Peace with a Prayer: The Spiritual Frontlines of Transitional Justice in Sierra Leone

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Standing close to a modest display of hair products and perfumes in his small shop at Cline Town, Mohamed Sesay arranges bottles neatly as the morning sun filters through the open doorway. The air is thick with the scent of colognes, mingling with the distant rumble of passing trucks and chatter from nearby stalls.

“I still remember it like yesterday,” he says, pausing to straighten a box of pomade. “The shouting… the gunshots. I can still hear them sometimes, even in my sleep.”

Mohamed was just 14 years old when rebels stormed his village near Kambia in 1998. His parents were killed, and he was taken and forced to live with the rebels. “What kind of justice could fix that?” he asks. “Only God can forgive them. I don’t think I can.”

Mohamed arranging his goods

For Mohamed, justice is not just about courts or commissions. It’s about healing wounds that have cut deep into the soul of a nation.

More than two decades after Sierra Leone’s eleven years of civil war came to an end, a question still lingers: Can religious institutions help bridge the painful gap between memory and reconciliation?

The war that left deep psychological and emotional wounds on the population. As the nation seeks healing, both mosques and churches have emerged as key players in reconciliation efforts. These spiritual spaces serve not only as sanctuaries for prayer but also as vital environments for confronting the past, offering forgiveness, and rebuilding a fractured society. For Aminata, the road to healing is paved with faith, though the path remains challenging.

In the heart of Freetown’s Mellon Street neighborhood, Pastor Michael B. Lansana, leader of the New Apostolic Church, Wellington Branch, sits in front of the parsonage. He recalls the early 2000s as a time filled with urgency and purpose. “We had survivors in our pews, ex-combatants in our youth group,” he recalls. “The Church was a safe space but also a space of deep confrontation. People wanted answers.”

Pastor Lansana says the role of religious institutions in the country's transitional justice efforts cannot be overstated as the TRC recognized churches and mosques as trusted community spaces, tasked with promoting forgiveness, truth-telling, and reconciliation.

"But forgiveness isn't enough without transformation," he says, his voice firm. "We've preached peace, but now we must preach justice, economic, social, and spiritual justice."

In a modest building at King Harman Road, Madam Josephine H. Koroma, a project staff of the Council of Churches in Sierra Leone (CCSL) leans forward, voice low and deliberate. "The Truth and Reconciliation Commission recommended a strong role for religious institutions in healing this nation's trauma," she says. "But the follow-through, the support, the resources ever really came?"

Koroma, who has worked in trauma healing since 2003, recalls how pastors across the country held prayer vigils, truth-telling circles, and forgiveness campaigns. "We carried the burden of truth and mercy when people couldn't trust the police or courts," she says. "But we can't carry it alone."

The CCSL has launched several initiatives to support post-war healing, peace events and truth-telling forums. Yet Koroma acknowledges that the council faces real challenges.

"We're losing the youth," he says. "To hopelessness, to drugs, even to violence. If we can't show that peace brings dignity, what good is peace?" She points to a surge in youth violence, drug abuse and crime in Freetown as a symptom of the unresolved trauma. "These are children of the war. Even if they weren't born during it, they inherited the pain."

Stressing on the need to strengthen and expand the Council's existing national platform, she told Awoko: "We have the reach. We are in the cities and the villages. But we need greater investment, coordination, and resources to deepen our impact, especially in communities that have been neglected since the war."

But for Mohamed, the path forward is deeply personal. He attends both church and mosque, depending on the week. "I don't think God minds," he says with a tired smile. "What matters is the peace I feel when I pray." His son, now 17, has never seen war.

He hopes he never will. "The past should not be his burden. But if we don't talk about it, if our churches and mosques forget it, maybe one day, it will be." He adjusts his goods and stands, watching a group of schoolgirls pass by in pressed uniforms. "Faith saved me," he says.

"But faith must also act."

Just across the street in Rokupa, Imam Abdulai Sesay prepares for the midday Zuhr prayer at the Gaddafi Mosque. A former teacher and now a member of the Council of Imams, Sesay believes the Imams have a moral responsibility to lead communities through memory and healing.

"We cannot pretend the war is history," he says. "Some victims still hide their pain, and the scars remain."

According to Sesay, he participated in multiple interfaith dialogues after the war and says Imams helped mediate between victims and perpetrators in their communities. "It was not easy. A boy

who once held a gun in the bush now sits in the same mosque with a woman whose husband he killed."

But he says the work is far from done. "What is justice? It is not only courts and prisons. It is also land returned to the rightful owners. It is a widow getting support. It is the state supporting people who carry the physical effect of the war.

Representatives from Sierra Leone's interfaith institutions are calling for more than prayer. A member of the Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB), Sheik Ibrahim Sesay, one of the few men who coordinated post-conflict trauma dialogues in the early 2000s, says religious institutions became the "de facto institutions of truth."

"People didn't trust the government. But they trusted their pastors and imams. That's how we reached the villages," he says.

Sheik Sesay remembers holding circles of prayer and testimony in war-torn communities. But he also acknowledges that even religious leaders were sometimes complicit in the silence. "There were imams and pastors who never talked about the war. Who buried it. We must confront that," he says.

In an interview with Awoko, the Minister of Social Welfare, Melrose Karminty said "As we reflect on the profound role that religious institutions have played and continue to play in Sierra Leone's journey toward healing, the Ministry of Social Welfare reaffirms its commitment to working collaboratively with faith-based actors to advance holistic transitional justice."

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