

THE MEMORY PROJECT

LEARNING FROM HISTORY

Report



Introduction

The Memory Project provides an avenue for historical dialogue and narrative around the violent civil war that occurred in Sierra Leone from 1991-2002. This is an oral history project dedicated to recording testimonies from former child soldiers, amputees, rape victims, and all those who lived through the war, to ensure that the history of the civil war is preserved in order to confront the horrors of our past and to help prevent a repetition of similar atrocities. As Winston Churchill put it, “those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” Dealing with the past matters because it helps us learn from history and prevent us from wandering the same line of conflict in the future.

The project will serve as a platform for justice, granting an avenue to the voices and experiences of children and youths who were most affected by the war and continue to be most vulnerable in society. Moreover, it will provide former child soldiers room for individual healing through reflection and help build a collective narrative.

Full-length testimonies, as well as shorter and more accessible video clips, will be available to the public, accompanied by written transcripts for easy browsing online. Testimonies will be presented in numerous ways such as the Jeneba Project website and public presentations, as part of larger educational programs for high schools and colleges in Sierra Leone and the U.S, and as an exhibit in a future memorial in Sierra Leone, which the Jeneba Project will establish at a later stage.

The testimonies will provide a meaningful framework to publicly explore the traumatic memories of political violence; debate difficult questions about human behavior and choices in difficult circumstances; highlight the problematic nature of rigid ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’ labels; and ultimately provide future generations and leaders with powerful lessons about the importance of human rights and democratic values in preventing intolerance and violent expressions. During the decade-long brutal civil war, children for instance, were both primary victims of atrocities and principal perpetrators of violence as child soldiers.

In an interdependent world, no catastrophe is local. We must learn from the history of Sierra Leone and undertake the moral responsibility to prevent such crises in the future. We hope the project will be helpful in the advocacy against the use of child soldiers everywhere, and also provide opportunities for Sierra Leoneans to share their experiences and also hear the experiences of others in the same conflict. The goal is to create an avenue for collective narrative and dialogue led by those who were affected by the conflict without any inhibitions or power structures that may influence honest dialogue and narrative.

The Sierra Leone Memory Project

... Learning from History

Phase I

The Sierra Leone Memory Project is an oral-history project dedicated to recording testimonies from survivors of the decade long conflict in Sierra Leone (1991-2002) to ensure that the history of the civil war is preserved in order to help prevent a repetition of similar atrocities.



When we commenced the Sierra Leone Memory Project (SLMP), we were faced with several questions pertaining to the willingness of people to openly discuss their past and their role in the civil conflict. Having consulted several individuals to discuss the project prior to launching, almost all experts and public servants we spoke to admonished us to be careful about opening old wounds and warned us that Sierra Leoneans are not very keen on discussing their painful past.

Before embarking on the journey to Sierra Leone, we discussed the matter with a few psychiatrists, especially in the area of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). We wanted to thoroughly prepare for some of the possible reactions from participants and for our personal reactions as listeners. The main concern raised was in the area of the long-term effects of internalized pain and trauma. We were cognizant of some of

these difficulties. Joseph Kaifala, who led the launching, is a survivor of the decade of civil war that occurred in Sierra Leone and Liberia, and is aware of the kinds of pain and trauma many survivors carry. In the end, we decided that it was best to allow individuals to make their own choices and set their own limitations by offering the option of reflecting on their difficult war years.

We held a preliminary press conference in June to explain the project to the media and to raise awareness. Many newspapers were represented and most of those that attended produced stories about the project. In addition, we had a radio program on Culture Radio FM 104.5 in Freetown to provide a clear understanding of what the Memory Project is about and what it intends to

achieve in Sierra Leone. After all the sensitization and awareness raising, we created an audio call for participation that was regularly aired on Culture Radio.


As you may have guessed, we were very nervous during the first testimonies. Our first participants were all double (have both hands chopped off) or single (have one hand chopped off) amputees. Our method was simply to ask open-ended questions that were less tainted by our perceptions and assumptions and allowed participants to lead the conversation. We determined our role to be collectors of testimonies not researchers looking for specific information--it was better to let people decide what they wanted to reveal. Most of the testimonies happened without serious breakdowns and participants who started to cry or showed signs of distress took time to calm down and continue if/as they wished.

