The Challenge of Boko Haram in Nigeria and Lessons from the Sierra Leone Civil War

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Abstract
The civil war in Sierra Leone was one of the most vicious conflicts in Africa's recent history. Baptists and other religious communities worked together to end the conflict between the government and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Today, Nigeria has similar challenges and there is a need for close cooperation between religious communities to mediate peace between the government and Boko Haram. Faith-based peacebuilding aims at a just peace and reconciliation through non-violent means, and this study compares faith-based peace building in Sierra Leone during the 1990s with the Boko Haram uprising in Nigeria today and considers the lessons to be learnt. The article discusses how the efforts of faith-based peace building actors in Nigeria may support both the peace process and the peaceful coexistence of religious communities, arguing that within this there is an urgent need to discuss poverty and social marginalisation, build stronger relationships between governments and local communities, and open direct dialogue with Boko Haram.

Keywords
Muslim-Christian relations; Sierra Leone; Nigeria; faith-based peace building

Introduction

In the present article, I am following the concept of faith-based peace building that has become commonly used to describe religiously motivated non-violent diplomacy in the world's trouble spots. The importance of religious actors has been observed in conflicts throughout the world and in Africa in particular. In this study, I shall analyse faith-based peace building during the conflict in Sierra Leone in the 1990s and with respect to Boko Haram terrorism in Nigeria today.

The Federal Republic of Nigeria is engaged in an armed battle with the Islamic militant group Boko Haram. Nigeria is the richest and largest economy in Africa. However, the country faces many challenges, with over half the population living in absolute poverty, especially in the north and north-eastern states of Nigeria. The Boko Haram insurgency has also spread to the neighbouring countries of Niger, Chad, and Cameroon and has caused a humanitarian emergency around Lake Chad.[1]

Nevertheless, there are already local examples of grassroots levels of interfaith peace building in Nigeria, where Muslim and Christian leaders are working together with traditional rulers. One example is the Adamawa Peace Initiative in the north-eastern state of Adawana. The vision for the initiative is to positively engage the youth and recognise that religion is an instrument for peace. Peace builders identify vulnerable youth in the area and, as the crisis continues, help refugees and educate local young people in development programmes.[2]

During the war in Sierra Leone, Muslim and Christian leaders worked together, condemned atrocities, and asked the rebels to lay down their arms, declaring that the violence was against God's creation. The local Baptist community was also active in peace building. The General Secretary of the Baptist Convention of Sierra Leone (BCSL), Moses B. Khanu, and the Reverend Alimammy Koroma were key people in this and committed themselves to non-violent conflict transformation together with other Christian and Muslim leaders. Reverend Khanu was chosen to act as co-chairman of the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone (IRCSL) and was also the president of the Council of Churches of Sierra Leone (CCSL). Reverend Koroma was General Secretary of the CCSL and also acted as General Secretary

[1] Virginia Comolli, *Boko Haram: Nigeria's Islamist Insurgency* (London: C. Hurst, 2015), pp. 2, 86–89.

[2] Margee Ensign, 'We are Obsessed with Peace': A Story of Peace Building in Northeastern Nigeria', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 20, no. 2 (2016), 168–175.

of IRCSL. The organisation had good contacts with both the government and the rebels, but it was politically neutral.[3]

During the war in Sierra Leone, local Baptist churches were active and supported the non-violent peace building. This was an exceptional development. Baptists share some common historical roots with the peace churches such as the Quakers and Mennonites, but they often have different views on peace and war. Baptists usually follow the just war doctrine, supporting the right of governments to go to war and use violence when it is to protect the lives of people.[4] Today, there is a growing interest in new understandings of war and peace. Glen Stassen was an academic from a Southern Baptist background and he argued in his book *Just Peacemaking: Transforming Initiatives for Justice and Peace* that Christians are disciples of Christ and supposed to follow just peace making instead of just war. Stassen's argument for a just peace theory is that Christians have a biblical commitment to peace and a focus on practical steps, taking action in terms of political engagement uniting people of different faiths.[5] In 2013, the World Council of Churches (WCC) issued the 'Statement on the Way of Just Peace' to challenge violence and warfare and stated that the Christian obligation is to work for just peace using non-violent peace building methods.[6]

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[3] Jari Portaankorva, 'Muslim and Christian Leaders Working Together: Building Reconciliation in the Sierra Leone Conflict', *Journal of Pan African Studies*, 8, no. 9 (2015), 78–96 (pp. 82–85); Peter Penfold, 'Faith in Resolving Sierra Leone's Bloody Conflict', *The Round Table*, 94, no. 382 (2005), 549–557 (pp. 550–553).

[4] Baptist Peace Fellowship, 'Baptist Views On War And Peace', report originally published 1969 and added to by members of the BPF Committee in 2008 <http://www.baptist-peace.org.uk/pdfs/Baptist%20Views%20on%20War%20and%20Peace.pdf> [accessed May 2023]; R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation,* Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), p. 144; Portaankorva, 'Muslim and Christian leaders working together', pp. 83, 89–90.

