed by re-escalations.

The war in Liberia spread to Sierra Leone in 1991 when the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), led by Foday Sankoh and supported by Taylor, launched an uprising against the president of Sierra Leone, Joseph Momoh. This precipitated a civil war that lasted over a decade. During this time, there were three military coups, a failed peace agreement, and a rebel invasion of the capital, Freetown, in which over 5,000 people were killed. A peace agreement was signed between the rebels and the government in 2001, and by January of 2002 the war was finally over. Presidential elections were held in May 2002, and they were widely considered free and fair. The Special Court was launched later that year and issued its first set of indictments in early 2003.

In June of 2003, Taylor was indicted by the UN-backed Special Court for Sierra Leone for war crimes committed on Sierra Leonean territory; two months later, as anti-Taylor rebels closed in on Monrovia, Taylor was forced into exile and Liberia began to focus on peace-building. National elections were held in 2005, and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was inaugurated as president of Liberia in early 2006. In March 2006, Taylor was brought to Sierra Leone to stand trial in the Special Court. For security reasons the Special Court opted to conduct the trial in The Hague, where it is now in process.

The wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone were notorious for their extreme brutality. More than 300,000 civilians were killed—250,000 in Liberia and 50,000 in Sierra Leone—including an estimated combined total of 50,000 children from both countries. As both countries are

relatively small—Liberia's population is 3.6 million and Sierra Leone's is 5.3 million—vast segments of the citizenry were affected. Mass terrorization of entire villages and towns was routine. Common practices included summary execution, systematic rape and enslavement of women, and abduction and use of children as soldiers. Thousands were maimed, and over two million civilians were displaced. Documented atrocities included hacking off limbs, carving initials of rebel factions into victims' skin, and ritualistic sacrifices of pregnant women and young girls. Numerous people have reported that they were forced to cut, cook, eat, and serve human flesh and internal organs, including

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that of their own relatives. Countless numbers of children and teenagers were forced to watch the torture, rape, and brutal murders of their parents and siblings. In many cases, family members—including children—were forced to rape, murder, and mutilate each other. In regions where attacks occurred, large portions of the population had to hide in the dense forest for long periods without food or water, and had to walk for many miles to seek refuge, often falling into ambushes along the way. Large numbers were beaten, robbed, extorted, humiliated, and raped when attempting to cross national borders into refuge (Stepakoff et al. 2006).

### The War Crimes Tribunal in Sierra Leone

The Special Court for Sierra Leone was established as the result of an agreement between the United Nations and the Government of Sierra Leone, with the mandate of bringing to trial those who bear the greatest responsibility for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Sierra Leone after 30 November 1996. As of September 2007, five individuals have been convicted and another four individuals are on trial. Specific offenses they are accused of include murder, rape, extermination, acts of terror, enslavement, looting/burning, sexual slavery,

conscription of children into an armed force, forced marriage, and attacks on UN peacekeepers and humanitarian assistance workers.

Though individually charged, the accused were grouped into four trials, representing different factions that were involved in the war. The first trial opened in March 2004, and the second in June 2004. Judgments of guilty were rendered in both these cases during the summer of 2007. The third trial began in July 2004 and is expected to conclude in March 2008, and the fourth trial, *The Prosecutor vs. Charles Gbankay Taylor*, opened in The Hague in June 2007 and has been adjourned until January 2008. The Court is expected to close in 2009.

A 12-person psychosocial support team, which is part of the Court's Witnesses and Victims Section (WVS), provides witnesses with a variety of needed services before, during, and after their testimony. I was the WVS psychologist and the supervisor of this team. In detailed follow-up interviews conducted with witnesses several months after they completed their testimony, we found that for the vast majority, testifying has had important psychological benefits (Stepakoff 2006a).

For example, witnesses have mentioned that they appreciated the opportunity to talk about things that had seemed inexpressible. They also valued the experience of narrating their experiences in the presence of attentive listeners, and feeling that they were heard. They described the relief they felt after sharing with others what had previously been kept inside.

Yet in some instances, victims may wish to find alternative channels by which to represent their experiences. In some cases, experiences may be more fully and accurately represented via artistic performance instead of, or in addition to, courtroom testimony. In the following vignette, a young woman derived psychological benefit from representing her traumatic war experiences via a combination of verbal narration in court and creative expression through drama.

### Nancy's Story<sup>1</sup>

"Nancy" (a pseudonym) is a 23-year-old woman who was a witness for the prosecution in the Special Court. Before the war, Nancy lived in a rural village of Sierra Leone with her mother, two sisters, and two brothers. Her father worked as a security guard in a nearby town and came home monthly. Nancy's family had a small piece of farmland, where they grew rice and cassava. Her mother helped support the family by selling meals.

When Nancy was 14 years old, anti-government rebels attacked her village. Nancy's brothers were captured and forced to carry heavy loads for the rebels, and Nancy's mother and two sisters were raped. Her older sister was captured and was never seen or heard from again. Her mother and younger sister were also captured but managed to escape after a short time in captivity.