After the first interviews, participants thanked us for the opportunity to be 'treated as human beings.' They expressed their gratitude for the opportunity to share their stories and their appreciation for the listening ears we provided. Since many of the amputees are street beggars, they explained that they were always at the mercy of either kind passersby who gave them money or recalcitrant youth who insulted them for being on the street. Such expressions of sincere gratitude for the opportunity to share stories encouraged us to continue the project, as opening old wounds in a safe and dignified setting is an important step in helping people heal.

Since elections are around the corner in Sierra Leone, it was difficult to get many former combatants to give recorded testimonies. We anticipate greater participation in the coming years. Another group that was difficult to reach was survivors of rape, as the possibility of stigmatization in many small communities discourages survivors of rape from openly sharing their stories. We are hopeful that more people will volunteer to speak as we continue to implement the project in Sierra Leone.

Another limitation stems from the fact that the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL) is summing up its activities, and many still believe that their testimonies could land them in court. However, both the Special Court and the Government of Sierra Leone have made it clear that they will not be indicting more people apart from those already indicted by the Court. But many people in Sierra Leone, especially those who were directly involved in the conflict, remain skeptical about the sincerity of international courts. We anticipate that this fear will remain until the mandate of the Court ends.





Additionally, there are those who have developed what could best be described as ‘interview fatigue.’ Since the end of the civil war, researchers and journalists from the West have gone to Sierra Leone in search of stories. Though it is unlikely that they could have offered promises of improving the lives of those they interviewed, many of them certainly implied, whether knowingly or unknowingly, such promises. Moreover, since it was often aid workers who served as liaisons between locals and interviewers, the interviewees assumed they would be entitled to long-term assistance. However, many of the researchers and journalists never returned to Sierra Leone, and most people feel that they were swindled. In fact, there is a growing mindset that researchers and Journalists become rich from these testimonies.

Additionally, the fact that Sierra Leoneans are also leading the Memory Project could also serve as a discouraging factor, as local Journalists or researchers don't have the same prospects for future benefits that Westerners bring. In light of these challenges, we made sure to clearly convey the fact that the oral history testimonies are intended primarily for a Sierra Leonean audience.

In sum, the initial launching of the SLMP has been very successful and what we achieved at this initial stage went far beyond our expectations. With more funding, we hope to continue the process of soliciting testimonies and sharing them both in Sierra Leone and abroad. One thing we are considering right now is possibly setting aside a Fund, under the auspices of The Jeneba Project, to provide some future assistance to amputees who continue to face serious struggles in post-conflict Sierra Leone. The problem is enormous for a small organization such as The Jeneba Project, with very little funding, but we hope that even a small assistance could provide some relief to many amputees who continue to survive only by begging in the streets.

We are extremely grateful to Humanity In Action for providing the bulk of the initial funding for the Memory Project. Humanity in Action is an international educational organization dedicated to inspiring and connecting a global network of students, young professionals and established leaders committed to promoting human rights, diversity and active citizenship in their own communities and around the world. Special thanks and appreciation to Alicia Wells and Alyssa Lapane for their enormous work towards the Memory Project both in the US and Sierra Leone. We are grateful to Phil Ugelow, Nienke Venema, Andy Rasmussen, Dr. Adeyinka M. Akinsulure-Smith, Peter Brock, Francis Kaifala, Sahr Kendema, Zainab Kamara, Liz Shafiroff, Culture Radio, and all those who contributed one way or another to the launch of the Sierra Leone Memory Project.

A Personal Reflection

Joseph Kaifala

When the women sobbed I saw my mother, and it hurt my heart.




The year 2012 marks a decade since the end of the Sierra Leonean civil war. Some of us who left the country just after the war to live in the West have had various opportunities to share our stories with audiences faraway from home. Many people listen to our stories with genuine fascination at the horrors we have endured and the wonderful *joie de vivre* many of us still exude even after such ghastly experiences. Sadly, there are also those who listen to our stories merely to confirm their views that Africans have monopolized brutality, murder, and barbarism. But no matter the reception, there is always an audience for those who have the courage to share their experiences.

As a Gandhian and a humanist, I believe that by sharing my experiences during one of the most brutal and senseless civil wars, I can possibly persuade those who continue to flirt with war to understand that peace is invaluable and war is

not the answer. There are among us those who continue to believe that peace cannot be appreciated without an experience of war; but must all of humanity witness a calamity like war to live in harmony? I think, hope, not! And those of us who have been fortunate to survive the terror of explosives and the ratatat of machine guns shredding human lives should never relent in persuading our societies to avoid war at all cost.

