



Africa Spectrum

Fuest, Veronika (2010),
Contested Inclusions: Pitfalls of NGO Peace-Building Activities in Liberia,
in: *Africa Spectrum*, 45, 2, 3-33.

ISSN: 1868-6869 (online), ISSN: 0002-0397 (print)

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<www.africa-spectrum.org>

Published by
GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of African Affairs
in co-operation with the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation Uppsala and Hamburg
University Press.

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Contested Inclusions: Pitfalls of NGO Peace-Building Activities in Liberia

Veronika Fuest

Abstract: In post-war situations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) feature highly in peace-building processes in their (perceived) capacities as both representatives of civil society and as grassroots agents to be employed in the reconstruction and transformation of society. As elsewhere, in Liberia, peace-building approaches include, first, international blueprints of representation that intend to empower groups generally perceived to be socially subordinate and, second, supporting traditional institutions considered social capital in reconciliation. Using the example of Liberia, this paper explores how in local conflict arenas, NGO workshops – the most popular mode of participatory intervention – are interpreted and appropriated by local actors; it highlights some fallacies and unintended consequences of inclusive procedures in practice and questions the support furnished to heads of gendered secret societies.

■ Manuscript received 15 September 2010; accepted 16 November 2010

Keywords: Liberia, peace-building, non-governmental organizations, parties to conflicts/conflict participants, social participation, development policy strategies, local politics, tradition, secret societies

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A wide range of studies has focused on misconceptions and unintended consequences of blueprint policies in development, including the participatory approach, and has demonstrated how the resources and intentions of external interventions may be selectively acquired, manipulated and/or thwarted not only by their target groups but also by development agents themselves in unpredictable ways at various levels of the international hierarchy of the aid business (cf. for example, Bierschenk, et al. 2000; Cooke and Kothari 2001; Mosse 2005; Stirrat 2007; Rottenburg 2009). This paper describes the approaches and practices of some international and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that have engaged in peace-building in Liberia since the years of the civil war (1989–2003) and explores some of the effects and repercussions of those interventions. Considering Liberia’s historical and cultural background, I focus on a popular type of intervention – workshops – and explore the local meanings, ways of appropriation and unintended consequences of those events. I also highlight some fallacies implicit not only in the standard procedures of social inclusion and participation derived from international models but also in the promotion of traditional institutions considered social capital in reconciliation. I argue that in local arenas those interventions may aggravate current lines of conflicts, as questions of both legitimacy and representativeness are not sufficiently raised by the development agents in charge. The paper thus contributes to the debates concerning “the tyranny of participation” (Cooke & Kothari 2001) and the complexities of the notion of local ownership in peace-building. This notion involves contradictory assumptions: On the one hand, policies are governed by the assumption that war-shattered communities need to be brought into conformity with international standards of good governance (“liberal peace”). On the other hand, the importance of traditional institutions and social contexts (“peace-building from below”) is emphasized (Donais 2009).

Findings are based on intermittent field research¹ in semi-urban and rural locations in the centre and northwest of the country (Bong and Lofa Counties) and in the capital city Monrovia between April 2005 and March 2007 (altogether five months), and on an evaluation of literature and NGO project documents.² The regions mentioned above in the centre and north-

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- 1 For financial support of my fieldwork, I gratefully acknowledge the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle/S., Germany. My thanks also go to Maarten Bedert, Morten Boås, Mark Davidheiser and Stephen Ellis for constructive comments on an earlier draft of this paper.
 - 2 Research included participant observation in three workshops in Bong County: two on gender and one on good governance; interviewees consisted of representatives of international donor agencies and consultants as well as local key informants such

west of the country comprise the most densely populated areas of Liberia outside Monrovia and geographically coincide with the so-called “*Poro* complex” of secret societies (also spanning the larger part of Sierra Leone and the southeast of Guinea). This region has historically been marked by the pervasive influence of male and female secret societies in all spheres of life, especially the mutually exclusive secret societies of *Poro* (for men) and *Sande* (for women). It also coincides with Liberia’s most prominent “catchment area” of foreign aid, due to its accessibility by road from Monrovia.³ This particular coincidence has provided a challenging (due to respondents’ reluctance to talk about secret society affairs) but also fruitful research environment considering the issues at stake.

Policy Frameworks in Peace-Building

Liberia’s post-war landscape of peace-building has been shaped by the standard assumption of the international community that concerted efforts to reconcile and regenerate war-torn societies in ways that will inhibit relapses into violence should be taken by external actors (Bornstein and Munro 2003; Duffield 2005; Pugh 2000). Donor policies and projects are informed by a “new humanitarianism” and a concept of “liberal peace” involving profound social transformation with ameliorative and harmonizing measures (Duffield 2005: 8-12). The end of a civil war is viewed as offering countries unprecedented opportunities to rebuild their societies and to push through difficult reforms. From this perspective, the (inter)national mission of post-conflict rehabilitation is not simply reconstructive, it is explicitly transformative (Bornstein and Munro 2003: 225). However, a crucial difficulty in war-torn societies – in effect, “failed” states – is that the state is both the agent and the object of reconstruction (Bornstein and Munro 2003: 221). Formal institutions such as government courts possess limited capacities and little legitimacy in the “no peace/no war” situations that are so characteristic of countries that have endured extensive civil conflict – particularly where abuses of state institutions are considered to have been at the root of the conflict in the first place, like in Liberia. State-centred notions of regulatory

as local authorities, leaders of organizations, and NGO workers. NGOs contacted in the course of research: Democratic Education Network-Liberia, Mother Patern College, Search for Common Ground, Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIP-NET). Group discussions and further interviews were conducted with men and women who had participated in workshops, and old friends from pre-war times (field research in Liberia 1984–1986).

- 3 NGOs have also been active in Liberia’s southeast, albeit to a lower degree (see Fuest 2008a).

institutions and security are perceived to involve the risk of imposing illegitimate and non-sustainable changes. This dilemma has resulted in parallel, however often disparate, strategies and activities of peace-building at various levels of intervention.

To international agencies such as the World Bank and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), a way out seems to be reinforcing or establishing civil society institutions and actors, thus restricting any arbitrary power of the state, in addition to rebuilding and reforming legislative and executive structures (Bornstein and Munro 2003: 225).⁴ Besides government reform, three general policies of intervention can be made out, the first two being inspired by the liberal peace approach:

First, NGOs have come to be considered particularly suitable peace-builders. NGOs are more flexible than state actors and they provide access to a wider range of non-military options, such as psycho-social care; re-training of ex-combatants; awareness-raising; encouraging trust-building between conflicting parties and lobbying for peace; and organizing reconciliation events rather than focusing on violence actors. NGOs also have access to local expertise and institutions and are more likely to represent the interests of the local people. In predominantly Christian countries, churches may perform a leading role; they have strong organizations and enjoy a high degree of legitimacy (Bornstein and Munro 2003: 225, Neubert 2004: 61-62).⁵ Depending on the context, measures devised by UN agencies, for example, may be implemented by local or international NGOs (INGOs) commissioned for specific peace-building measures, or an INGO may pursue its own agenda.