During the attack, Nancy was raped by two men and was also stabbed with a knife. Nancy was captured by a rebel commander and forced to become his "wife." She was kept in captivity for over two years. During that time, she was forcibly injected with cocaine and other drugs, and forced to use weapons and participate in combat operations. She was ordered, under threat of death, to assist in a ritualistic human sacrifice. On several occasions she watched members of the rebel group—one of whom proudly bore the nickname "Cut-Hand"—deliberately amputating civilians' arms.

When Nancy was 15, she became pregnant by the man who had captured her and gave birth to a son. At the time he was "married" to her, Nancy's "husband" was continuing to capture, rape, and impregnate other young women. Shortly after she gave birth to his child, he abandoned Nancy and the child.

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1. Due to the central importance of protecting the identity of the witnesses, no visual images accompany this article.

One day, the rebels ordered Nancy to go to the market to buy food for them, and at the market she saw her older brother, who brought her to his home. He was killed soon after, however, during the rebel invasion of Freetown, and Nancy returned to the rebel group. As a result of looting, Nancy was able to obtain enough money to break free. She could not go back to her village or her family of origin because women who were captured by the rebels were ostracized, targeted, and blamed. Children born as a result of wartime rape were labeled "rebel babies" and were usually rejected by the woman's extended family and community.

Eventually, Nancy linked up with a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that assisted her in completing vocational training, and she now supports herself and her child through semi-skilled labor. She overcame the addiction to cocaine that she had developed during her captivity. With the support of the WVS psychosocial counselor, Nancy was able to reconnect with her parents and surviving siblings after having been estranged from them for nearly 10 years.

After the war, as a result of the combination of her victimization and her inside knowledge of the activities of the rebel faction that had captured her, investigators from the Office of the Prosecutor in the Special Court asked her to testify, and she agreed to do so. In order to protect her from possible reprisals, she was permitted to testify under a pseudonym. For one entire day, she underwent examination in chief by the prosecution, and for two days she underwent cross-examination by the defense attorneys for the three accused. A few weeks before she was expected to testify, in order to have time to prepare with the attorneys, Nancy was brought to Freetown to live in a safe house.

Several days before she was scheduled to testify, Nancy informed a WVS psychosocial counselor that she had created a play together with several other witnesses, and asked to perform the play for court staff. She requested that staff who wished to attend purchase tickets and come

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to the safe house that evening; about 20 staff, curious and intrigued, did so. Due to strict rules about protecting the identity of witnesses—for example, most witnesses are screened from the public, and measures such as pseudonyms and voice distortion technology are commonly used—only staff and interns of the Witnesses and Victims Section and the Office of the Prosecutor were permitted to attend. Nancy distributed the proceeds from the ticket sales evenly among the actors, all of whom came from economically deprived backgrounds and used these funds to meet impor-

tant basic needs. In addition, with the permission of Nancy and the other actors, an audiovisual technician whose usual work consisted of videotaping the trials videotaped the performance so that staff who had not been able to attend the performance would be able to view it on tape.

When we first arrived, the witnesses performed a song with accompanying dance gestures they had composed to welcome us and express their appreciation for our presence. The other performers included several young men who had been captured as children during the war, and several women, all of whom had experienced capture, multiple rapes, and enslavement, and one of whom had suffered an attempted and nearly successful double amputation—both of her arms were permanently and severely damaged, but are still attached. It was striking, in light of these traumas, that the song was lively and upbeat.

They then began the play, which was a direct and very graphic depiction of Nancy's war experiences, interwoven with the similar traumatic experiences of several of the other "performers" (i.e., the witnesses). The play was performed in Krio, an English-based creole that is the lingua franca of Sierra Leone. Sierra Leonean members of the audience provided simultaneous translation for those expatriate audience members who did not understand Krio, though the

nonverbal depictions (e.g., gestures, facial expressions, movements, sounds) were sufficiently specific and powerful that the translation was almost unnecessary (see the boxed excerpts).

The play had a narrative structure with a coherent temporal sequence. The first scene depicted village life in the period before the war, and this was followed by the depiction of a brutal attack on the village, which included mass rapes, killings, looting, amputations, and captures. The actors then portrayed women and teen boys living in captivity and being forced to participate in attacking civilians. Next, the actors showed the end of the war and their pervasive sense of dislocation, disorientation, and confusion about where to go and what to do.

The actors depicted village life before the war by having several actors seated onstage talking with each other as a family unit, as was typical in peacetime. The rapes were portrayed graphically, but without completely undressing. An outer garment that covered Nancy's lower legs was removed, but those portraying the perpetrators did not disrobe. A few of the actors portraying rebels represented the multiple acts of rape by sequentially lying down on top of Nancy while she screamed and wept. Amputations were represented through gesture—swinging a prop machete—sounds, and words. The loss of the arm was depicted by tying the actor's hand to her shoulder so that her arm looked like a stump. The performance was serious and intense, and the audience was riveted.