But while I was sharing my experiences with Westerners, many of whom could also afford books and documentaries about the Sierra Leonean conflict, it occurred to me that there was a thick silence around the civil war back home. Although, there are a few people who easily volunteer stories of their experiences to Western researchers who export the stories with a promise of never revealing the identity of the subjects involved, most Sierra Leoneans have not yet developed the concept of collective narrative. Many people have internalized their experiences and very little has been achieved in the area of oral and written history. As a result, the next generation is growing up with little opportunity to understand and learn from our mistakes as a society.



Sierra Leone is at peace now, but many of the sociopolitical conditions that forced the country into war are slowly reemerging. Food prices are on the rise and corruption has still not been averted in many public offices. Education remains unaffordable for many children, and those who can afford to enroll face other complexities such as lack of fees, uniforms, trained teachers, and proper sanitation. In fact, the wishes of many adults we interviewed during this preliminary stage of the Sierra Leone Memory Project (SLMP) were simply to feed and educate their children. The difficulty of achieving these two fundamentals of life is causing significant agony in the hearts of many parents, especially the amputees. The inability of parents to educate their children is also contributing to child labour, teenage pregnancy, prostitution, and petty crimes.

However, several significant changes are happening in the country. Between 2011 and now, the country celebrated its 50th independent anniversary; Charles Taylor was convicted for aiding and abetting the commission of war crimes and crimes against humanity in Sierra Leone. Other Sierra Leoneans charged with similar crimes had already been convicted and sentenced. Come November Sierra Leoneans will be heading to the polls for the third time since the end of the civil war for presidential and parliamentary elections. Those who succeed in November will be confronted with many unfinished businesses; like the full implementation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) recommendations, employment for the youths, repair of educational structures, the curbing of corruption, and food security. Unless these systemic failures are repaired the peace we have worked so hard to achieve will remain fragile.

In terms of national remembrance and memory, not much has been done to ensure proper commemoration of the civil war as an important aspect of national history. Most of the TRC's recommendations have not yet been realized. However, as the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL) comes to a closure, preparations are being made to reconfigure part of the Court's infrastructure into a peace museum. According to the Court, the peace museum "would be a place of symbolic significance for Sierra Leone, commemorating those who suffered in the civil war, serving as a reminder to future generations, and attracting tourists who wish to understand the conflict." If this is properly implemented, it could serve as a fundamental step towards collective memory and remembrance—a very significant aspect of national history, healing, and reconciliation.

I am currently researching for a book that will provide a clear understanding of the civil war and serve as a contribution towards memory and remembrance. Many books have been written about the war, but most of them contain misconceptions and assumptions that must be clarified for future generations. As a Sierra Leonean, and one of the educated few alive who actually lived through the civil war, I believe that I am obliged to provide factual information and explain cultural undertones, which have been mostly misconstrued by foreign researchers visiting Sierra Leone for very brief periods. The testimonies we have collected will also be transcribed and available to those who are interested in hearing firsthand accounts of the decade of civil war that occurred in Sierra Leone.

I am certain that the testimonies will some day serve as important historic accounts of our decade-long civil war, and many generations of Sierra Leoneans would have the opportunity of learning from their compatriots and those whose experiences underlie the course of our national history. During the course of the interviews, especially of victims, it occurred to me that any of the people could have been my mother, father, brother, sister, cousin, uncle or aunt. When the women sobbed I saw my mother, and it hurt my heart. But, while most of the materials we have collected are pointers to our shameful past, they could serve as useful guides on the path to a better and peaceful Sierra Leone. Like the triumph of the captive Sengbe Pieh and his comrades; the formation of the Province of Freedom that became Sierra Leone; and the ferocity of Bai Bureh, this too is part of our national history.


Breaking the Silence

Liat Krawczyk

We aim to give weight to the human complexities that arise when faced with unimaginable circumstances and choices.



At the end of a decade-long civil war in 2002, Sierra Leoneans were left reeling at the brutal violence they had experienced and at the complete destruction of their country. The abuses perpetrated throughout the conflict—massacres, amputations, systematic rape, and forced conscription—had dire consequences. The war left deep scars on the conscience of many Sierra Leoneans. The trauma and normalization of violence stripped many people of their dignity and humanity. In light of the pain that continues to reside in the hearts and minds of many Sierra Leoneans, and given the air of silence that often characterizes the way in which people deal with pain, the Sierra Leone Memory Project (SLMP) was founded with the core belief that it is critical to provide survivors a platform to share their experiences and reflections, and an opportunity to break the silence if they wish to do so.