Second, in post-conflict situations, the paradigm of participation is applied. According to a wide international consensus, representatives from all walks of “civil society”⁶ are to be included in forums of various kinds, and a voice is to be given to the subordinate and marginalized. Communities and local organizations (“stakeholders”) are to be empowered to negotiate with national and international institutions and bureaucracies. A better society is to be promoted by including people who are (usually perceived to be) mar-

4 See Boås and Jennings (2005) for a discussion of blueprint-development approaches to mend what are perceived to be “failed” states. The authors argue in favour of case analyses that take into account “the complex nexus of actors, incentives, power structures and networks” (388).

5 In West Africa an enormous variety of pentecostal churches mushroomed during and after phases of violent conflict. Their role in local and regional “peace-building” certainly deserves to be studied.

6 Cf. the contributions in Baker and Chandler (2005) on the uses and intricacies of the concept “civil society”.

ginal and disadvantaged – for example, women and youth – at all levels in the making and implementation of decisions that affect their lives. Contextually, depending on their status and complexity, NGOs may be both agents and target groups in these processes. The most popular type of communication forums are workshops involving a variety of “stakeholders”. These events have gained significance throughout sub-Saharan Africa since the 1990s and have come to be considered crucial instruments in peace-building.

Third, donor agencies also consider strengthening a country’s informal indigenous capacities the major task of international assistance. Traditional institutions are assumed to have retained regulatory powers that the state has lost in the course of wars; they are emphasized to ensure local “ownership” of both structures and processes. The donor community’s “discovery” of traditional institutions is sometimes phrased in discourses of “social capital” in reconciliation after violent conflict (Klute 2004).⁷ The underlying assumption is that the potential for peace-building, such as authentic leadership, already exists in the particular region or community and hence is rooted in its “traditional culture”. Peace-building then requires that actors become aware of the already-existing traditional methods of both conflict management and local wisdom in a given society. Cockell (2000: 21-23), for example, considers the mobilization of “indigenous resources” to be one of the “parameters for sustainable peace-building strategies and programmes”. In Liberia, these resources have been ascribed to, aside from local chiefs, leaders of the traditional secret societies in particular.

The material presented in this article shows how the approaches of liberal peace, on the one hand, and of a communitarian notion of local ownership and peace-building from below (involving traditional authorities), on the other hand, are implemented by NGOs at the local level in Liberia. To facilitate an understanding of the repercussions at the local level, the general background and present conflict parties are mapped out in the following section.

7 Among social scientists, too, traditional institutions have been extensively considered in the theory of peace-building, reconciliation and reintegration, see contributions in Zartman 2000. Many theorists and practitioners have been inspired by Lederach (1995), who criticized the notion and practice of simply transferring Western conflict-management techniques across cultures with little or no understanding of the cultural knowledge and resources in the conflict setting, which are considered essential elements in peace-building. See also Davidheiser (2006).

Historical Setting and Societal Rifts

The Liberian civil war, which has been considered the seat of the fire in this war-torn part of West Africa, lasted 14 years (1989–2003). It claimed the lives of between 150,000 and 250,000 people and displaced nearly half the country's population. After the *Comprehensive Peace Agreement* was finally signed and Charles Taylor left the country in 2003, the international community aspired to rebuild Liberia, prevent it from relapsing into violent conflict, and turn it into a respectable country with a functional government. A peacekeeping force, the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), was deployed all over the country. In 2004 the armed factions were disarmed and demobilized. The interventions by the UN and other international players also facilitated the implementation of peaceful national elections in 2005, culminating in the inauguration of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, Africa's first female president, in 2006 (Mehler and Smith-Höhn 2006). A new quality of participation of civil society actors in politics and democratic processes of transformation have been observed in most sub-Saharan countries in the last two decades (Eberlei 2008). In Liberia this development has been delayed by the war but seems to have accelerated under the present head of state.

At the local level, since the first years of civil conflict, international and national NGOs became increasingly active in the country,⁸ which has shaped a common local perception: “When the war came, development came.” Since the peace agreement, Liberian government institutions have been framed by expanding, parallel donor structures (UN agencies, the European Commission, bilateral agencies and INGOs) to an extent hitherto unknown. In the year 2008 an estimated 180 foreign charities were active in Liberia.⁹ These structures have fuelled an impressive mushrooming of local NGOs with mixed intentions and purposes: to fight abject poverty and to heal the wounds of war; to work for reconstruction and reconciliation in

8 According to a study of the NGO sector in Liberia in the years of the civil conflict, some NGO programmes focused on relief provision, others had many objectives, including advocacy. Also during those years major differences rested in the nature of the organizations and their linkages, with international NGOs having greater access to external actors, as well as greater sustainability in terms of funding. Political-level work was dominated by local NGOs, reflecting their comparative advantages as locally embedded organizations, although many effective activists and organizations received core international funding and support, mainly from smaller and private donors (Atkinson and Mulbah 2000). Duworko (2003) has drawn attention both to the weakness of some local NGOs that were merely “one-man or family-run organizations” and to the general lack of trained manpower.

9 “Liberia. With a little help from her friends”, *The Economist*, 23 August 2008, 34.

their county, district or community; to contribute to constitutional reform;¹⁰ and to tap into the flow of external funding – after all, international funding channels have become one of the major sources of Liberian income, even in rural areas. More than 400 NGOs had registered with the Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs by February 2007.

At the national level, policies and activities have been dominated by international agencies. They have introduced rights-based models of governance which feature high on the international peace-building agendas concerned with the state bureaucracy. These international agencies support and run mass media that broadcast a wealth of novel concepts, discourses and procedures derived from the paradigms of participation and good governance (most conspicuously, the nationwide “UNMIL radio”, but also regional radio programmes in various local languages). The rhetoric of human rights, women’s rights, youth rights and the transformation of structures of subordination is widely employed. Multilateral organizations as well as INGOs generously support scores of workshops and preparatory activities such as the “training of trainers”, the design (and recycling) of manuals for “peace-building”, “good leadership” or “gender-mainstreaming”.¹¹ Participatory and socially inclusive methods of training and facilitation are widely employed by the “implementing partners”, i.e. INGOs or NGOs, as the case may be. These are the major actors in the field of “software projects” concerned with social relations¹² outside the capital city.

Understanding the implications of these activities requires a look at present, local conflict arenas from a historical perspective. Heuristically, social and political practices of identity-shifting notwithstanding, dividing lines run between ethnic groups, status groups and generations, manifestations of which may be studied in the recent history of the *Poro* secret society.

In the northwest and centre of the country, traditional socio-political relations were constituted and negotiated within a system of distinct hierarchical order, i.e. ranked lineages with powerful elder chiefs and the mutually exclusive gendered secret societies (d’Azevedo 1962). Leaders of secret societies, called *zoes*, were invariably elder members of the ruling lineage; they claimed to have esoteric knowledge of medicines, to possess spiritual pow-

10 Archibald (2005), however, has raised the issue that among the local organizations working in the field of governance reform, constitutionality and human rights, there are many that serve as “fronts” for diaspora Liberians with political ambitions in the country.