[5] Glen H. Stassen, *Just Peacemaking: Transforming Initiatives for Justice and Peace* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1992).

[6] World Council of Churches, 'Statement on the Way of Just Peace' <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/statement-on-the-way-of-just-peace> [accessed June 2023]. The statement was adopted by the WCC 10th Assembly as part of the Report of the Public Issues Committee. Point 2 of the statement includes the following comment: 'To build peace in our communities, we must break the culture of silence about violence in the home, parish and society. Where religious groups are divided along with society, we must join with other faiths to teach and advocate for tolerance, non-violence and mutual respect, as Christian and Muslim leaders are doing in Nigeria with ecumenical support.'

Theoretical Background

Faith-based Conflict Transformation

Today, many Christian organisations are working on a global level for peace building. The Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) changed its strategy at the beginning of the 1980s and started to support international reconciliation efforts and the sending of peace builders. John Paul Lederach began to develop a model of non-violent conflict transformation while working in Nicaragua in the late 1980s. Lederach mediated the conflict between the Sandinista government and the Miskito indigenous people. Lederach noticed that the traditional models of conflict transformation were inadequate, and he wanted to develop a new model of peace building where warring groups would meet and find peace and reconciliation.[7]

For decades, researchers had followed the Norwegian father of peace research Johan Galtung's theory of violence and conflicts. According to Galtung, there are different forms of violence: direct personal violence and structural indirect violence. The direct violence in the conflict is visible and obvious, but there is a much larger, unseen, and less apparent structural violence. Galtung's main argument in his peace and war research is the distinction between 'negative peace' and 'positive peace'. Negative peace means the absence of violence, but positive peace means the absence of structural violence and building a social system that serves the needs of the whole population with constructive conflict resolution.[8]

Hugh Miall challenged the concept of peace in Galtung's theory as too limited and too abstract.[9] According to Heikki Patomäki and Ole Wæver, the weakness of Galtung's theory of structural violence was the definition of violence as a synonym for social injustice that made

[7] Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred*, pp. 146–147.
[8] Johan Galtung, 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research', *Journal of Peace Research*, 6, no. 3 (1969), 167–191 (pp. 183–185).
[9] Hugh Miall, *Emergent Conflict and Peaceful Change* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 11.

the theory utopistic.[10] However, Galtung's theory of structural violence remains an important view of and approach to understanding the unseen elements of conflict. In contrast, John Paul Lederach's scholarship of conflict transformation is the understanding that conflict is not static and peace is a process that continues as the relationships between people and the structures of society develop.[11]

According to Lederach, conflicts are resolved by means of top-level, middle-level, and grassroots level interventions with an active role played by civil society organisations. In the reconciliation process, local peace mediators build networks from the grass-roots level up to the highest level of political decision-making in society. In the peace process, the top-level political and military actors negotiate ceasefires and peace accords. The mid-level actors, such as religious leaders, use their position to foster peace education. The grass-roots level leaders have connection to the masses as they work locally in towns and villages.[12] The role of peace builders is to support the three-level conflict transformation.

John Paul Lederach's theory of conflict transformation has strongly influenced the practice of using local peace building actors instead of international external interventions. The local mediators use methods that are based on their own experiences living in the midst of the conflict and their knowledge of the dynamics and context of the conflict. The peace mediator's role is neutral, building trust on both sides of a conflict. The conflict transformation process is relationship-centred, a non-violent peace building through dialogue and reconciliation. The key element is the development of friendly and respectful relationship with the enemy and restoration of broken relationships. When the warring parties sign the peace treaty, a

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[10] Heikki Patomäki and Ole Wæver, 'Introducing Peaceful Changes', in *Peaceful Changes in World Politics*, TAPRI Research, Report no. 71, ed. by Heikki Patomäki (Tampere: TAPRI, 1995), pp. 3–27 (pp. 8–10).

[11] John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 78–79, 163–167. Thania Paffenholz, 'International Peacebuilding Goes Local: Analysing Lederach's Conflict Transformation Theory and Its Ambivalent Encounter With 20 Years of Practice', *Peacebuilding*, 2, no. 1 (2014), 1–17 (pp. 4–5).