On an individual level, the chance to move beyond isolated grief and to be recognized by others can help a person heal. Moreover, the Memory Project gives weight to individual experiences of trauma at a societal level, a factor we believe is crucial to a country undergoing dramatic political, economic, and social transitions. For one, by providing interested individuals with a platform to voice their experiences, the project offers people equal considerations and respect not always afforded to ordinary citizens in official spaces such as the Special Court, which focused on high-level actors, and the TRC, which collected testimonies solely in the years right after the war. We believe that such open spaces, which expose a wealth of human experiences, can help the nation undergo a longer-term transformation, with the hope that it serves as an outlet for anger or grief. Our hope is that these emotions can be transformed into relief and understanding, thus rebuilding the broken trust critical to sustainable peace and reconstruction.

In contributing to the task of building a national collective memory, the SLMP aims to give weight to human complexities that arise when faced with such unimaginable circumstances and choices. We believe that it is imperative on both moral and pragmatic grounds that the history of the war is presented in its full complexity in order not to allow the politics of memory to refuel hostilities. For this reason, we avoid rigid labels of 'perpetrator' and 'victim' that are risky and particularly misleading in a conflict in which so many participants were children.

However, in recognizing that the process of reconciliation requires not only dealing with the past but also the present conditions necessary for living in peace, the Memory Project believes that testimonies collected today can serve us better than future recollections, as they are able to expose the hardships still faced by survivors, such as amputees, who remain invisible and neglected by society. They also reveal that many of the structural inequalities that were a source of the grievances that led to the conflict have not yet been completely resolved.

Most importantly, these testimonies are precious gifts for the future not only of Sierra Leone but also of the world. We hope they serve as solid accounts of the past and a testament to the reality that where we are is defined by where we have been. We also hope that the lessons we learn from a history of grief and terror will guarantee that such acts will never again be repeated.



Name: **Aminata Amadu**

Place of Birth: Sandeya, Luawa Chiefdom

Age: N/A

Children: Ansumana, 3 years old

Status: Married to Philip Amadu

“He raped me in front of everyone...”


I went to school and made it as far as form one (seventh grade). My father’s house is right across the street from here. My father died during the war and my mother was separated from us. I don’t know whether she is dead or live. My sister lives with me and my brother is in Koidu. We were farmers before the war. My parents had a cacao plantation and we grew rice. I ate well and lived fine. I used to go to school in the morning. I ate before school, and there was always food when I returned from school.

I met my current husband before the war. We were already talking about getting married. I was in my aunt’s village when the rebels entered Sierra Leone. My father sent a message for me to return home. That was the same time the Sierra Leone Army (SLA) captured two rebels and took them to Kailahun. By the time I got home, my father told me that the rebels were already in control of Kailahun. He told me to stay with him and not to go anywhere.

I remember when the rebels attacked Bandajuma and forced some youths to carry their loads to Burkina (Giehun). They went through our village and told us to catch all the chickens and make them ready for the trip to Burkina. When they returned, we cooked some of the chickens for them and they took the rest to Burkina. Afterwards, they killed all the dogs and ate them, too. Our village had lots of dogs and the rebels ate them all. They also ate all the cattle!

One day, a rebel by the name of ‘Killer’ approached me for sex. I told him that I was a virgin and “I don’t do that kind of business.” He told me that I was the kind of woman they wanted...sweet. My father attempted to intervene and rescue me from the rebels. That’s when they forced him to the ground and cut his throat right there in front of me. So I cried: “you have killed my father, why don’t you kill me too!” The rebel refused to kill me and said he wanted me as a wife, instead.

He raped me in front of everyone! My mother was watching, too. Right there, in front of my father’s corpse. They forced me down and pointed their guns at me. I started to struggle, but my mother started to scream: Agree! Agree! Agree, so they don’t kill you! The rebels raped me and returned to Burkina. We buried my father in a shallow grave at night. The rebels returned for food many more times. When they ate all the food, including the dogs, they started arresting young people to go hunting for them. One



day, they instructed the youths to bring back five animals, but the boys caught only three animals and brought them to Superman (the commander). Superman was unsatisfied and decided to complete the count with two human beings.