11 For example, methods are based on the popular manuals “Training for Transformation” by Hope and Timmel (1995, 1999).

12 In peace-builders’ parlance, “hardware projects” refer to activities of reconstruction and rehabilitation of physical infrastructure.

ers to control hidden forces of the forest (manifested, for example, in the secret *Poro* mask, colloquially labelled “devil”), to have the ability to mediate between the supernatural world and the community, and to control various other domains considered important to social life and the community’s survival. Initiation into the societies was compulsory for all boys and girls (Murphy 1980; Schröder 1988). The *zoes* were feared for their secret powers. This fearful respect was translated into special economic benefits for the *zoes*; they controlled the labour and services of youthful clients, and during initiation they were entitled to – and expected – generous donations by the relatives of the initiates, and in the case of the *Sande*, female *zoes* extracted donations for their spiritual support during pregnancy and childbirth (Bledsoe 1984). Most adult community members, who were ordinary members of the societies, had been socialized by senior society members into obeying them. The initiation periods were marked by physical pain and hardship, including male and female circumcision, as well as psychological intimidation.

The *Poro* and *Sande* were formally assimilated into the system of indirect rule created by the government in the past century. Since the middle of the twentieth century, Liberian governments have seen these societies as valuable “cultural institutions” that could strengthen the power of chiefs in those areas where *Poro* and *Sande* existed. The societies had been protected by official regulations since 1924, and successive presidents sought and received initiation into the men’s society. Not only did the government’s Department of the Interior, and later, the Ministry of Internal Affairs assume the task of regulating the *Poro* and *Sande* societies nationwide, they also protected them against local contestation, for example by Christians threatening to expose their secrets. The fact that local officials of *Poro* could call on the government to protect them against local criticism or attempts at reform “clearly had a major effect in shaping local politics on lines more authoritarian than in the past” (Ellis 2006).¹³

One ethnic group was exempt from secret society membership and activities, the traders called Mandingo, who had migrated to the area of Liberia from neighbouring Guinea and settled among the indigenous groups over a period of four centuries. In general, the Mandingo, the majority of whom are Muslim, were classified locally as “strangers”; by being denied membership in the *Poro* they were largely excluded from their communities’ political affairs. For complex historical reasons, the Mandingo became both promi-

13 Out of all Liberian presidents the *Poro* was instrumentalized in the most effective way by Charles Taylor. He effectively ruled over the interior of the country, in contrast to the other heads of state, who were based in Monrovia. Reportedly, he gave the *zoes* cars and even busses (personal communication with S. Ellis, 11 July 2007).

ment victims and perpetrators in the civil conflict. In some locations, a cycle of violence was created by mutual desecrations or destruction of religious sites, i.e. mosques and secret *Poro* groves.¹⁴ The majority of the Mandingo were driven into exile in the course of the civil war, and Mandingos united to form two of the major warring factions (Ellis 1999; Højbjerg 2004). Even after the signing of the formal peace agreement, ethnic tensions have persisted and have been manifested by outbreaks of violence, particularly in the north of the country. Since 2004 many Mandingos have come back to resume their previous activities but have been prevented from reclaiming their property and have been denied access to marketplaces and farmland by the “indigenous” people that had driven them away. The war provided an opportunity for members of these groups, chiefly the Gio and Mano of Nimba County, but also the Kpelle and Loma of Bong and Lofa Counties, to fill the void of commercial activity that the absence of the Mandingos had created. They are in direct competition with the Mandingos and invoke – or construct – their “customary” rights to the territory to use the land, market spots and housing space formerly owned by Mandingos. The issue of land is the key factor of the interethnic tensions. The most prominent lines of ethnic conflict divide various groups in the north (Gio, Mano) and northwest (Loma) of the country from the Mandingo. In the years following the war, various observers have maintained that Liberia’s peace remains fragile as long as this interethnic strife persists. Reconciliation between the Mandingos and the other ethnic groups has been considered “one of the most important post-conflict challenges” (Sawyer 2005: 63) in Liberia.

Another important challenge is what intellectual Liberians refer to as the “elder–youth conflict”. Various observers maintain that in the past decade, the dominant line of cleavage in Liberian society has become generational. The conditions of war gave the youth more agency and power than ever before; the gerontocratic system of the past, which in Liberia’s west is intertwined with the *Poro* society, seems to be severely contested (Ellis 1999; Richards et al. 2005; Utas 2003). Participation in the war was considered a revolution in the minds of the youth, “a way of freeing themselves from a heavy workload and parental expectations”, and, in the case of males, from constraints in access to women and potential wives (Utas 2005: 140).¹⁵ In many locations, the powers of the secret societies *Poro* and *Sande* were reported to have been eroded during the years of the war. Frequently, *zoes* became targets of violence; they were humiliated in public or killed, or they had to flee into exile. Their loss of power was exacerbated by the incapability

14 *Poro* masks were looted by Mandingos and sold to expatriates in traditional arts shops in neighbouring Guinea (personal observation made in Nzérékoré, October 1993).

15 For a similar view on Sierra Leone cf. Richards (1996).

of parents to mobilize the resources required for their children's initiation in times of severe hardship (Richards et al. 2005). Concomitantly, female genital mutilation (FGM) seems to have decreased significantly. According to some estimates, in rural areas approximately 50 per cent of the female population between the ages of eight and eighteen had undergone FGM before the civil war began. While exact figures were difficult to ascertain, at the turn of the century many believed the war caused a reduction in this practice, estimating that the incidence had dropped to as low as 10 per cent.¹⁶ However, as will be elaborated below, rural elders have revived the initiation rituals in an effort to regain control over independent youths.

It is this field of complex local power struggles and cross-cutting lines of conflict (of which we have caught but a glimpse, for that matter) where NGOs enter with the intention to build peace.

“Workshop Culture”: Meanings and Unintended Consequences

The first thing we need to do is breaking the culture of silence (NGO trainer, Gbarnga, August 2005).

Since the 1990s, and accelerating somewhat after the signing of the peace agreement, a surge of NGO workshops have been conducted all over Liberia.¹⁷ Characteristic topics have been “reconciliation”, “gender-mainstreaming”, “good governance”, “community dialogue” and “youth leadership”. “Reconciliation” workshops deal with ethnic/religious conflicts typically involving the Mandingos. The workshops are usually organized and facilitated by NGO staff, who are, as a rule, educated, urban Liberians external to the local setting and trained in participatory methods. The events may last from three to ten days and are conducted in urban or semi-urban environments or rural district headquarters.

In general, the “workshop culture” furnishes economic, social, political and symbolic resources to those invited, i.e. those selected to participate. Workshops benefit – and are also instrumentalized by – various categories of participants in different ways.

16 U.S. Department of State (2001), Liberia: Report on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) or Female Genital Cutting (FGC), online: <<http://www.state.gov/g/wi/rls/rep/crfgm/10104.htm>> (1 August 2005).

17 Remarkably, the commonality of this intervention has resulted in a neologism in Liberian English, a transitive verb: “to workshop s.o.”. The subject is usually an NGO, the verb collocates with target groups such as village communities, women, or youths.

First, participation in workshops is highly coveted as a way of attaining economic resources. Regular food and comfortable shelter are provided for several days, which is particularly important to very poor participants. In most cases, generous “sitting fees” (depending on the context, up to 25 USD/day) are granted to the participants, and the “reimbursements” of transportation costs are a welcome source of cash income for those who choose to walk to the venues (sometimes over a period of two days) instead.