[12] Paffenholz, 'International Peacebuilding Goes Local', pp. 5–7.

restorative justice is needed for the people affected by the conflict and for integrating the perpetrators of violence back into society.[13] Lederach's scholarship follows Edward Azar's study of long conflicts and their transformation and Adam Curle's findings on how relationships transform from violent to peaceful in situations such as the Biafran war in Nigeria, for example. Lederach has also used the theories of Herbert Kellman and Ronald Fisher concerning building relationships in the midst of conflict, as well as Paulo Freire's research of oppression and exclusion.[14]

Brian Cox and Daniel Philpott define faith-based diplomacy as track two diplomacy practised 'by non-state actors, officials of non-governmental organisations, religious leaders, and private citizens'.[15] *The Missing Dimension of Statecraft* (1992) edited by Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson was a landmark book in the research of faith-based peace building and politics. The research opened a new avenue for religions and faith-based actors to take a role in conflict resolution. The examples of the history of faith-based peace building acted as a reminder that there is a forgotten element of quiet religious diplomacy in world conflict zones.[16] Johnston also follows Mennonite and Quaker nonviolent conflict management methods in his books.[17] Johnston edited a later book, *Faith-based Diplomacy: Trumping Realpolitik* (2003), that describes the efforts of faith-based diplomacy and conflict resolution after the terror attacks of 11 September 2001 in America. Johnston argues that there has been a tendency to ignore the religious dimension in global politics.[18]

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13 Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, pp. 84–86, 98–99. Paffenholz, 'International Peacebuilding Goes Local', p. 1.

14 Paffenholz, 'International Peacebuilding Goes Local', pp. 4–5.

15 Brian Cox and Daniel Philpott, 'Faith-based Diplomacy: An Ancient Idea Newly Emergent', *Brandywine Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 1, no. 2 (2003), 31–40 (p. 3).

16 *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft*, ed. by Douglas M. Johnston and Cynthia Sampson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

17 Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred*, p. 304.

18 *Faith-Based Diplomacy: Trumping Realpolitik*, ed. by Doulas M. Johnston (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 4.

Religion and Conflicts

Samuel P. Huntington was right in his prediction that international conflicts would have a religious dimension after the Cold War. However, looking at the conflicts in Africa, researchers often fall into a trap following Huntington's simplified *The Clash of Civilizations* argument of inevitable collision between Islam and the West.[19] This is echoed in Robert D. Kaplan's article 'The Coming Anarchy' where, in analysing the fragility of West African countries, his description of a new barbarism is based on similar Western stereotypes and neo-colonialist hegemonic narratives that look at Africa as a lost continent.[20]

According to Scott Thomas, the growing globalisation has changed the nature of conflicts after the Cold War to internal wars, and the superpowers' influence on world politics is now weaker than before.[21] The African states of Angola, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Kenya, Liberia, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, and Uganda have faced conflicts and civil wars during the recent decades, but the ethnic or religious divisions were not the root cause of the wars. The conflicts in contemporary Africa are more linked with social and economic changes.[22] Religious terrorist groups such as Al-Shabaab in Somalia, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Boko Haram in Nigeria share similar features in their recruitment that are typical in African conflicts. Most of the young men come from poor neighbourhoods where unemployment and low levels of education are common.[23]

Religion is an important component to keep people together. Through religions, people build their social identity and become part of a larger community. Jolle Demmers argues that political players and leaders often use religious language to motivate people towards their

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19 Samuel P. Huntington, 'The Clash of Civilizations?', *Foreign Affairs*, 72, no. 3 (1993), 22–49 (pp. 22, 26).
20 Robert Kaplan, 'The Coming Anarchy', *Atlantic Monthly*, 273, no. 2, (1994), 44–77 (p.74).
21 Thomas, Scott, 'Diplomacy and Religion', in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*, ed. by R. A. Denemark (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 1097–1103.
22 Jeffrey Haynes, 'Conflict, Conflict Resolution and Peace-Building: The Role of Religion in Mozambique, Nigeria and Cambodia', *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 47 (2009), 52–75.
23 Darlington Mutanda, 'What Makes Terrorism Tick in Africa? Evidence from Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram', *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations*, 21, no. 1 (2017), 20–40 (pp. 21–23).

own political purposes.[24] Looking at the conflict in Nigeria, there is a religious dimension in the Boko Haram insurgency. The significance of religion in the context of contemporary international politics is unavoidable. There is often a religious component in conflicts, exacerbated as the media often actively follows religious extremists, legitimising their violence in the name of God.[25] However, a study of armed conflicts in 130 developing countries during the period 1990 to 2010 suggests that religious factors fuel armed conflict when conflicts overlap religious and other identities and grievances. Extremist religious leaders justify and legitimise the use of violence using religious language.[26]

In the academic discussion after the 9/11 terror attacks in New York, Islam has often been portrayed as a source of extremism and violence.[27] However, interreligious peace building is growing today and in particular the number of Muslim background peace brokers helping to resolve conflicts is increasing. The importance of faith-based peace building in Islamic societies has been obvious in African conflicts. Religious actors may bring a spiritual dimension to peace building and create a sense of commitment to their peace work that may help in conflict resolution.[28]

I shall now turn to the comparison of the faith-based conflict transformation process in Sierra Leone in the 1990s with the Boko Haram conflict in Nigeria today. The pre-war period and civil war in Sierra Leone bears parallels and similarities with the case of Nigeria. This article thus explores the following questions: What are the lessons

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[24] Jolle Demmers, *Theories of Violent Conflict: An Introduction*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 20–22.