After what had initially appeared to be the end of the performance, the actors walked offstage for a few moments, and then returned and performed a song they had composed with accompanying dance gestures. In the song, they repeated the following lyric numerous times, almost as a form of incantation: "We want peace, no more war, we want peace in Sierra Leone." The tone of the song was upbeat and positive, and the performers smiled and appeared proud, content, and relieved as they sang it.

They then went on to perform another song they had composed, with the following lyrics:

People, this is what they have done to us:  
they cut my hand, they cut my foot,  
they killed my mama, they killed my papa,  
they killed my uncle and my aunt,  
but we will let it be till Judgment Day,  
we'll leave it all to God.

Essentially, these lyrics seem to advocate reconciliation and discourage direct revenge.

As it turned out, the songs were not the finale of the drama but instead an interlude. After a few moments offstage, the witnesses returned to perform the final scenes of their drama. They depicted their efforts to rebuild their shattered lives, including enrolling in school or vocational training. They also portrayed the staff of the war crimes tribunal making contact with the victims and inviting them to become witnesses and testify before the Court—and showed the victims deciding to come forward. At this point, Nancy portrayed a senior psychosocial counselor providing comfort and support to a rape victim and encouraging a child ex-combatant to complete his interrupted education.

The performers went offstage for a moment and then returned. One of the female performers now directly addressed the audience in a cheerful tone:

Good afternoon to all of you, this is the way they used to treat us in the bush [i.e., while in captivity during the war]. We decided to put it into a drama, so that you can see. We all have problems, some of us cry every day because of our problems, but nevertheless, we still say thanks to God for the life that we have. That's why we've arranged to act in a drama, so that you could see what happened to us in the bush. This is the end of the drama.

The performance had a powerful effect on the 20 WVS staff who attended. Most were moved to tears. The Chief of Section, a man with a long career as a police officer and police chief, had never wept in response to the courtroom testimony, but he did so here. Several audience members later remarked that although they had heard many hours of courtroom testimony about the war, their understanding of the horrors that had occurred, and their appreciation for the suffering and resilience of the survivors, had been immeasurably deepened by the theatre performance created by Nancy and the other witnesses.

## Follow-Up Interview

As I reviewed the videotape of Nancy's drama nearly a year later in preparation for writing this article, I decided to invite Nancy for a follow-up interview. During the interview, I learned a great deal about Nancy's experience of creating and directing the performance, and what it had meant to her.

Nancy had had no formal training in drama, but before the war, in primary school (her education had ended prematurely because of her capture), she had had a teacher who had taught her about going onto a stage to sing welcome songs for visitors. After the war, at her vocational training center, she had once participated in a drama about the dangers of HIV. In view of how little education and previous performing arts experience she had had, it seemed all the more remarkable that she had been able to take on the responsibilities of a competent dramaturge, director, and actor during her relatively brief stay at the witness safe house.

After she persuaded her peers to join her in this endeavor—they were initially reluctant, because they felt embarrassed and self-conscious—she assigned a specific role to each one, based primarily on what the person had actually experienced during the war. Women who had been raped in the war were assigned to play rape victims in the drama; young men who had been child combatants in the war were instructed to show, in the drama, how they had behaved when capturing women. Thus, the roles were not developed from imagination but rather from the types of incidents that the actors had actually observed or participated in.

After creating and assigning the roles, Nancy led a series of four rehearsals before inviting the WVS staff to the performance. Although the main plot centered around her experience, during the rehearsals the other witnesses added elements from their own lives. In view of the low literacy rate and strong oral tradition that characterize Sierra Leonean culture, the actors' lines were not written down but rather were learned and memorized during rehearsals. (Note: The "script" that follows this article was transcribed from the videotape of the performance.) During the interview, I asked Nancy to recount her reasons for creating this play:

The idea came to me because of my son. I wanted you [the WVS staff] to know how I got pregnant with him when I was so young, when I wasn't mature enough to be ready to give birth to a child—that the pregnancy had resulted from rape. We wanted for you to know exactly what they [the perpetrators] used to do, the way they used to rape us, the way that sometimes three or four men would rape us at the same time, and if you told them you are tired, they would tie you and still continue raping you; the way they used to amputate us, they would amputate our leg or our arm. I suffered a lot, so I wanted you to know. Since you [WVS staff] were not with us in the bush, and we had only explained this to you [in words], it might not be that interesting to you, that is, to explain our story to you while you are just listening to it, so I decided that we should put it into a drama, so that you would be able to see exactly what happened with us during the war; that's why I said, "Let's put it into drama."

I wanted for you people to really know the way they used to act with us, because maybe by *talking*, sometimes we might lie to you, therefore I wanted my peers and I to be able to *show* you exactly what happened to us. By acting you would see exactly what we mean.