Second, workshops are a welcome source of entertainment. Eloquent facilitators hold speeches about livelihood-related topics of wide interest, they employ unusual methods and encourage everybody to voice their opinions. Participants may experiment with new ways and mediums of communication. Also video presentations can be enjoyed in places where such technology could otherwise not be afforded or applied for want of electricity.¹⁸

Third, workshops provide an opportunity for symbolic contact with the “developed” part of society and exposure to novel pieces of knowledge and ideas. A peculiar aura is created by clean white paper flipcharts and abundant supplies of permanent markers – paraphernalia of an enlightened modernity in rural environments where usually illiterate families struggle to find the means for their children’s basic school equipment. Participation in workshops is a source of prestige – those who have attended one or several workshops may claim a superior status in the community.

Fourth, workshops connect people to wider networks and provide opportunities for creating new alliances with powerful people. Like in other countries, “workshopping” has entailed the formation of a new stratum of “workshop professionals” composed of the educated and sometimes internationally experienced members of various organizations and communities – a new variety of the “development brokers” characterized by Bierschenk et al. (2000).

Fifth, local authorities can enhance their status and build or strengthen their networks of patronage by assigning privileges of workshop participation to (potential) clients. Whereas the categories of prospective participants are defined by the NGO in charge, the selection of individual participants is

18 The repertoire of DEN-L (Development Education Network-Liberia), an NGO inspired by Paolo Freire’s approach and supported by the Catholic Church of Ireland, comprises role plays, group work, plenary discussions and internationally known exercises such as Hopes and Worries, Johari’s Window, River of Life, Drawing a House, Animal Behaviour, Co-operative Squares, Trust Walk, Force Field Analysis, Local-Global Analysis, Gallery Walk, Problem Tree, etc. All of this is often framed by prayers and songs. Instructive videos include *Countdown to Freedom*, *Animal Farm* and *Liberia, America’s Stepchild*.

largely left to “the communities”,¹⁹ which means that in practice the invitation letters are directed to local town chiefs – facilitating another incidence of the “elite capture” so common in the arenas of the development business.²⁰

In regard to the idea of “liberal peace”, workshops may be considered devices to introduce democratic principles and to effect “social (re-)engineering” by pooling various resources and empowering the weaker sections in the communities. While I do not want to deny the possible benefits workshops have for a wide range of people previously sidelined in Liberian society, I do want to draw attention to unexpected repercussions effected by standard procedures of social inclusion as well as participatory methods. Workshops are *exclusive events* in various respects. International standard procedures of training, sensitization, civic education, and reconciliation prescribe the inclusion of “representatives” of certain socio-political categories such as women and youth, sometimes by quota. The NGOs attempt to stratify workshop participants according to these categories. In addition, “local authorities” and “traditional leaders” are included, in recognition of their power and potential as change agents at the local level. In this way, NGOs have unintentionally sidelined the Mandingos in the whole range of workshops that do *not* specifically address ethnic reconciliation. Given the backdrop of leadership and ethnic conflict in many communities, Mandingos are generally excluded from enjoying the multiple material and symbolic benefits of the “workshop culture” and they also miss out on the opportunities to social-network that these workshops offer to participants. Where the selection of participants is left to “the communities”,²¹ in effect to their chiefs, the Mandingo minority (among other marginalized groups) tends to be excluded. The good intentions of the NGO community notwithstanding, by informed speculation I suggest there may be a bias or blind spot because Liberia’s major NGOs are faith-based and/or seem to be dominated by Christians.²² Against this backdrop the question needs to be raised of

19 The egalitarian connotations of this concept have been deconstructed by various anthropologists. See, for example, Bierschenk et al. (2000), Mosse (2005). In this context see also Donais (2009) for a discussion of the concept of local ownership, where a commonality of purpose among a set of local actors is often wrongly assumed.

20 For parallel dynamics in Nigeria see also Smith (2003) about the creation of “wealth in people” through the allocation of project resources.

21 The egalitarian connotations of this concept have been deconstructed by various anthropologists. See, for example, Mosse (2005).

22 Examples are the Lutheran World Service/Lutheran Church of Liberia, the Justice and Peace Commission, the DEN-L, the Mother Patern College of Health Sciences, and the Christian Health Association of Liberia. Stirrat provides an intriguing “cliché common amongst development workers” concerning the faith-oriented

whether project resources furnished to non-Mandingo patrons indirectly reinforce local imbalances of power between the contesting ethnic parties and possibly neutralize the intended effects of reconciliation workshops.

On a more general level, exclusion is effected by the mediums of communication employed. The trainers, as local strangers, have to use Liberian English, which has not been mastered alike by all Liberians, as a medium. (Some NGOs that are committed to the cause of most comprehensive inclusion, however, take particular effort to provide for interpreters). They use writing on boards or flipcharts to illustrate their points. Also the participants are expected to “visualize” their views by writing. Illiterate people directly invited by an NGO are sometimes reluctant to join the event for fear of being shamed as “country” people in an arena that is perceived to be “civilized”, or they are present but do not participate.

Considering the goal of peace-building, workshops may also *be over-inclusive events*. Particularly in workshops directed at ethnic reconciliation, traditional authorities are assumed to be the carriers of “Traditional Forms of Reconciliation”; according to this logic, representatives of the Christians, Muslims and “Traditional Beliefs” – in effect important social elders – are to be invited.²³ However, according to various workshop reports, the presence

history of NGOs in general, stating that “while the offspring of the colonial service work for official bilateral and multilateral donors, the children of missionaries join NGOs. Missionary organizations of the past have frequently transformed themselves into today’s development organizations” (2000: 32-33). As in Liberia, churches seem to enjoy a reputation for their peace work and potential of legitimacy elsewhere: “With financial and logistical support garnered by the New Sudan Council of Churches from a wide variety of international humanitarian and religious institutions, [...] peace workshops [...] succeeded in greatly reducing tensions between Dinka and Nuer communities” (Hutchinson 2002: 42).

- 23 Similar to, the Peace Committees set up by Search for Common Ground are comprised of women, youth, elders, ex-combatants, members of civic organizations, representatives from relevant government agencies, and traditional and local leaders. They were meant to mobilize community members to monitor the peace and prevent the eruption of violence. Research that analyses the practices of these novel institutions is desirable. As Archibald (2005) reported, the requirement set by another INGO to establish “peace committees” omitted the participation of village and clan chiefs. Communities – or rather their leaders – complied with the conditionalities of the INGO in the hope of eventual benefits, in a manner paralleling the implementation of so-called “hardware projects” (infrastructure projects), which invariably require the constitution of committees to mobilize the community’s contribution to the structure or technology provided and to warrant their sustainable management. Ignoring the new committees, the communities continued to resolve local conflicts in their own way, invariably with the involvement of chiefs, either individually or as members of the councils of elders. Archibald observed that “the various ‘peace

of “youth”, representatives of which are routinely invited by the NGOs, may in fact impede open communication considered so crucial for the success of these interventions. Reportedly, at one workshop conducted in Gbarnga, Bong County, in 2006, a major issue was that members of various tribal affiliations expressed remorse and apologized for their violent transgressions and social discrimination but the Mandingos did not return those expressions. One participant voiced this view: “We feel we have been betrayed by the Mandingos. We exposed ourselves by admitting the wrong we had done and expressing remorse. They did not. This means they are not open to us. Also they can use our confession as a weapon against us” (quoted in Lennon 2006). It turned out that the Mandingo were willing to admit many crimes committed by their people, but not in public and not in the presence of individuals considered juniors. The Mandingos present were elders and tribal leaders, whereas many of the participants of different ethnic (Kpelle) affiliation had the social status of “youth”. To the Mandingo, confession would have been possible exclusively in the presence of elders of the same or superior rank. In this context, the confession of “truth” was inhibited because of the status issue²⁴ rather than because of the virtues of social-forgetting, a reason so often put forward in debates around truth and reconciliation commissions (for example, cf. Shaw 2005).