[25] John Azumah, 'Boko Haram in Retrospect', *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations*, 26, no. 1 (2014), 33–52 (pp. 33–34).

[26] Matthias Basedaus, Birte Pfeiffer, and Johannes Vüllers, 'Bad Religion? Religion, Collective Action, and the Onset of Armed Conflict in Developing Countries', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 60, no. 2 (2014), 226–255.

[27] Andrew R. Murphy, 'Introduction', in *The Blackwell Companion to Religion and Violence*, ed. by Andrew R. Murphy (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 1–4.

[28] Mohammed Abu-Nimer and Ayse Kadayifci-Orellana, 'Muslim Peace-Building Actors in Africa and the Balkan Context: Challenges and Needs', *Peace and Change*, 33, no. 4 (2008), 549–581 (pp. 549–552).

learned from the Sierra Leone conflict transformation process in 1990s for the Nigerian Boko Haram insurgency? How may Baptists and other religious communities support just peace and non-violent peace building efforts in Nigeria?

The Boko Haram Insurgency in Nigeria

Nigeria is a religious country where Islam and Christianity are part of people's identity. There has been a long ethno-religious conflict in the middle belt of Nigeria between Muslim herders and Christian farmers, and the conflict has spread to other areas following migration. Nigeria has been rated one of the poorest countries in the world with almost half of the population living in extreme poverty. The grievances of the people often find expression in conflict due to societal-level violence. The root-cause and interpretation of Boko Haram's evolution in Nigeria and its later violent activities can be traced to unemployment and hopelessness among the youth, as well as to worsening standards of living.[29]

During the British rule, Islamic law was a legal code applied in northern Nigeria until independence. The colonial indirect rule supported the conservative Islamic rulers, and the fragility of Nigeria is traced to the colonial time that created a divided Nigerian state with ethnic and religious distrust. The Borno state in northern Nigeria is a Muslim-dominated area and historically a part of the medieval Kanuri Empire of Borno. Today it is one of the poorest areas in Nigeria. Maiduguri is the capital and the largest city of the Borno State.[30]

Muhammed Yusuf was a cleric and radical reformist and the founder of Boko Haram. He started as a youth leader and preached in Maiduguri Mosque, but soon the local Islamic leaders opposed him because of his teaching. Then Yusuf founded his own school in 2002

[29] Comolli, *Boko Haram*, pp. 2–3, 64–65, 130.
[30] Muhammad Dan Suleiman, 'What Makes Islamist Movements Different? A Study of Liberia's NPFL and Nigeria's Boko Haram in West Africa', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 32, no. 1 (2017), 1–19 (pp. 4–5).

and continued with a more radical Salafist interpretation of the Quran.[31] His message gave his followers the nickname 'Boko Haram', meaning Western education is forbidden. The Boko Haram was inspired further by the global jihadists who wanted to have Sharia laws introduced in Nigeria. In the beginning, the movement was more peaceful compared to later developments, and their grievance concerned political change in the country. Yusuf built a new mosque and followed the example of the religious renewal of Uthman Dan Fodio, a reformer of the early 1800s, and his jihadi legacy.[32]

The new Ibn Taymiyyah Masjid Mosque was the centre of community mobilisation. Boko Haram followers supported new small business ventures and helped young men when they struggled with unemployment. The community programmes resulted in motorbike taxis and support to new members who wanted to get married and start family life. The members of Boko Haram came from poor areas of Maiduguri. Soon, the federal government started to follow their anti-state rhetoric. However, the challenge was not just to the state or to the social situation, there were also assassinations of religious leaders who opposed Boko Haram.[33]

Early on, Muhammad Alli, a leading member of the Maiduguri youth group under the leadership of Muhammad Yusuf, called 2002 a *hijra* and left the town with a small faction of the youth and started a separatist community with strict Islamic principles. In December 2003, Muhammad Alli's group, known also by the name 'the Nigerian Taliban', was in confrontation with police security forces and came under siege. The siege ended in January 2004 with shootings, and most of the members along with their leader Alli were killed.[34]

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31 Mike Smith, *Boko Haram: Inside Nigeria's Unholy War* (London: Tauris, 2015), p. 39.

32 Jo Voll, 'Boko Haram: Religion and Violence in the 21st Century', *Religions*, 6, no. 4 (2015), 1182–1202 (pp. 1189–1192).

33 Hilary Matfess, 'Boko Haram: History and Context', in *Oxford Research Encyclopedias: African History* (2017) <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.119> [accessed June 2023].