I asked Nancy how she would compare her experience of giving testimony in the tribunal with her experience of creating and performing the drama:

Telling our story in the court was good, but we were also thinking of other ways; we were thinking that we should also add drama. So when we came to the safe house, I told my peers, "When we go to the courtroom people will listen to what we are saying, but let's try to also put it into a drama so that they can *see* the various things that happened to us." In the courtroom, I explained to the judges what happened to me, exactly the same things that I showed in the drama, but in the courtroom I did it through talking, not through drama.

She also noted that in the courtroom, each person would speak by himself or herself, telling his or her own story alone. However, in the drama the witnesses would be able to present their stories together, simultaneously, to show how different elements of their stories were interlinked. For example, in the performance it was possible to depict commanders forcing child combatants to capture young women and, as was typical of rebel attacks, several different family members being victimized at the same time.

In response to my asking her which method she felt more satisfied with—courtroom testimony or acting—she replied that she felt good about both and had gained relief from each, but that in the courtroom she had been able to bring out her story with greater fullness and detail, whereas the drama had been an encapsulated version. I asked her how she felt after she had finished testifying in the court. She answered: "I was happy; what made me happy was that I was able to express the problems that were bothering me in my heart." I asked her how she felt after performing the theatre piece. She replied, "I was happy, because we expressed what had been bothering us."

It appears that the two methods of representation—narrating a verbal account of her experiences in the courtroom, and portraying her experiences through drama—or, to put it more succinctly, telling and showing—complemented each other. She felt a sense of relief and satisfaction from each method, and there were specific advantages to each. The verbal narrative provided Nancy with an opportunity to elaborate her story more fully, and to convey a large number of details, whereas the drama provided Nancy with the feeling that the audience would have a more direct, visceral understanding of what she had endured. In a sense we, the audience, became *her* witnesses, and through both listening and watching, we were able to gain a fuller picture of the lives of Nancy and her peers.

### Commentary

For over a decade and a half, there have been debates among psychotherapists, social scientists, legal theorists, and human rights activists regarding the relative effectiveness of juridical versus artistic/theatrical "testimony" (Felman and Laub 1992; Minow 1998; Stepakoff 2006b). In view of the fact that previous discussions have tended to present a polarized view, in which one form of "testimony" is advocated and the other devalued, it is noteworthy that Nancy felt that she had benefited from *both* approaches, albeit in different ways. Nancy's insights are relevant for other postconflict societies, in which national healing may best be advanced by a combination of juridical and artistic/theatrical methods.

Moreover, in some instances, if one approach is relatively weak or ineffective, the other may become more central to national healing. For example, in Cambodia—where the tribunal established to prosecute those responsible for the Khmer Rouge genocide was long hampered by

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bureaucratic, logistical, and political difficulties—the visual, literary, and performing arts have been a central vehicle by which survivors of the genocide have communicated their experiences of suffering and victimization (Stepakoff 2006b).

It is noteworthy that the lyrics to the two songs performed by the Special Court witnesses, as well as their very willingness to develop a joint production with both victims and perpetrators, reveal a strong tendency to leave ultimate judgment to God while seeking peace and reconciliation on earth. More specifically, the performers recited a list of the various atrocities to which they were subjected (amputation, murder of relatives, etc.), but then sang, “We will let it be till Judgment Day, we’ll leave it all to God.”

In the aftermath of large-scale atrocities, individuals and societies may show a range of views on the relative merits of accountability and punishment versus forgiveness and reconciliation (Cobban 2002a, 2002b; Hayner 2002; Minow 1998; Roth and DesForges 2002; Stover and Weinstein 2004). For example, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, most Jewish organizations emphasized the need for accountability. In postapartheid South Africa, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was selected as the preferred method for addressing the legacy of apartheid, rather than Nuremberg-type trials. Following the Rwandan genocide, *gacaca* courts were established with a vision of interweaving traditional methods of community mediation with principles of international law. In postwar Mozambique, priority was placed on traditional rituals of community reintegration, and prosecutions for war crimes were not utilized, whereas in Argentina, trials against nine senior leaders of the military junta were vigorously pursued.

Interestingly, Sierra Leone is the only country thus far that has had *both* a Truth and Reconciliation Commission *and* an international war crimes tribunal. It is also the first country to host a UN-backed international war crimes tribunal in the same country in which the crimes took place (the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia was in The Hague, and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda was in Tanzania).

It is not possible to generalize about which goal—accountability or reconciliation—should be given a higher priority. It is, however, becoming increasingly clear that in many instances the goals of accountability and reconciliation are at odds, and difficult tradeoffs may be required (Hayner 2002). For example, in order to develop a viable peace treaty and bring a longstanding conflict to an end, it may be necessary to offer amnesty to those who committed war crimes. Conversely, in some instances efforts to punish war criminals may risk damaging a fragile peace and lead to the re-escalation of violence. Depending on the values, interests, and vulnerabilities of particular parties, one or the other of these goals may be viewed as more important.