Further problems arise from the combined application of standard social and religious categories by NGOs intending to ensure what is perceived to be fair representation in workshops. Generally, the ethnic Mandingo are ascribed a Muslim identity; as a result, workshop participants are both recruited and grouped for structured communication events according to religious affiliation. The category of “youth”, as a cross-cutting group marker of age or social status, is included as a marginalized group in the list of “stakeholders” to be represented in peace-building events. At a reconciliation event hosted by the Interreligious Council in Lofa County, as reported by Bedert (2007), not only did (albeit a small minority of) Christian Mandingos worry about the identity they were to adopt in that workshop; but the category of “youths” also overlapped with the other participating groups of “Muslims” and “Christians”, in addition to the “Traditional Beliefs” (typically represented by *Sande* and *Poro* elders), which constitute the standard

committees’, as parallel, imposed structures lack legitimacy, and usually fall into disuse when the INGO’s presence ends” (Archibald 2005).

24 The same kind of social constraint has been observed in the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRC) in Sierra Leone and Liberia, where elders were reluctant to “confess” in the presence of youth (personal communication with a Sierra Leonean member of the Liberian TRC, Monrovia, 14 April 2007).

categories of participants in reconciliation workshops in Liberia.²⁵ This seems to have created some confusion over individual identities: Does one perform as a Christian, a Muslim or as a youth? Workshop situations may be complicated even more by the fact that *Poro* members may also be Christians. Also, Muslim women may be members of the *Sande* society²⁶ whereas Muslim males may not enter the *Poro*.

Operating in the field is challenging to the NGOs and INGOs in various ways. Frequently, local NGOs have to adapt to their donors' objectives and strategies, including using imported blueprint approaches and supply-oriented rather than demand-oriented activities and structures. Intervention models in use may be culturally inadequate (Neubert 2004: 67). Marginalized civil society groups as well as traditional authorities (themselves often members of the predatory elites that rebellious youth combatants wanted to oust when they took to fighting) are to be included in the same workshops. According to various reports, some INGOs have been struggling with problems of local access and acceptance; they were "confronted by major challenges related primarily to the dilemmas and risks involved in building relationships with local political actors and organizations" (Atkinson and Mulbah 2000: 7).²⁷ Unintended consequences may emerge from a lack of resources such as time, staff and sufficient expertise in the actual implementation of projects – institutional constraints which are notoriously common in multiple development contexts. Due to deficits in careful preparation and supervision – which, it should be noted, are not always due to a lack of will or knowledge on the part of the NGO workers – NGOs may miss inviting important elders or fail to insist on the inclusion of legitimate representatives in their absence. These authorities may boycott the decisions that were painstakingly reached by the actual participants during long sessions. Also, as reported, reconciliatory NGOs may unintentionally fuel conflict if their intervention is only superficial and/or short term. Facilitating the voicing of grievances on all sides in forums set up by workshops may take days, and

25 See also structured events of the TRC or the Interreligious Council.

26 I discovered this ethnographic detail in the course of my interviews of Mandingo women in Bong County. It seems to have escaped the attention of all scholars who have so far published about the Liberian secret societies. The social implications would certainly deserve further research.

27 As elsewhere (cf. Neubert 2004: 64-67), Liberian NGOs also seem to suffer from a lack of coordination and from rivalry inside the NGO community. Few would disagree with Sawyer's observation that there has been a striking lack of coherence: "[P]eace-building activities are undertaken in an eclectic and compartmentalized manner as donor support becomes available and external expertise directs" (Sawyer 2005: 138).

there may be a lack of time or staff to follow up in order to facilitate the actual reconciliation process that should ensue.

It is worth noting that workshop facilitators, who are sometimes also the leaders of their NGO, may be in a socially ambiguous situation. Apart from the aspect of income, social prestige and the concomitant requirement of compliance with their donor, they may have a strong personal commitment to the improvement of their society. Often their own lives were shaken by events of the war; their training in participatory methods seems to have been a significant marker in their biographies and to have provided them a new way of contextualizing their own experiences.²⁸ During training, an unusual opportunity of critical reflection on one's own life and a new bird's eye view on human relations is facilitated. Therefore, on the one hand, facilitators seem to have – to some extent – internalized the assumption of the independent individual in the Western sense, which the workshop model implies, namely that individual decisions are taken on the basis of information, which is freely shared in the workshop process (cf. also Smith 2003). On the other hand, as experts of their own social environments, they understand the social limitations of the model. Depending on the context, facilitators may play out one or another aspect of their socialization.

While their NGOs depend on international organizations for their activities, in practice unsuitable demands from the donor community may be circumvented in creative ways. For example, the “over-inclusive” approach may be shrewdly adapted to local realities, where status is a crucial constraint to the sharing of information that is perceived as either sensitive or exclusive. After having observed a team of facilitators arranging working groups according to status in a workshop on good governance (Palala, Bong County), I asked them about this obvious departure from the credo of participatory methods. They explained that there were communication barriers between social elders and juniors and that they wanted the working groups to discuss the critical subjects in as open a manner as possible, at least internally.²⁹

28 For example, one facilitator related that he ceased his membership in the *Poro* society and told of the complications and rifts that his decision caused in his family. Female facilitators seem to be particularly adamant when it comes to defending their decision not to have their daughters initiated into the *Sande*.

29 When studying the flipcharts of a workshop session on “Women in Leadership” that I had not been able to attend, I noticed that one facilitator had developed a training module called “dealing with secrets” – apparently a curious concession to local concerns in a society that has historically institutionalized the importance of secrecy.

However, where facilitators insist on participation and transparency, workshops may have unintended repercussions. Participants are encouraged to vent their experiences, feelings and views. Depending on the situation and the skills and intentions of the facilitators, participants may be “seduced” into sharing information that is usually retained or kept secret, or into venturing an open critique of the social order. Workshops aiming to effect “good governance”, “youth leadership” and “gender-mainstreaming” may explicitly call the traditional legitimacy of local authorities and elders, i.e. the prerogatives of males, into question. In plenary discussions, if low-status participants remain shy in the presence of seniors, committed facilitators (without any stakes in the local power arena) may take on the role of challenging these authorities almost to the point of public shaming. As outsiders they can speak out on sensitive topics on which insiders have to keep silent, thus enticing participants to follow their arguments. Explicit questioning of traditional authorities by persons of lower status, however, seems to harbour a risk of ensuing revenge. As one participant whispered to me: “You see, they may say it here, but [when] they go home they [are] afraid” (workshop participant, April 2006, Palala). The mobilization of militant action by gender workshops has even entailed violent transgressions on women by husbands or male gangs in Lofa and Bong Counties; there, in public and in private, women had voiced energetic demands in “after-workshop” situations. Men feeling threatened by gender-awareness trainings have reportedly prevented their wives from participating. While there is a lot of public feminist discourse in Liberia’s urban centres and in the media (“We women can do anything men can do”, “Our eyes are now open, men and women are equal”, etc.) and many are deeply sympathetic to the president’s affirmative action (cf. Fuest 2008b, 2009), women have also expressed reservations about some of the messages conveyed in gender workshops: “If I ask my husband to do housework – three times and I will receive a beating!” (workshop participant, Gbarnga, August 2005). Concerning reconciliation workshops, NGO activists themselves have opined that merely speaking in public about things that were, according to a fragile and implicit social consensus, previously covered up might trigger inimical emotions.