34 Azumah, 'Boko Haram in Retrospect', p. 40.

The turning point in the tension and clashes between the federal government and Boko Haram occurred in July 2009. A group of Boko Haram followers were travelling to a funeral when the police stopped them. The police security forces started to beat group members, and when they tried to run away the police started shooting at their backs. In revenge, Boko Haram attacked police stations and fighting broke out in which the police killed between 700 and 1000 Boko Haram members. Because of the uprising, the army raided Maiduguri Ibn Taymiyyah Masjid Mosque and Muhammed Yusuf was later arrested by soldiers. After interrogation, the police shot and killed Yusuf.[35] The killing of the Boko Haram leader sparked controversy and accusations of the extra-judicial killing of Yusuf by the state of Nigeria.[36]

Boko Haram never disappeared but went underground, and a year later, in 2010, the new Boko Haram leader Abubarak Shekau declared jihad and started launching terrorist attacks in the northern states of Nigeria. Boko Haram rapidly changed from proselyting and preaching community and from conducting illegal activities into a violent terrorist organisation.[37] Abubakar Shekau pledged loyalty to international terrorist organisations like Al Qaida, Usama bin Laden, and the Islamic States in Iraq and Somalia (ISIS). Shekau also developed a hatred against the United States of America and Christians: '[W]e know what is happening in this world, it is a jihad war against Christians and Christianity.'[38] Boko Haram claims that their violence is a response to a long history of the persecution of Muslims in Nigeria. The sect sees that Western-style democracy, education, and alliances with non-Muslims are dominating in Nigeria. The leaders of Boko Haram use a religious rhetoric of victimhood in order to justify their violence against other Muslims, Christians, and the government of Nigeria.[39]

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35 Matfess, 'Boko Haram: History and Context'.
36 Comolli, *Boko Haram*, pp. 55, 116.
37 Matfess, 'Boko Haram: History and Context'.
38 Azumah, 'Boko Haram in Retrospect', p. 41.
39 Alex Thurston, 'The Disease Is Unbelief: Boko Haram's Religious and Political Worldview', The Brookings Project on US Relations with the Islamic World, Analysis Paper, no. 22 (January, 2016), pp. 1–33 <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-disease-is-unbelief-boko-harams-religious-and-political-worldview/> [accessed May 2023] (pp. 5–6).

The Nigerian government response led to the establishment of the Joint Task Force Operation Restore Order (JTF ORO) in 2011. Nigeria has the best equipped and funded military forces in West Africa, with 80 000 active troops plus 82 000 paramilitaries. The government declared a state of emergence on 31 December 2011 for six months. The reason for the emergency was multiple attacks carried out by Boko Haram during the Christmas period of 2011. After the emergency period, attacks against government buildings and churches intensified. Nigerian Christians were dissatisfied with government efforts to help churches and victims and censured the lack of clear condemnation on the part of Muslim leaders of the violent acts of Boko Haram. Also, Muslim leaders were suspicious of the government and President Goodluck Jonathan because most of victims were Muslims and they believed that President Jonathan was influenced by the Christian leaders.[40]

Peace Talks

The Nigerian government attempted to open talks with Boko Haram, but negotiations proved fruitless. The former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo met with Boko Haram leader Babakura Fuggu, the brother-in-law of Mohammed Yusuf, first in 2011 and then in 2012. The issue at the centre of the negotiations was the extra-judicial killing of Mohammed Yusuf. Babakura Fuggu was also in danger because he was ready to meet the former leader of Nigeria. There was discussion of conditions for a ceasefire and amnesty for Boko Haram members, along with talk of employment opportunities in the future. Boko Haram demanded payment of compensation to the family of Mohammed Yusuf. In 2012, the day following his meeting with former President Obasanjo, Babakura Fuggu was shot and killed by a Boko Haram member.[41]

The highest authority of Islam in Nigeria, the Sultan of Sokoto, Muhammadu Sa'ad Abubakar III, introduced an amnesty programme for Boko Haram, but it was rejected by President Goodluck Jonathan.

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[40] Comolli, *Boko Haram*, pp. 109–113.
[41] Comolli, *Boko Haram*, pp. 115–116.

However, a committee to evaluate the feasibility of pardoning militants was founded. Other world leaders encouraged the Nigerian government to discuss and meet the enemy Boko Haram. Unfortunately, discussions and plans of offering an amnesty to Boko Haram failed when their leader Abubakar Shekau stated that they had done nothing wrong, and it was the government that needed an amnesty due to the atrocities against Muslims.[42]

Darlington Mutanda argues that the influence of Boko Haram in Nigeria is basically a result of poor governance. The marginalisation of north-east Nigeria has caused insurgency, which has spread into neighbouring countries, and there is still an urgent need for peace negotiations.[43] As noted already, the aim of this article is to examine how faith-based peace building might offer a way forward in Nigeria by drawing a comparison with what happened in the civil war in the West African country of Sierra Leone in the 1990s and identifying what lessons might be learnt. The next section thus describes the conflict in Sierra Leone and the process that emerged from it.