The strong emphasis placed on forgiveness and reconciliation by the performers in Nancy’s drama at the witness safe house may be attributed in part to the fact that these individuals, by serving as witnesses for the prosecution, were already actively participating in a process intended to promote justice and accountability. Preliminary results of follow-up research with witnesses who have completed their testimony in the Special Court suggest that witnesses may experience a greater inclination toward forgiveness and reconciliation in their personal lives and local community contexts when they feel that an institutional mechanism exists to bring about justice, punish key perpetrators, and promote accountability (Stepakoff 2006a). The example offered by this group of witnesses from the Special Court for Sierra Leone points to the possibility that accountability and reconciliation, which have widely been viewed as potentially competing aims, may in fact coexist and even be mutually enhancing.

## Conclusions

Nancy evinced a strong interest in and talent for drama. Nevertheless, as of September 2007 it appears that the theatre piece she created, directed, and performed in while at the Special Court’s witness safe house was probably a one-time event. As Nancy noted in her follow-up



interview, her main motivation in developing the performance was to enhance the witness support staff's understanding of the traumatic experiences she and her peers had undergone in the war. This objective was achieved: audience members noted that following the performance, their grasp of the horrific realities of the Sierra Leone war and the suffering and resilience of the survivors had been immeasurably intensified and deepened, despite their previous exposure to innumerable hours of courtroom testimony.

Nancy's opportunity to create this dramatic performance was attributable to a highly specific set of circumstances. During the time the drama was developed and rehearsed, she was living in a communal safe house along with several other witnesses, who in combination had undergone a variety of war-related experiences. These witnesses had an unusual amount of unscheduled time because they were waiting to testify. They had been brought to Freetown a few weeks before testifying, but the attorneys who were intending to lead them in court typically only spent a few hours per day meeting with them. In addition, for security reasons, the witnesses were discouraged from going out. Thus, Nancy found herself with a group of war survivors who were readily available for planning and rehearsing a performance.

Further, the fact that during this period prosecution attorneys were meeting with them daily to help them prepare their testimony probably stimulated in them both vivid memories of their war experiences and a heightened inclination to share these experiences with receptive listeners. It seems that these conditions combined to make the performance possible. It is not clear, however, whether similar performances will be created by witnesses in the future.

A few weeks after the performance, Nancy completed her courtroom testimony and returned to her village. Psychosocial staff from the Court have maintained contact with her and continue to provide her with periodic assistance. As of September 2007, she was supporting herself and two children by petty trading such as selling small quantities of sardines, toothpaste, and sugar in a local market. She was also enrolled in a new vocational training program to become a caterer. Her mother was helping her care for her young son so that she could attend her training program.

Although Nancy has expressed an interest in creating and performing more theatre, given her maternal, vocational, and work responsibilities, it may be difficult for her to find opportunities to do so. The same is true for most of the other witnesses, who come from similar backgrounds and face similar day-to-day challenges.

In other settings in postwar Sierra Leone, however, there have been some limited efforts to use the performing arts to represent or grapple with selected historical and political events. For example, a professional acting troupe called the Freetown Players has created and performed plays about the Amistad revolt and the Sierra Leonean roots and culture of the Gullah people of the South Carolina seacoast in the US. Sierra Leonean adolescents and young adults enrolled in Ballanta Academy of Music and Arts in Freetown have given music and dance performances that focused on themes of peace and reconciliation. An NGO established as an offshoot of the Sierra Leonean Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC Working Group) recruited and trained professional storytellers to tour the country with tales designed to share the key findings of the TRC. War Child (an NGO) has used the performing arts to build resilience and social skills in war-affected children. A different NGO, Center for Victims of Torture, has used dramas developed by counseling staff as a means of promoting community awareness about torture and war trauma. An NGO called National Vision has organized visual arts activities and exhibits on the theme of "Looking to the Future: Promoting Peace, Reconciliation, National Healing, Unity, and Human Rights."

These efforts, however, have been initiated by relatively privileged, educated professional and paraprofessional performing artists. Typically, these artists work with members of their own acting troupes or create and direct their own dramas, sometimes inviting community members to participate later. By contrast, a striking feature of the performers in the drama by Nancy and

the war-crimes witnesses was that they were solely responsible for initiating the project, with no formal training or external encouragement. Although the Court has a 12-person psychosocial support team with skills in counseling and mental health care, no one from the support team had ever suggested or offered opportunities for participation in the performing arts. Rather, the idea arose spontaneously in Nancy, who then persuaded her peers. The invitation to the performance came as a complete surprise to the staff, and the desire to create a dramatic performance portraying their traumatic war experiences was wholly indigenous. This suggests that the inclination to symbolically portray traumatic experiences is a basic human need that extends across cultures, and not merely a product of Western influence.