As a rule, workshop sessions are highly interactive and lively. It has been beyond the scope of my fieldwork to assess the impact of the personal social experience of participatory methods – knowledge is shared openly, and every participant, irrespective of his/her level of education, is treated in a respectful way, and authorities are challenged assertively – on the lives of various subgroups of participants. I suggest that workshops constitute a social space, a peculiar setting where the trainer as “other” looks into one’s life and helps to define the “self” in a reflexive way and to discover the

structure behind everyday action. People are made to think about the meaning of social change in their own context (for example, participants are asked to think of examples of both good and bad leadership in their own community starting from their own family). Depending on the topical emphasis of the workshop, facilitators have described this process as a “healing mechanism”. Facilitators may raise confidence and hopes for social and political improvements among participants who are intent on curbing the power of (perceived) suppressors and abusers of power. Indeed, on several occasions I have observed how the spirit of most participants rose in the course of the sessions. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the experience of participatory methods may be more striking than the actual content of the training in a hierarchical society like the one in western Liberia: “The *way* it is *done* has done a lot of good” (former participant of a reconciliation workshop, Kakata).

Among educated individuals, workshops are certainly well-accepted events. An emphatic appeal to me (I was mistaken for a donor representative) by the leader of a market women’s association reveals subversive interests: “Workshops are good thing. We need more! You people have to come and lecture all of them [male authorities]!” (Gbarnga, April 2006). By contrast, elders’ comments may be less enthusiastic: “The workshop was fine, but it will not change human being!” (town chief, Zowienta). However, further research is needed to understand when, where and how workshops are contested and authorities turn against capacity-building or civil-education projects that are seen to be insufficiently tailored to local needs or that challenge local power structures.

Beneficiaries of Intervention: Traditional Authorities as Blocks in Peace-Building

People continue to rely on the resilient informal structures and coping mechanisms which determined politics and facilitated survival and conflict resolution both before and during the war. Ignoring these institutions is done at the peril of the chances for lasting peace. Some of them – even when based on divisive categories such as ethnicity, clan, or religion – could be important building blocks for a peaceful post-conflict order (Andersen 2006: 3).

This assessment by a foreign consultant who worked in Liberia indicates a common assumption in the donor community, as outlined above. It is also an instance of the terminology of craftsmanship so common in the rhetoric of policymakers, which is rife with metaphors such as “reconstruction” and

“building” in relation to social entities – it is highly suggestive of “do-ability”: By implication, policymakers and “designers” of institutions are still assumed to be capable of effective social engineering, i.e. being in control of the “material”, the resources that are to be utilized in the service of desired change. The political dimensions

are obscured by the prevailing focus on partnerships, good governance, and civil society. [...] Yet, simultaneously, and despite the political aspects of “reorienting relationships”, the tasks are posed as technical ones, amenable to the skills and capabilities of the leading international development institutions (Bornstein and Munro 2003: 225).

This technical attitude is also reflected in practitioners’ acronymic terminology. For example, the concept “Traditional Forms of Reconciliation” is apparently standardized by the acronym “TFR” in the donor community (cf., for example, Duworko and UNDP 2005). The term “Traditional Justice Mechanisms” (TJMs) is used in a similarly technical manner (cf. IDEA 2007).

The legitimacy of some of the “important building blocks” in question and of their representatives is fiercely contested by large sections of Liberian society. Whereas before the civil conflict they had been questioned only by a minority of Christian missionaries (since the 1970s), Liberians in the centre and northwest of the country seem to have become divided over the role of the secret societies in recent years. In many parts of that region, initiation into the societies was disrupted by the war, and the *Poro* and *Sande* have been dormant or are defunct in many rural communities. Also, a lack of trust in the virtues of *zoes* has been reported where these are perceived to have been without the power to protect their communities.³⁰ Many urban youths, in particular those attending schools, are no longer interested in becoming initiated into the *Poro* and *Sande* and would refuse to be forced. Urban parents are generally less inclined than before the war to send their children to the initiation camps (so-called “bush schools”). International agencies and some Liberian NGO activists are critical of the *Sande* society on account of their practice of clitoridectomy, which is the central ritual of female initiation.

However, the sodalities’ apparent loss of function, legitimacy and power – as reflected in the narratives of urban residents and some human rights activists – have been counteracted by a variety of actors interested in their instrumentalization and/or revitalization. A revival or re-legitimization

30 Findings presented by J. Smith-Höhn at the Conference of the Liberian Studies Association in Bloomington, Indiana, March 2007, suggest that the *Poro* is perceived by most urban Liberians as a security risk rather than an asset.

of the secret societies by what may be termed, from a human rights point of view, an “unholy alliance” can be observed: The efforts of internal actors, i.e. politicians seeking presidential office, the Liberian government, as well as local elders, are compounded by projects of international organizations.

One opinion seems to be shared by the national media, the donor community and many Liberians, who seem to agree on the essential problems of Liberian society today: increasing prostitution, crime and domestic violence; social deviance of former fighters; and the lack of regulatory institutions. These problem areas are discursively related by rural elders to a perceived lack of respect on the part of the youth, their lack of moral values and their refusal to support and labour for their elders as a result of the war. According to them (and to *zoes* returning from exile), the weakening of the *Sande* and *Poro* societies has resulted in 1) a loss of traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution, 2) socialization into social and practical skills, and 3) ritual reintegration of ex-combatants.³¹ Therefore, many older members of western Liberia’s rural society seem to be ready to support the re-empowerment of secret societies and their leaders, which is manifest in efforts to revive the “bush schools”. One may conclude, as several authors have (cf. also Sawyer 2005; Archibald and Mulbah 2005), that secret societies could be vital in building and sustaining peace, by “restoring community discipline, and in the ritual reintegration of ex-combatants” (Richards et al. 2005: 65).

Indeed, these perceptions seem to be supported by ethnographic evidence from the past and present. Westermann (1921: 246) reported that young Kpelle men who had committed crimes could flee to bush schools in session and thus be ritually cleansed. Staying in that spiritually loaded place made them innocent, as the person that entered died symbolically and was reborn at his coming out.³² The *Poro*’s reputation as a peace-building organization has been enhanced by reports such as that by Sawyer et al. (2000). In locations where the *Poro* continued to function, it has also been ascribed authoritative powers in building peace. As reported, it was vital to the reduction of violence and to the settlement of interethnic disputes. For example, careful co-optation of armed leaders could successfully constrain their actions and serve the protection of local people (Sawyer 2005: 30-31,

31 However, discourses of “destroyed communities” and “collapsed institutions” may have been maintained and fostered by local NGOs in order to fuel the inclination of international donors to channel funds to them.

32 See also Bellman: “When the boys enter into the *Poro* fence, they carry their innocence as well as the evils the community wants to be rid of. [...] Blessings are given that contain a kind of curse. The presenter prays that the initiates will catch illnesses and misfortunes to take into the bush with them. There, by undergoing metaphorical death, the boys eliminate evils from the community” (Bellman 1984: 111-12).