The Civil War in Sierra Leone

The civil war in Sierra Leone lasted for eleven years and has been described as one of the dirtiest and most violent wars in Africa.[44] It began in March 1991 when the Sierra Leonean Revolutionary United Front (RUF) attacked the area of Sierra Leone bordering Liberia together with the Liberian rebel army. The RUF leader Foday Sankoh and Liberian guerrilla leader Charles Taylor had formed a coalition and began to take control of the diamond mines in the Kono district of Sierra Leone. The RUF rebels found some popularity in the beginning, but after a series of atrocities they quickly lost the support in the eyes of the people.[45] The casualties of war amounted to about 70 000 lost lives

[42] Comolli, *Boko Haram*, pp. 117–118.
[43] Mutanda, 'What Makes Terrorism Tick in Africa?', p. 28.
[44] David Keen, *Conflict and Collusion in Sierra Leone* (Oxford: James Currey, 2005), pp. 219–240.
[45] Penfold, 'Faith in Resolving Sierra Leone's Bloody Conflict', pp. 550–553.

and 2.6 million displaced people in a country that has a population of 6 million.[46]

The RUF originated in the 1980s as a protest movement but later continued with violence that systematically targeted civilians. The RUF was formed when a group of teachers and students began to protest against President Joseph Saidu Momoh because of reduced salaries and a state of economic emergency. The beginning of the rebel movement was a reflection of the failure of the Sierra Leone state to provide education and welfare to a generation of young people. Later, Foday Sankoh, a former army corporal, took the leadership of the RUF group.[47]

In Sierra Leone, the war was fuelled by a socio-economic conflict and grievances; however, the roots of the conflict are deeper in the history of Sierra Leone. The civil war in the 1990s was the culmination of marginalisation processes in the countryside. The former colonial administration, opportunities for formal education, and the discovery of rich diamond mines started to change the society. The result of the social change was a large migration of young men from rural areas to the capital Freetown for education and to the diamond mines for a better life and income. The poor rural areas continued their life as before: extended families and young people living under the authority and control of elders.[48]

During the war, the RUF advanced into rural areas and its recruitment strategy was the killing of parents and family members in order to force children and young people to destroy their family ties. The old family hierarchy was replaced by the rebel army and its fluid order. The new social hierarchy made it easier to force abducted children and youth to participate in murder, rape, and torture.[49] The RUF shaped

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46 Mary Kaldor and James Vincent, *Evaluation of UNDP Assistance to Conflict-Affected Countries: Case Study Sierra Leone* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2006), pp. 5–6.
47 Alimammy Koroma, 'The Power of Organization', in *Peacemakers in Action: Profiles of Religion and Conflict Resolution*, ed. by David Little (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 278–301 (pp. 283–284).
48 Catherine Bolten, 'We Have Been Sensitized: Ex-Combatants, Marginalization, and Youth in Postwar Sierra Leone', *American Anthropologist*, 14, no. 3 (2012), 496–508 (pp. 498–499).
49 Bolten, 'We Have Been Sensitized', pp. 498–499.

a culture of violence and a new closed world of combatants with a strict command structure based on fear. A sign of the fragility of the country was the absence of an organised army. The underpaid soldiers in the Sierra Leonean army had the epithet 'sobels', soldiers by day and rebels by night, and there were government soldiers and rebels mining diamonds side by side in Kono.[50]

The Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone (IRCSL)

During the war, the World Conference for Religion and Peace (WCRP) decided to help Muslims and Christians in Sierra Leone. The WCRP encouraged religious leaders to come together and form an organisation for dialogue and peace building in order to encourage every level of society to pursue conflict transformation and reconciliation.[51] In Sierra Leone, there was already strong resistance to the war as a number of civil society organisations were actively working for peace. Muslim and Christian delegates came together on April 1997 and decided to form the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone (IRCSL). The founding members were prominent leaders of Islamic and Christian organisations. The representatives of African Traditional Religion (ATR) were initially ignored and excluded from IRCSL. However, ATR leaders joined the reconciliation process after the civil war.[52]

Sheikh Conteh, the chief Imam of Freetown, described the meaning of good cooperation between the faiths thus:

> There has been a marriage between the followers of these two main denominations [sic] in our country, Muslims and Christians. Before the rebel war […] [from] the beginning of the history of this country Muslims and Christians have been living together, loving each other, interacting, exchanging ideas, and they have seen themselves not as Muslims or Christians but as people of the same Creator and people worshipping the same Creator and people recognize the talents of the respective members of denominations.[53]

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50 Paul Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth and Resources in Sierra Leone*, The International African Institute (Oxford: James Currey, 1996), pp. 7, 28.
51 Penfold, 'Faith in Resolving Sierra Leones's Bloody Conflict', p. 551.
52 Portaankorva, 'Muslim and Christian Leaders Working Together', pp. 82–84.
53 Portaankorva, 'Muslim and Christian Leaders Working Together', p. 84. Interview of Imam Sheikh Conteh in Freetown 2013.

