

Fambul Tok:

reconciling communities in Sierra Leone

John Caulker

In the late 1990s, I played a leading role in calling for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to be part of any peace deal ending the conflict in Sierra Leone, partly inspired by what I knew about the South African version, with its 'truth for amnesty' provisions.

Human rights activists like me were worried that a future peace agreement might include a blanket amnesty, which would do nothing to promote post-conflict accountability or reconciliation. Unfortunately, in the end, despite providing for the establishment of a TRC, the Lomé Agreement of July 1999 did just that.

I decided to work hard to make the TRC, which began its hearings in 2002, as credible and effective as possible. My thinking was not to go with an elitist, top-down approach. I wanted to involve the people in the rural communities and called for grassroots 'mini-commissions' which would feed into the official Commission, stressing the importance of local dialogue and ownership. But the idea was dismissed by the TRC.

My colleagues and I within civil society then formed a TRC Working Group, a consortium of some 60 non-governmental organisations (NGOs), with the aim of ensuring that the views of Sierra Leoneans about how the TRC should go about its work were seriously considered. But the TRC often ignored those views.

The TRC: an opportunity missed

The TRC published its final report in 2004. It was certainly a worthy 'research project' and its report was good – but the process was less so. It was always more a UN than a Sierra Leonean initiative. The TRC did not go beyond short hearings in the main district towns. Very few perpetrators testified, partly because they were worried about incriminating themselves and ending up before the Special Court for Sierra Leone, also established in 2002.

The official description was that the TRC and the Special Court were complementary, but, as the TRC Working Group had warned, it did not work out like that in practice. The Special Court has spent about \$200 million in bringing eleven people to trial, with former Liberian president Charles Taylor the last case before it. There has been no provision for victims, while promises about a 'legacy', in terms of a more effective national judicial system, have not been honoured. It was more of an international tribunal with limited national accountability. Maybe, as we argued at the time, some kind of sequencing of the TRC and Special Court might have been better.

Implementation of the recommendations of the TRC has been slow and patchy, including for the establishment of a reparations programme and a special fund for war victims. Successive governments have given many of the TRC's recommendations a low priority and the attention of the international community has largely moved on. Ordinary Sierra Leoneans are now either cynical about the TRC or have forgotten about it. The truth is that, in the countryside, many were barely aware of it in the first place. Victims and perpetrators at community level still often find themselves living uneasily next door to each other, without having had any opportunity for meaningful acknowledgement or reconciliation.

Fambul Tok: origins and values

By 2007 I was frustrated and burnt out. I could not see a way forward. But just as I was about to withdraw from the scene, everything came together to create Fambul Tok (Krio for 'Family Talk'). I met the head of the US foundation Catalist for Peace, Libby Hoffman. She shared my vision of

a grassroots process of reconciliation in which perpetrators and victims at the local level might come together, drawing on Sierra Leonean culture and tradition, and she offered to support a programme based on this vision.

Above all, we both agreed that the people most affected by a conflict are the ones who know best what their needs are – an insight often missing from the work of outside experts involved in conflict resolution work. In February 2008, Fambul Tok began in Kailahun District in the east of the country, where the conflict began. Today we are working in five districts: Kailahun, Kono, Koinadugu, Moyamba and Bombali. In future we would like to extend our work to other parts of the Mano River region, in partnership with Liberians, Guineans and Ivorians.

In Fambul Tok it is the people themselves who organise the programmes. Reconciliation processes led by the people are more sustainable. We do not go into a community with promises. We are careful not to be seen as NGOs going in with aid handouts. For us, the most important thing is building community ownership. While we do have a small, talented group of paid staff at district and national level, most of the day-to-day work of Fambul Tok is being done by volunteers within their own communities.

Before the conflict, Sierra Leoneans used to describe ourselves as one big family. “The family tree will bend but never break”, as we say here. In Fambul Tok, family is not merely biological, but the community as family, the district as family, and even the nation as family. We have found that there is little interest in Western notions of punishment at the community level. We have our own way of addressing justice, our own ways of disciplining people, but it does not involve sending them to prison. Nor do we send them into exile.

There is an adage in our local dialect that says: “There is no bad bush to throw away a bad child”, which means that when a person has done something bad the most important thing is to try and rehabilitate them, not simply throw them out of the community. Our culture is built around conversation, centred in storytelling, where people sit around the fire at night to talk about the day’s events.