60-64). The *Poro* seems to also have been active in organizing collective labour in the reconstruction of communities, sometimes in response to demands for community contributions to development projects. As reported, in some Lofa communities the public appearance of the “devil” (a *Poro* mask) enforced a youth-labour contribution (Atkinson and Mulbah 2000: 9). In the course of the war, the *Poro* provided mystical protection and “imaginary weapons” to enhance military effectiveness of fighters (Ellis 2001).³³ With this reputation, the *Poro* is reported to claim a crucial – albeit backstage – role in the process of the National Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) by invoking its power of “destroying the charms” that are still working to render ex-fighters gun-proof. As a senior *zoe* explained, elders need to be talked to in all districts to participate in the destruction of those “charms”, the rationale being that the charms are keeping “these boys” in a fighting mood: “No charms, no ready to fight.”³⁴

I do not want to deny the possibility of various regulatory and conciliatory functions of the *Poro* (and *Sande*, for that matter) that may help to settle conflicts, to regulate cooperative community work, and to reintegrate the traumatized and marginalized, in particular ex-combatants. Some of the historical functions ascribed to the *Poro* are the (trans-ethnic) organization of war and trade; harmonizing lineage rivalries; constituting a cross-cutting institution which balanced secular leadership, social control and jurisdiction; and the creation of social conformity and institutional security. But I want to draw attention to a dilemma that has been addressed by Merry (2006), *inter alia*, in regard to local activism and human rights: In many cases, traditional authorities harbour ambitions to maintain or to revive hierarchical systems of dominance that may spur human rights violations such as domestic slavery or severe physical mutilations as part of initiation rituals. But some NGOs seem to be – or have been – naively idealistic and blissfully unaware of the possible harmful implications of their work. In fact, there are some critical aspects of the inclusion of Liberian “traditional leaders” in peace-building projects that should be considered.

As mentioned above, historically the secret societies were crucial institutions for enabling elders and local elites to accumulate resources and concentrate power. During extensive periods of compulsory initiation, including circumcision of both girls and boys, the *zoes* could extort considerable amounts of fees and labour services from senior relatives of the initiates

33 The *Poro* is believed to be in control of “imaginary weapons” that, historically, have been provided by ritual experts associated with the most powerful sodalities. As protective amulets and bullet-proofing medicine, they are intended to enhance the military effectiveness of those who employ them (Ellis 2001, 2006).

34 Interview with *Sande* elder, Monrovia, 12 March 2007.

and, in the case of girls, from prospective husbands. The overriding but hidden motive of many a “traditionalist’s” discourse on the value of the sodalities therefore seems to lie in their opportunity to (re-)establish a viable source of income. This commercial aspect was highlighted by the short duration of the new “bush school” sessions in some places (Bong County) in 2007; the time span of this purportedly important institution of socialization, which used to last for months and even years in the past, was reduced to just a week. The revival of these camps is contested among Liberians for various reasons. Human rights activists, urban youths and many educated people consider the institution inhumane or backward. From a different point of view, the effectiveness and disciplining function of this short-termed initiation is seriously questioned by concerned elders intent on regaining control over “the youth”. They maintain that the initiation into the *Poró* and *Sandé*, if conducted in that perfunctory way, will not serve the urgent purpose of re-educating the youth that has been “spoilt” by the war.

The efforts of traditional elders have been supported by various “modern” actors. The secret societies have been instrumentalized by various post-war politicians striving to consolidate their power. During election campaigns, some contestants for the presidency “courted” (bribed) *Poró* and *Sandé* leaders to direct the votes of their society’s members, in order to enhance their constituencies. Apparently playing on the peculiar tradition of previous Liberian governments, President Johnson-Sirleaf has cooperated with the *Sandé* society in particular and made promises of gender-specific benefits. Significantly, present society leaders reportedly try to embrace members of the government by inviting them to become high-ranking “members”. The Liberian government seems to be walking a tightrope in trying to balance demands for human rights with the need for political expediency. Its affirmative action to promote women’s human rights appears to be selective. While publicly demanding women’s human rights on the “frontstage”, to use Goffman’s terminology, the president has had, on the “backstage”, to support gerontocratic structures that are not only interested in curbing non-submissive youths but are also continuing with or reintroducing FGM, in order to win and consolidate political support (cf. Fuest 2009). It is striking that in contrast to other African countries, for example Sierra Leone, FGM was hardly mentioned in Liberia’s media until recent times.

According to the policies of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) and the multilateral donors, the *zoes* have been included in all important reconciliation workshops at national and county levels. Ironically, the *zoes* are taken to be the representatives of the “traditional religions”, which have to match, by common consensus, the representatives of the two major con-

flicting religions, i.e. the Muslim and Christian, communities. Along those lines, power has been granted to *zoes* in the Liberian TRC process: A “Traditional Advisory Council to the TRC” was established with support from the government. The MIA is encouraging the National Council of Traditional Authorities – by implication, the leaders of the secret societies – to restore order and to resume their “regulatory functions”; it is also attempting to formalize the societies’ status as quasi-NGOs and is reported to have considered putting the *zoes* on the payroll and to be centrally regulating the initiation cycles of the *Poro* and *Sande*. At the same time, the discourse of the MIA (probably under the influence of international donors) aims to reform the societies to gradually make them more liberal and more suitable for “good governance”.³⁵

The secret societies have received direct support, apart from government actors, from at least one INGO (Everyday Gandhis, based in the United States), and from the Liberia Community Infrastructure Project (LCIP), funded by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). These organizations have bought the idea that the secret societies, in particular the *Poro*, constitute a crucial factor in the reconciliation process and the re-establishment of order in Liberia’s perceived-to-be-unstable communities.³⁶ Accordingly, *zoes* have been able to construct both houses for themselves and *Poro* shelters, and they have also been able to conduct lavish public rituals of “cleansing” and reconciliation.³⁷ On the internet we can read about the work and misunderstandings of Everyday Gandhis:

Initial response to our efforts has far exceeded our wildest hopes: [...] communities are organizing traditional healing, cleansing and reconciliation ceremonies, restoring elders and *zos* (*indigenous healers*) [author’s emphasis] to their rightful place in the community, and organizing grassroots teams to monitor media coverage, select and elect peace-building candidates and organize reconciliation at every level.

Critical observers have suggested that the public ritual, which was attended by government and UN representatives, may well have been a creative re-

35 Interview MIA, Monrovia, March 2007.

36 These projects have been described by Archibald (2005) and Bawn (2006) for LCIP and by Cynthia Travis for Everyday Gandhis, online: <<http://www.everydaygandhis.com/oj-2.html>> (15 August 2007).

37 The explicit project purposes of the Liberia Community Infrastructure Project (LCIP) are “traditional healing and cleansing of ex-combatants and war-affected persons” and “cleansing the land of atrocities such as rape, torture[,] etc.” (unpublished Grant Form of LCIP, 24 May 2005).

sponse to the donor community's "discovery" of traditional institutions.³⁸ Reportedly, shrewd local authorities have led the Monrovia-based organizations on just to gain access to resources – after all, cows and goats for the sacrifices, a lot of entertainment and an increase in reputation by media coverage were provided almost for free. Critical local observers have voiced the opinion that the rituals were not conducted in any proper "traditional" sense (the context and the meaning of sacrifices and vows during mutual meals were ignored) and therefore did in fact not oblige the participating parties to keep their promises of reconciliation. And, as a consultant has warned, "there are obvious dangers that resources channelled into this process would unwittingly support the reinforcement of a pre-war status quo" (Archibald 2005: 21).