In May 1997, one month after the formation of the IRCSL, the government of Sierra Leone was overthrown in a military coup. The military junta, named the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), took power in the capital Freetown and invited the RUF rebel movement to join them. The international community refused to recognise the AFRC. The Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) had a meeting together with the United Kingdom and the United Nations Security Council and they decided to remove the AFRC junta from power. After this decision in February 1998, the West African army under the command of Nigerian troops arrived in Freetown and forced the junta to leave the capital city. Democracy was restored and President Kabbah's government returned to power. However, there was worse to come, because the RUF army was still in power outside of Freetown in the rural areas and was strongly supported by Liberian leader Charles Taylor.[54]

In December 1998, rebels showed their strength and, with the assistance of Liberia, attacked Freetown, killing people and abducting children. The IRCSL appealed to both parties in the conflict and spoke against violence and revenge. After the catastrophe in Freetown, the United Nation's special envoy, Francis Okello, asked Muslim and Christian leaders for help in starting the dialogue and negotiation process between Sierra Leone's President Kabbah and RUF leader Sankoh. The IRCSL actively spoke against war, and, moreover, the religious communities provided humanitarian assistance to the rebels.[55]

The leader of the Baptist Convention of Sierra Leone, Reverend Moses Khanu, remembered meeting with the RUF leader:

> We tried to find means and ways how to talk to Foday Sankoh, the rebel leader. So, we had access to him when he was caught; he was arrested in Nigeria and brought to Sierra Leone as a prisoner. He was to stand trial. He stood trial and he was condemned to die. He had pyjamas with a big [letter] C. We went in there and we discussed with him about […] his men to stop the war. We had this discussion a couple of times. And finally he agreed to

[54] Penfold, 'Faith in Resolving Sierra Leones's Bloody Conflict', pp. 551–552.
[55] Portaankorva, 'Muslim and Christian Leaders Working Together', p. 86.

> have a voluntary ceasefire. He called for it and called the men to cease fire. Nobody forced [him] during that time. So, we continued meeting with him. He agreed for him and the government to meet and talk peace.[56]

The Peace Process

The IRCSL delegation met with Sankoh in prison and he was given permission to use the radio to contact his field commander. The RUF field commander responded and released fifty-four abducted children. Sankoh was released from prison and he was ready to sit at the negotiating table. The IRCSL travelled to the neighbouring country of Liberia to meet with President Charles Taylor, whose presence was necessary in the peace process because he was the biggest supporter of Sierra Leone's rebels. The IRCSL was a neutral peace broker and had direct contacts to both the government and President Kabbah and the rebel leaders, which helped in setting up dialogue between the two parties.[57]

The RUF invited the IRCSL to participate an informal meeting before the negotiations. The West African countries were present at the negotiation table with the United States and the United Kingdom. During the negotiations in Lomé, the IRCSL, WCRP, and Norwegian Church AID acted as informal mediators and, in remaining neutral facilitators, convinced the parties to stay at the negotiating table. The Muslim and Christian members of the IRCSL supported peace and forgiveness, and when there were problems in negotiations they encouraged negotiators to continue their meeting with prayers. Finally, only five months after the rebel attack on Freetown in December 1998, the Lomé Peace Accord was signed in May 1999.[58]

Before the peace talks, President Kabbah and Foday Sankoh had agreed to a ceasefire. The Lomé Peace Accord opened a new avenue for the people of Sierra Leone, and the agreement signed between rebel movements and the government led to a new power-sharing unity government in which the RUF leader Foday Sankoh became the

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[56] Portaankorva, 'Muslim and Christian Leaders Working Together', p. 87. Interview of Revd Moses B. Khanu in Freetown 2013.
[57] Koroma, 'The Power of Organization', pp. 291–293.
[58] Portaankorva, 'Muslim and Christian Leaders Working Together', p. 88.

country's vice-president and cabinet minister for mineral resources. The treaty provided an opportunity for the rebel army to be transformed into a political party and a blanket amnesty was granted for rebel soldiers. However, the peace in Sierra Leone was fragile and the ceasefire was sometimes violated by the RUF troops. In May 2000, RUF members guarding the house of Foday Sankoh opened fire on demonstrators, killing many civilians, and the incident led to the arrest of Foday Sankoh. The imprisonment of the former rebel leader facilitated the completion of the disarmament and demobilisation process in Sierra Leone.[59]

The Lóme peace agreement also called for the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to deal with the brutalities committed during the war. The decision followed to start the process of truth-telling for communal reconciliation. Over nine thousand written statements were collected from victims and ex-combatants, and fourteen victim hearings were convened. Restorative justice touched the rural communities when Christian, Muslim, and African Traditional Religion representatives organised over seventy reconciliation ceremonies in villages. Religious rituals may offer new ways of building reconciliation using local cultural resources.[60] Religious words such as peace, violence, and reconciliation have emotional and religious meanings. The words have also political and social importance when they touch people's fears. Asking for forgiveness and forgiving are powerful in the process of reconciliation.[61]

Conclusions

The peace process in Sierra Leone was a strong example of the role of the religious communities and actors. Peace mediators were neutral, building trust on both sides of the conflict. When the warring parties signed the peace treaty, a restorative justice was needed for the people