It is precisely in the context of systematic deception, erasure, and denial that opportunities for portraying the truth about war experiences are so important—important for individual and family healing, and also for repairing the larger social fabric in which individuals and families are embedded.

A second remarkable feature of the witnesses' performance was that two groups that typically show a considerable amount of tension and negativity toward one another—rape victims and former child combatants, who were frequently perpetrators of rape—worked in a spirit of partnership and cooperation to jointly depict their intertwined experiences. This is all the more meaningful in light of the fact that both "roles"—rape victim and combatant/perpetrator—are extremely stigmatized in Sierra Leonean society. It is very unusual for a woman to publicly admit to having been raped, and it is even more unusual for a perpetrator to admit having committed atrocities.

A further remarkable aspect of the witnesses' drama was that within the group of 10 performers, a woman was the clear and undisputed leader. Sierra Leone is an extremely patriarchal society, in which authority and power are nearly always vested in men. It is a testament to Nancy's psychological strength, social skills, and motivational abilities that she was successful in enlisting the active participation of six men, all of whom responded to and built on her artistic suggestions.

More than 2,500 years ago, the Greek dramatist Aeschylus remarked, "In war, truth is the first casualty." It is precisely in the context of systematic deception, erasure, and denial that opportunities for portraying the truth about war experiences are so important—important for individual and family healing, and also for repairing the larger social fabric in which individuals and families are embedded. Silence is one of the most psychologically destructive consequences of trauma.

To quote another ancient source, the gospel of St. Thomas, "If you bring forth what is inside you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is inside you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you." The performance by Nancy and her peers demonstrates that even individuals with little formal education or artistic training will spontaneously search for ways to represent traumatic events they have witnessed, perpetrated, or experienced. The harm caused by war atrocities is invariably exacerbated by silence, regardless of whether this silence is self-imposed or demanded by the victim's family, community, or government. Conversely, as victims find creative means for symbolizing and sharing their experiences, psychological and social repair become possible.

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### "What Happened to Us"

translated from the Krio by Neneh Binta Barrie

Excerpts from the performance by "Nancy" and other witnesses  
 from the Special Court for Sierra Leone

In the text below, ECOMOG stands for the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group, a West African multilateral armed force established as a regional security initiative in the 1980s. ECOMOG intervened in Sierra Leone in 1997 to stop the RUF rebellion. Accordingly, members of the RUF ("rebels") considered anyone who was associated with ECOMOG as an enemy. In the performance, the actors are demonstrating a phenomenon that occurred in the war, whereby rebels would be sent to spy on a village and would then collectively punish the villagers if they were believed to be supporters of ECOMOG.

#### Scene 1

(Inside the house of Nancy's parents, in a rural village in Sierra Leone. Onstage: Nancy is seated alongside her parents and sister.)

FATHER: (To NANCY, who is holding a book) Nancy, bring me the machete so that we can go and do some work on the farm.

NANCY: (Holding a book, addressing her father, in tone of annoyance) I'm trying to study, why are you bothering me to go and do work at the farm? (She gets up and walks offstage and returns with a machete, which she gives to her father.)

SISTER: Father, you know there've been problems, why are you saying we should go to the bush when you know there've been problems nearby.

FATHER: We can't just sit here, we need to go to the farm to do some farm work.

NANCY: Sister, wait and listen to me. Father says he wants to go to the bush, but I will not go with you, because I'm afraid that the rebels will attack us if we go to the bush. I'll stay here, and if the rebels attack here, I'll run away. Still I wish you would stay here with me, so that if the rebels attack we could all run away together.

MOTHER: *(To NANCY)* You are right, I know that the route that we use to go to our farm is the very route that the rebels have been using to attack people.

NANCY: *(To her FATHER)* If you want to go, you can go, but as for me, I'm not going. In fact, I'm going to continue studying. *(She reopens her book and reads.)*

SISTER: *(To FATHER)* The rebels could come and attack here at any time, so please don't leave us.

*(FIRST REBEL BOY, a young teenager, enters from offstage.)*

FIRST REBEL BOY: *(To the gathered family):* Can you tell me where there's somebody selling cigarettes and pepper?

NANCY: *(To the boy)* Where are you from?

FIRST REBEL BOY: Not far from here.

NANCY: Go over there *(points)*, over there a lady sells cigarettes and pepper and other things.

*(The BOY goes to the side of the stage, where a young woman is selling.)*

FIRST REBEL BOY: *(To VENDOR)* I want 2,000 Leones worth of cigarettes. *(VENDOR sells him the cigarettes. The BOY pays, and the VENDOR goes to give him his change, but the BOY refuses to take the change.)* No, never mind, just keep it. *(The BOY then goes back to the part of the stage where NANCY and her family are.)*

FIRST REBEL BOY: *(To NANCY)* Do you have ECOMOG people living in this area?