By virtue of what Klute and von Trotha (2004) have called the "exotic fallacy", development actors in Liberia have built on the conflict-resolution competence of "traditional authorities" and resumed responsibility for invigorating them. Donor agencies elsewhere have also promoted traditional institutions and interfered in the local dynamics of power constellations. Accepting "at face value the traditionalising rhetoric and its legitimisations", they have failed to see "the connection between peace-promoting measures and the processes of local power-building" (Klute and von Trotha 2004: 111; for a similar argument cf. Donais 2009).

Certainly the possibility of external agencies enabling the creation of a lasting peace when they come in to mediate on behalf of conflicting parties should not be denied. But the local meanings (and processes of appropriation) of public rituals – whether traditions recently invented or not – that NGOs help to facilitate to promote reconciliation require further investigation to be fully understood. It is possible that NGOs that focus on the *Poro* rather than the *Sande* may unknowingly support an ongoing backlash at evolving contestations of male prerogatives emerging from changes in gender identities as a result of both the war and of external intervention (Fuest 2008b, 2009). The ceremonies funded by the LCIP in Lofa County were in part conducted in spiritual sites that excluded women.

Using those "building blocks" thus points to the importance of "understanding how legitimacy can be obtained, sustained, and squandered within particular post-conflict societies" (Donais 2009: 20) and of appreciating the

38 That event in Lofa is reminiscent of the reconciliation festivals and meetings involving the Tuareg in Mali, where the number of such events, constructed as "local traditions", increased after external agencies started supporting them in the mid-1990s. As the flow of aid resources receded, a new tradition of reconciliatory meetings was invented. At the same time, local chiefs exploited these events to consolidate or re-establish their power as mediators (Klute 2004: 301-306).

local contexts of conflict of the societies in which peace-builders operate. In short, there are risks in just emphasizing traditional institutions while ignoring the social context.

Conclusion

In Liberia, the pitfalls in the work of both local and international NGOs seem to be an outcome of a combination of the liberal peace approach involving social (re-)engineering and blueprint procedures of representation and participation – “the tyranny of method” (Cooke and Kothari 2001: 7-8) – and of reductionist conceptions of local socio-political complexities inherent in the approach of communitarian ownership. This combination, it seems, has been transferred from “normal” contexts of development aid to situations of peace-building in post-war countries. Much of the work of NGOs seems to be subject to paradoxical demands and approaches; operating under the usual resource constraints of all project work, they are caught halfway between a “top-down”, liberal peace approach and a (naive) “bottom-up” approach of local ownership. The findings presented illustrate that patterns of international intervention, even if “translated” to some extent by local NGO actors into social realities, may emphasize or even trigger conflict at the local level, thwarting the intentions of their official missions. As Donais has stated,

attempting to move beyond liberal understandings of ownership towards an acknowledgement of the importance of local agency in peace-building processes requires thinking through not only the meanings of *ownership* but also the characteristics of *the locals*. Despite the recent focus within peace-building discourse on the broader question of local ownership, analysis of the specific identity of the relevant locals remains surprisingly thin (Donais 2009: 11).

NGO workshops furnish various resources that are appropriated and used in multiple ways. Depending on the context, the selection of workshop participants, which is informed by standard models of inclusive procedures, may be either too exclusive or too inclusive in regard to the objective of the respective event, as contextual meanings of ethnic, gender or generational identities are ignored. NGOs impose categories of workshop participants that include perceived subordinate groups in peace-building events but overlook certain minorities. Thus, standardized procedures of recruitment of workshop participants, in combination with power constellations at the level of communities, result in the exclusion from workshop benefits of an important ethnic minority, the Mandingo – an outcome that may be coun-

terproductive to the project of reconciling ethnic conflict parties. These standardized procedures also result in the inclusion of youths in reconciliation events where the discussion of critical topics should be reserved for elders in order that those topics be effectively processed in that particular cultural context.

Within the framework of the local-ownership approach, traditional institutions are supported by some international NGOs – and by the Liberian government, for that matter. The systematic inclusion in peace-building events and even direct support of “traditional authorities”, in particular leaders of the gendered secret societies *Poro* and *Sande*, as perceived “building blocks” in local processes of reconciliation and reintegration, contributes to the reinvigoration of traditional institutions, the legitimacy of which has been widely contested in Liberian society in recent years. The leaders of the secret societies are riding on the ticket of the international ideology that regards traditional institutions as important factors in processes of reconciliation and reintegration. In this way, secret society leaders may be regaining power at a faster rate than they would otherwise have done. This kind of intervention raises questions not only pertaining to human rights – in particular to initiation rituals involving female genital mutilation – but also to taking sides in current debates of (re-emerging) gerontocratic leadership. Agencies with a narrow, functionalist perception of the virtues of traditional rulers may unwittingly be supporting the reconstitution of an oppressive system. Further research is needed to explore whether the allocation of project resources to traditional leaders results in thwarting efforts of (previously) subordinate youth and women to assert emerging or novel identities as decision-takers and thus triggers or emphasizes new types of conflicts. New economic opportunities that opened up to young people and women in the course of the war and its aftermath have given rise to claims for power that are in turn fuelled by international rights discourses and by other flows of resources from the fountain of post-war participatory interventions. Further attention should also be drawn to the question of how international and national discourses of transparency are translated into local power arenas, particularly where comprehensive secret cults and strong mechanisms of socio-political exclusion have been deeply rooted in tradition.

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Umstrittene Inklusion: Fallstricke bei *peace-building*-Aktivitäten von NRO in Liberia

Zusammenfassung: Nichtregierungsorganisationen (NRO) wird in Nachkriegsphasen hohe Kompetenz in Bezug auf *peace-building*-Prozesse zugesprochen, denn sie repräsentieren die *civil society* und stellen gleichzeitig Akteure, die an der Basis zum Wiederaufbau und zur gesellschaftlichen Transformation beitragen können. Auch in Liberia schließen *peace-building*-Kon-

zepte an erster Stelle international erarbeitete Zielvorgaben zur Repräsentanz ein und sehen erstens eine Beteiligung von Gruppen mit niedrigem sozialen Status vor und zweitens die Unterstützung traditioneller Institutionen, die als soziales Kapital im Aussöhnungsprozess angesehen werden. Die Autorin untersucht am Beispiel Liberia, inwieweit NRO-*workshops* – die beliebteste Form der partizipativen Intervention – in Konfliktzonen von lokalen Akteuren interpretiert und für eigene Ziele genutzt werden; sie weist auf irrtümliche Annahmen und unbeabsichtigte Konsequenzen der praktischen Anwendung inklusiver Verfahren und stellt die Unterstützung in Frage, die Oberhäuptern geschlechtsspezifischer Geheimgesellschaften zuteil wird.

Schlagwörter: Liberia, *Peace-Building*, Nichtregierungsorganisation, Konfliktpartei/Konfliktbeteiligte, Soziale Partizipation, Entwicklungspolitische Strategie, Lokalpolitik, Tradition, Geheimbund