[59] Penfold, 'Faith in Resolving Sierra Leones's Bloody Conflict', pp. 554–555; Portaankorva, 'Muslim and Christian Leaders Working Together', p. 88.
[60] Hilary Anne Hurd, 'The Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone as Peace Facilitator in Post 1991 Sierra Leone', *Peace and Change*, 41, no. 4 (2016), 425–451 (pp. 430–440).
[61] Maria Ericson, *Search for a Shared Moral Landscape: An Exploration Based Upon a Study of Northern Ireland and South Africa* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2001), pp. 24–25.

affected by the conflict and to integrate perpetrators of violence back into society.[62] Muslim and Christian leaders have often avoided dialogue and close cooperation because they have been afraid of compromising their own convictions. In the contemporary conflicts in West Africa, there is a need for a deeper interreligious peace building and conflict transformation efforts.[63] In the African context, it is important that the Islamic framework and cultural context is a part of the peace building curriculum together with Christian and African Traditional Religion.[64] The lessons from the faith-based peace building in Sierra Leone are not easily transferable to the Boko Haram insurgency context. However, there are certain principles that can be applied in practice.

Boko Haram have continued their attacks against churches and Christians in Nigeria. In 2021, the Baptist Convention of Nigeria asked the federal government of Nigeria to prosecute all surrendered Boko Haram terrorists. Baptist leaders urged the government to deal decisively with kidnappers and to compensate all the families of kidnapped children and other victims.[65] In critiquing Boko Haram, the Baptist Convention leaders should also be ready to question the Nigerian government's excessive use of force and ask all parties to refrain from violence. Following the example of the peace process in Sierra Leone, the role of peace builders is to be trusted peace brokers with good relations to all parties involved in the conflict. It is impossible for the Baptist community to mediate peace without neutrality towards both sides of the conflict.

Looking at the situation in Nigeria, one can conclude that there is a need for direct peace talks between the government and the Boko Haram. According to Lederach, negotiations with terrorists provide possibilities for a constructive change. Terrorism can be seen as a

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62 Koroma, 'The Power of Organization', pp. 291–293.

63 Jari Portaankorva, Uskontodiplomatia ja konfliktinratkaisu: Muslimit ja kristityt sovinnon rakentajina (doctoral dissertation, Helsinki University, 2018), pp. 45, 64.

64 Abu-Nimer and Ayse Kadayifci-Orellana, 'Muslim Peace-Building Actors in Africa and the Balkan Context', pp. 553–573.

65 'Prosecute Surrendered Boko Haram Terrorists, Baptist Church tells FG', *This Day*, 20 August 2020 <https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2021/08/20/prosecute-surrendered-boko-haram-terrorists-baptist-church-tells-fg/> [accessed July 2023].

position of people using violent means in order to achieve a social change in a society and overcome powerlessness.[66] People living in Nigeria's Borno state are alienated, and Boko Haram has used this political and religious vacuum in their propaganda. There is an urgency to discuss the root-causes of conflict and build stronger and more meaningful relationships between the government and local communities in Nigeria. In the conflicts of Liberia and Sierra Leone and the anti-state rebellion of Boko Haram there are similar denominators, such as social marginalisation of the youth, poverty, and a fragile state. Muslim extremist groups and rebel movements in West Africa are not different in their basic pattern of resistance and rebellion against their governments.[67]

Baptist Churches in Nigeria have been working together with other Christian communities in helping people forcefully displaced in the areas in north-eastern Nigeria affected by the Boko Haram insurgency. Baptists are re-integrating migrated and displaced people into the society and transforming their lives.[68] A recent study on how pastors in the Nigerian Baptist Convention are using social media shows the interest for new ways of peace building at the grassroots level. There is a need for a dialogue that helps to resolve conflicts at the local level and promote peaceful coexistence of religious communities.[69] Also, the role of Muslim leaders in Nigeria, especially Islamic clerics, is to challenge Boko Haram's teaching and interpretation of the Quran. A just peace approach challenges churches and mosques alike to support non-violence and restorative justice in the midst of war and to work closely together with other faiths.

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66 John Paul Lederach, 'Conflict Transformation', *Beyond Intractability*, ed. by Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess, Conflict Information Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder, 2003 <http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/transformation> [last accessed 18 May 2024] (p. 54).

67 Suleiman, 'What Makes Islamist Movements Different?', pp. 1, 12–14.

68 Adebayo Afolaranmi, 'Faith-Based Interventions in the Reintegration of Displaced Boko Haram victims into the Society', *African Journal of Political Sciences*, 9, no. 2 (2020), 297–314 (pp. 306–310).

69 Adebayo Ola Afolaranmi and Akeem Adekunle Amodu, 'Peaceful Coexistence, Social Media, and the Nigerian Baptist Pastors: Challenges and Possible Ways Out', *EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR)*, 8, no. 6 (2022), 117–127 (p. 117).