NANCY: We don't have ECOMOG here. But there are ECOMOG in some of the surrounding villages.

SISTER: *(To NANCY)* Nancy, stop! Why are you saying that? Sometimes your mouth will get you into trouble! You know this is wartime, and you're giving that information! *(BOY walks offstage. SISTER continues to NANCY, in an emphatic tone)* If someone comes to you and asks you for any information about anything, just say "I don't know," and nothing more.

FATHER: *(To MOTHER)* I am going to the farm to gather some food. I'll bring the food back here later. Please bring all the children together and stay inside the house, because you see that boy who just came here to buy cigarettes? He must be a spy for the rebels.

FATHER: *(To NANCY)* Don't go anywhere.

NANCY: *(To FATHER)* Please, Father, you too—don't go anywhere. Please don't leave us alone here.

*(FATHER gets up from his chair, takes the machete, and walks offstage, as if going off to the farm.)*

NANCY: *(To MOTHER)* Mother, why did you allow Papa to go? You shouldn't have allowed him to leave us. Because if the rebels come here, they will capture us, and we will not be able to do anything.

*(The FATHER apparently did not even get as far as leaving the compound, because a moment later, he runs back into the house—i.e., onstage—and says to the family, in a frantic, panic-stricken tone.)*

FATHER: The rebels have come! The rebels have come!

*(The family frantically tries to gather up a few basic necessities such as food. Four rebel boys enter with aggressive sounds and gestures. MOTHER, FATHER, NANCY, and SISTER plead with the rebels not to hurt them.)*

FIRST REBEL BOY: *(To FATHER)* Put down your hand, I'm going to cut off your hand!

MOTHER: *(Pleading on FATHER's behalf)* Please don't cut off his hand.

*(NANCY and her SISTER are crying. FIRST REBEL BOY approaches COMMANDER)*

FIRST REBEL BOY: Look, these people right here, what should we do with them?

COMMANDER: *(To FIRST REBEL BOY)* Kill the father! *(FIRST REBEL BOY immediately goes and shoots FATHER. FATHER falls over, dead.)* Capture the women!

NANCY: *(Wailing, sobbing)* They've killed my father, oh God, they've killed my father.

SECOND REBEL BOY: *(Approaches the COMMANDER)* What should we do next?

COMMANDER: *(To SECOND REBEL BOY)* Take that girl! *(COMMANDER points to SISTER. SECOND REBEL BOY grabs SISTER's hands and physically pulls her offstage while she pleads and resists.)*

NANCY: *(Approaches her FATHER's corpse, which is sprawled on the floor, and wails beside his corpse)* Oh my father is gone, my father is gone.

*(NANCY, MOTHER, and VENDOR leave the house, i.e., walk offstage, while wailing. FATHER's corpse remains onstage.)*

NANCY, MOTHER, and VENDOR: *(Reenter, crying)* Sister is gone, Father is dead, what are we going to do?

MOTHER: They've killed my husband, they've taken my daughter, what am I going to do? What am I going to do? I have nowhere to go. I'll just sit here, I have nowhere to go.

VENDOR: *(In a different area of the stage, away from the family, speaking to the audience)* What should I do? I wanted to be a vendor, so I convinced some of my neighbors to loan me small things to sell, like cigarettes and pepper, and my plan was to do so and then give them their share of the money. But the rebels have taken all the things that I was going to sell, and all the money too. What should I do? How will I ever repay the people who loaned me their things to sell?

*(The family begins to lift up the FATHER's corpse, as if they are going to go and bury it.)*

## Scene 2

*(Two weeks after the first attack. MOTHER, NANCY, and VENDOR are in their house. The REBEL BOYS reenter, and this time a young woman is with them, and her demeanor clearly indicates that she is part of the rebel band. She seems to be on the kind of drugs that were forcibly given to rebels to make them behave in a bold, aggressive manner. She is the commander's "wife." Her name is ADAMA CUT-HAND. [Note: Adama Cut-Hand was a real person in the war, and that was the name she was genuinely known by; unlike all the other names used in this article and script, this is not a pseudonym.]*

ADAMA and three REBELS: *(Search MOTHER, NANCY, and VENDOR for money and other possessions, while shouting)* Where is the money? Give us money or we'll kill you!

*(ADAMA walks over and sits next to COMMANDER, her husband, and drapes her arm around his neck.)*

ADAMA: *(To the REBEL BOYS)* If they don't give you money, kill them!

THIRD REBEL BOY: *(Approaches COMMANDER)* What should we do next?

COMMANDER: *(To THIRD REBEL BOY)* Cut off the mother's hand, and take the girl.

ADAMA: *(To NANCY, forceful, intimidating tone)* Do you know who I am? My name is Adama Cut-Hand, and I am well-trained! Do you know who I am?!

NANCY *(to ADAMA)*: No, I don't know you.

ADAMA: You don't know me?!

NANCY: No, I don't know you.