Also, part of our tradition is in talking to our ancestors. If you do not please them, you will have bad luck. If you appease them, you are bound to have a good harvest. Fambul Tok communities have ceremonies that involve invoking the spirit of ancestors and asking for their blessing. This is a very important part of the reconciliation process. To sum up, the communities involved in Fambul

Tok are drawing on our culture and traditions, sometimes adding some new elements, in order to promote grassroots reconciliation.

Bonfire ceremonies: the sacred space

Bonfire ceremonies, which usually involve the whole community, have become central to Fambul Tok. But before we have a bonfire we undertake consultations in a community for a minimum of three months. We train a reconciliation committee that includes the head of the youth, head of the women (‘mommy queens’) and religious leaders in basic trauma healing, listening and mediation skills. Because they stay in the community, they are always there to talk through with offenders as and when the need arises. It takes a lot of time and a lot of training to help people feel comfortable to tell their stories and not be afraid. We have a district team that goes in regularly before and after the bonfire to find out if the victims and offenders are healing. It is a long process. Time is fluid, controlled by the community.

I would call the Fambul Tok bonfire the sacred space in the sense that it is only within that circle, within that bonfire that you can say anything you want relating to the war. Once you are in that sacred space you feel empowered, because you know the community is behind you. It is also the same for offenders. There they can discuss what they did, have a dialogue with the victim, and apologise. That apology is essential; people acknowledging their deeds is the basis for reconciliation. If there is not enough time to hear everybody’s stories during the bonfire, storytelling continues over the period ahead under a peace tree. After the bonfire, there are always cleansing and purification ceremonies.

Sustaining and extending Fambul Tok

Relationships can take a long time to heal, so we also have community farms, peace mothers’ groups and football matches, through which processes of reconciliation are sustained and deepened. Community farms have had some excellent harvests and women who have been involved with Fambul Tok have often taken on leadership roles within their communities. Once they have found their voice, they refuse to return into the background and often work together in new economic ventures. Fambul Tok provides some support but strongly encourages economic self-reliance. It looks increasingly clear that our reconciliation efforts are having real development benefits. These are some of the ways in which Fambul Tok is a catalyst for positive change at grassroots level.

As we hoped it would, Fambul Tok has taken on a life of its own. Increasingly, communities where we are not working are not waiting for us to come to them. They are beginning their own Fambul Tok processes anyway.



Peace Tree, Tankoro Chiefdom, Sierra Leone // © Nancy Quilliam/ Fambul Tok

Radio programmes and word of mouth spread the word for us. Fambul Tok has already produced hundreds of extraordinary stories of reconciliation and forgiveness. Some of these feature in the documentary film about our work which film-maker Sara Terry has produced and which is now being screened in Sierra Leone – and around the world. (www.fambultok.com)

In March 2011 we launched, with a number of civil society partners, a national unity campaign, *Wi na wan fambul* (We are one family), which has the goal of helping to ensure that the 2012 elections in Sierra Leone are conducted on the basis of tolerance and non-violence. You only have to look around the rest of Africa to see just how dangerous elections can be for peace and stability. The 2007 elections were reasonably free, fair and peaceful but, in the long term, democratic consolidation will only happen if there is a genuine process of national reconciliation. There is still much work to do on that front. Hopefully, *Wi na wan fambul* can make a big contribution.

From the international community's viewpoint, they say Sierra Leone had peace once the war ended. If you talk to the average Sierra Leonean in the village, however, they say what they want is *sustainable* peace. They understand that

the conflict does not end when the guns are silent. Peace comes when we really acknowledge what went wrong, when we really restore the dignity of victims, when offenders have the opportunity to explain why they committed the atrocities they did, and to apologise. Then one could say that we are at the beginning of the long road to peace.

Since we started Fambul Tok we have found that working with a community does not mean coming with a checklist, but rather coming with an open mind. You have to work with people and see through their own lens how they see things, not coming watching through your own prism from the outside. We hope that the international community, the NGO community and the Sierra Leonean Government can all learn from the approach of Fambul Tok. We are open to exploring what those lessons are with other activists and practitioners in the field of peacebuilding.

John Caulker is the Executive Director of Fambul Tok. Previously, he was the Executive Director of Forum of Conscience, a national human rights NGO, and played a leading role in the Truth and Reconciliation Working Group, a civil society coalition which engaged critically with the Sierra Leonean Truth and Reconciliation Commission during its existence.