“ He killed two of the hunters on the spot and butchered them.”

Superman put the body parts in a pan and let the blood drain. The rebels then drank the bowl of human blood. They took the bodies to Burkina and ate them. They returned with a cooked liver and boasted that they had eaten the bodies. “We were all afraid. Terrified!” My mother said we should escape into the bush. We built jungle huts called ‘Joe-bush’ and lived in them. I knew my boyfriend was in the bush as well, but we were all scattered in the jungle.

The rebels returned to the village many times, but there was no one there, so they decided to remove all the aluminum sheets from the houses and strategically place them around the village. The aluminum sheets produced loud noise when people trod on them at night, and the rebels were notified of their presence.

After awhile, we heard that the NPRC (National Provisional Ruling Council), Tom Nyuma’s, soldiers were in Kailahun. My mother said that we should go to Kailahun, but rebels on the way captured me, again. They ordered me to go to Manowa River and look for food for them. I left my mother and went to Manowa. We went across the Mono River and found bananas, plantains, and cocoyams. We were on our way back with five rebels who escorted us when we came across the SLA. The soldiers killed the five rebels and arrested us because we were carrying food for rebels in Burkina.

The soldiers initially took us to Segbwema and later to Daru. One of the soldiers took me to his sister and asked me to be his girlfriend.


I accepted.

They fed me and looked after me.

Later, the soldier decided to move to Kenema, and I went with him. He had become my husband. However, his commanders told him to return to Daru and leave me in Kenema. Rather unfortunately, he was killed in an ambush on his way to Daru.

His name was Michael Mustapha.

One of the soldiers who survived the ambush returned to Kenema and told me that Mustapha was dead. I lived with the soldier who survived and his sister for a while, but he was transferred to Tongo. I stayed with his sister, Musu Moses, but we never heard back from him. We concluded that he might have died in Tongo.



Musu and I decided to move to Freetown, since she had relatives there. It might have been 1995 or 1996. We joined a military convoy to Freetown. I met Aunty Fatu on the convoy and she told me that my boyfriend Philip was in Freetown. She gave me a description of how to find him. I had become a sister to Musu and her family in Freetown accepted me as well.

Then one day I saw Amadu standing on the side of the road near Waterloo.
I cried, "Amadu! Amadu! Amadu!"

I wept!

I was happy and sad at the same time. I wasn't prepared for the encounter, so my hair was rough; my clothes were simple rags, and I was thin. I had lost weight, so I was very thin!

Amadu came over and hugged me. I introduced him to my sister Musu and told him that I lived in Waterloo. After the meeting, I visited his place a few times. One day he brought me a bag of clothes and I was happy. Musu told me that people made their hair in Freetown for money, so I started hairdressing in the veranda for some money. I never even dreamed of returning to the village. I had no money or anything!

Depending on the type of client, I used to make Le 500.00 or Le 1000.00 for doing hair. Sometimes I made as much as Le 2,500.00, Le 3,000.00 or Le 3,500.00. Amadu used to visit and sometimes bring me some more money to supplement what I was making as a hairdresser. One day he came home and told me that we should get ready to be repatriated to the village. I was scared and skeptical!

"How are we going to survive in the village with nothing!"

In the end, Amadu volunteered to return without me. After awhile, I registered and was repatriated to the village, as well. Everything is normal now and we are farming very well.

"Freetown was a tough life!" "Too many mosquitoes, thieves and prostitutes."

I am also glad that no other woman can hit on my man here.



Call For Participation

“Those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” Winston Churchill

The memory project led by the Jeneba project is calling on all Sierra Leoneans with firsthand experiences of the civil war between 1991 and 2002 to participate in the memory project by offering oral testimonies for the benefit of current and future generations. This oral history project is intended to encourage Sierra Leoneans who were victims or participants in the civil war to tell their stories as ordinary people who have survived some of the most horrendous moments of our shared history.

Others have already written several versions of our story, but the aim of the Jeneba Project is to let your children learn from you. No Sierra Leonean would like to see a reoccurrence of what happened during that dreadful decade of our past, but it is only by reflecting on where we went wrong that we can guide future generations from wandering our line of failure.

Please contact the Jeneba Project if you would like to participate in this project. The Jeneba Project staff members will visit you to record your testimony. All stories are video recorded and will be available for public view.

Sponsors:



The Jeneba Project

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