ADAMA: *(To one of the REBEL BOYS, in an aggressive tone)* Chop off their hands, and rape them!

ADAMA: *(To NANCY, in an aggressive tone)* Take off your skirt!

*(NANCY removes her skirt, under which she is wearing briefs; she is crying, wailing and pleading. THIRD REBEL BOY lies down on top of her and makes thrusting motions as if he is raping her, while ADAMA CUT-HAND stands over them pointing a gun at them. When he finishes raping NANCY, SECOND REBEL BOY comes and lies on top of her and does the same, also with ADAMA "supervising." After he leaves NANCY, she is crying and wailing.)*

ADAMA: *(To FIRST REBEL BOY, pointing at NANCY's mother)* Cut off her hand!

*(The REBEL BOY takes a cutlass and cuts off the MOTHER's hand while the mother cries and pleads.)*

ADAMA: *(To the REBEL BOYS)* Let's move, let's move.

*(ADAMA and the REBELS go offstage. NANCY can barely stand, but she manages to and, with great effort, collects her scattered clothes. Her MOTHER, whose arm is amputated, is crying. The amputation of NANCY's hand is not explicitly shown, but it is implied because her hand is now missing—shown by the hand tied against her shoulder. Two ECOMOG SOLDIERS enter, chasing the TWO REBEL BOYS who just left, while stating that they are going to kill them. The two ECOMOG soldiers shoot the TWO REBEL BOYS, and they fall down dead. An ECOMOG SOLDIER helps NANCY and MOTHER bandage their stumps. Two ECOMOG soldiers hold the rebel COMMANDER and his wife, ADAMA CUT-HAND.)*

NANCY: *(To the ECOMOG SOLDIERS, pointing to the COMMANDER and his wife ADAMA)* These are the rebels who cut off my mother's hand, and my hand. These are the ones who raped me. They're from the same group of rebels that killed my father.

*(The ECOMOG SOLDIERS take the rebel COMMANDER and ADAMA along with them, and walk offstage.)*

NANCY: *(Crying, to the audience)* Oh my, what am I going to do, they have killed my father, they raped me, they amputated me, and they amputated my mother. They raped me. I'm finished. What am I going to do?

[...]

#### Scene 5

*(Two years after the attacks. Nancy is sitting in a chair. She is now playing a new character, that of a staff-person from the Special Court. To avoid confusion, in this scene Nancy will be referred to as "COURT WORKER.")*

PATRICIA: *(Approaches COURT WORKER, and sits down near her)* I've come to you because I need your help. They killed my father, they amputated my mother, and my mother died soon after. I was raped, and my sister was raped. Now I've come to you for help.

COURT WORKER: I'll help you, but please don't tell anyone that I'm helping you. Because I'm working for the Special Court [war crimes tribunal], so don't let anyone know that the Special Court is helping you. I'll be able to help you, but don't let the secret leak out. I'll give you money for transportation. Where are you from?

PATRICIA: Kailahun.

COURT WORKER: But Kailahun is far from Freetown, and you said you want me to help you. How can I help you when it's so far from Freetown? What is your address in Kailahun? *(PATRICIA gives address.)* Okay, I'll give you money for transportation, and I will come and meet you in Kailahun. Have you had anything to eat?

PATRICIA: No.

COURT WORKER: I'll arrange for some food for you. I won't be able to give you everything or provide for all your needs, because I have supervisors. But I'll talk to my supervisors, and I'll get back to you. But please, when you go back, don't tell anyone you've been in contact with the Special Court, for your own safety. Take this money, and go to Kailahun, and on Wednesday I'll come to see you.

*(PATRICIA walks offstage. COURT WORKER remains in her seat. TEEN BOY enters, and sits near COURT WORKER.)*

TEEN BOY: They killed my parents, and my house was burned.

COURT WORKER: So, they killed your mother, and they killed your father, and your house was burned, and you have no place to go? *(She takes out a pen and paper and writes some notes.)*

COURT WORKER: Where are you from?

TEEN BOY: Kabala.

COURT WORKER: Okay, I'll help you. I don't have money in my pocket to give to you, but the person in charge of this office is Chief, and I am going to meet Chief later. [Note: she is referring to the Chief of the Witnesses and Victims Section, who was in the audience.] I'll talk with Chief, and I'll let you know what he says. But if he's willing to help you, please don't tell anyone that the Court is assisting you. So, are you enrolled in school?

TEEN BOY: Yes.

COURT WORKER: I'll give you money for transportation, I want you to go. Don't come, I will talk with Chief, and then I'll come to your house and tell you. I don't have other money to give to you, and I can't take money out of my own pocket to give you, the money can only come from Chief. How old are you?

TEEN BOY: 17.

COURT WORKER: That's good, since you're a child we can help you. If someone is older than 20, we can't help them with their school fees, but for the children, we can.

*(She gives him the transportation money. He walks offstage, and she then walks offstage.)*