

Book review: Religion, Tradition, and Restorative Justice in Sierra Leone (2017), by Lyn S. Graybill

Dr Rosalind Coffey says Graybill's book is a fascinating reminder of the dangers which can stem from regarding justice as immutable.

Lyn S. Graybill's *Religion, Tradition, and Restorative Justice in Sierra Leone* asks how Sierra Leoneans put the pieces of shattered lives and relationships back together in the aftermath of the country's brutal and protracted civil war. It does so in the context of wider academic debates on how best to achieve post-war transitional justice.

Graybill argues that in marked contrast to 'the West', 'restorative' approaches to justice are preferable to 'retributive' ones in Sierra Leone and, more broadly, she indicates, in Africa. Retributive approaches emphasise punishment and prosecutions, and target perpetrators, the book explains, whereas restorative approaches turn on sentiments such as reconciliation, forgiveness and healing, with reference to both perpetrators and victims. To provide some context for this, Graybill cites the comments of former Chairman of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, on 'ubuntu'.

"*Ubuntu* says I am human only because you are human. If I undermine your humanity, I dehumanize myself. You must do what you can to maintain this great harmony, which is perpetually undermined by resentment, anger, desire for vengeance." 'In African traditional thought', Graybill explains, 'the emphasis is on *restoring* evildoers to the community rather than on *punishing* them.' Years ago, Tutu's words piqued Graybill's interest. Her book stands as an excellent investigation – and, as it happens, corroboration – of their validity.



RELIGION, TRADITION,
AND RESTORATIVE JUSTICE
IN SIERRA LEONE

LYN S. GRAYBILL

Sierra Leone is an interesting case, the author argues, because of the concurrent presence of two very different bodies geared towards achieving justice in the aftermath of the conflict: the Special Court (a war crimes court) and a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

Sierra Leone was the first post-conflict country to run two such institutions in parallel. Graybill found that among the populace the TRC resonated more positively than the Special Court. The evidence, which she accumulated from oral interviews and polling data, suggests that this was due to the character and reach of Sierra Leonean religious and 'traditional' values, resources, and approaches to conflict resolution, which aligned more with TRC ideals. That religious leaders – both Muslim and Christian – through the medium of the Inter-Religious Council (IRC) were particularly effective initially in helping to broker the peace, by emphasising the value of forgiveness, for instance, empathy, compassion, and the possibility of redemption supports this because it points to the centrality of religious identity in Sierra Leone. Fambul Tok (meaning 'family talk'), a programme which drew on Sierra Leone's tradition of discussing and resolving issues within the family circle – here in the form of truth-telling bonfires and traditional cleansing ceremonies (reconciliation ceremonies) at which perpetrators apologised to victims face-to-face – is Graybill's main example of an effective initiative which centred on 'tradition'.

One of the central implications of her research, the author suggests, concerns the potentially problematic nature of importing or imposing alien justice initiatives. The Special Court, she explains, was almost entirely a foreign imposition the key tenets of which failed to resonate in Sierra Leone.

Graybill's book is a fascinating reminder of the dangers which can stem from regarding justice as immutable, universal and/or something which can always be strictly codified. Rather, the argument supports the view that justice needs sometimes to be 'worked out' in a more flexible manner and can possess valuable local meanings. Graybill's source material includes very interesting accounts on the importance of acknowledgement in addition to the meanings of 'forgiveness', 'reconciliation', and other related concepts in the context of religion and tradition in Sierra Leone.

In the work's preface, the author comments that Tutu's emphasis on the significance of ubuntu in Africa has received some criticism for the reason that it appears unwarrantedly to emphasise African exceptionalism, and in doing so, to perpetuate unhelpful stereotypes about the continent's inherent 'difference' from everywhere else. Such an argument, too, it might be argued, incorrectly essentialises the opinions of a huge number of people living on a vast continent – reducing, in effect, a multiplicity of experiences to just one which is considered somehow uniquely 'African'. Given that they support Tutu's emphasis, Graybill's arguments might be faulted on the same basis.



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These criticisms seem to me to be misplaced, to a degree. There is, I think, much to be said for concentrating on the African context (rather than its people – i.e. inherent African attributes) – historically – in order to think about the meanings of justice and its pursuit there. Healing, an important theme in African history (and a word which Graybill links to restorative approaches), has long informed efforts to deal with social, economic and political change, including concerning conflict and violence, such as in relation to the Atlantic slave trade and, more recently, European colonial rule. Historians have, in turn, linked the theme of healing to other themes in African history such as demography and the environment. The book's argument seems very much in line with these existing emphases and it might draw on them. Additionally, they might inform the book's claims regarding causation – because it strikes me that it is not 'tradition' (ideals, values, practices, etc.) itself which is the guiding factor behind, in this case a 'restorative' inclination, as the book suggests; rather, a 'restorative' inclination/'tradition' has emerged in the context of a specific set of needs.

These can and do evolve. Indeed, where the criticisms of Tutu's words, and by implication also of Graybill's emphasis, are most helpful is in reminding us that cultural resources are rarely static and/or neatly bound. Two of the 'world religions' – Christianity and Islam – spread so successfully in Africa partly due to the dialogue they struck up with more established indigenous belief systems, with which they became intertwined to some degree, resulting in 'syncretic' forms. Neither Christianity nor Islam can be considered wholly fixed or immutable ideologies or resources impervious to change or interpretation in the way in which the book's structure, on some level, together with its references to the written religious texts, appears to indicate. So too, with 'tradition'. The beliefs and practices to which the term refers are, in Africa, as elsewhere in the world, persistently evolving and interacting with contemporary events. The syncretic nature of Christianity and Islam in Africa the book does mention briefly – but I think the author should elaborate.

It has implications for the main argument. 'Religion' and 'tradition' seem to be key resources in coping with the cruelties which were meted out during the war, and they have proved their worth through their longevity. But – as 'resources' – they are and will remain pervious; and, as events such as Africa's adoption of the 'world religions' itself bears witness, societies will likely incorporate further resources in response to new circumstances, should they fulfil a need.

Indeed, what is not emphasised in the book's main argument – but which is also one of its major running themes – concerns the implications of the details the author has unearthed about the practical limitations of the Special Court and the TRC in the country following the war. Importantly, the populace viewed aspects of *both* institutions positively. Critically, however, the implementation of the initiatives associated with the two institutions seems to have been poor – especially so in the case of the Court. Might the latter have been more effective and well-received, then, under different circumstances?

In Sierra Leone, a perceived need appears to have existed for an institution with a retributive dispensation and which reached beyond the 'local' level – to leaders in the country, and beyond. The presence of supermodel Naomi Campbell and US actress Mia Farrow at the much-publicised trial of Charles Taylor, the former Liberian president, who had supported the rebels and who came before the Special Court in 2012, is just one striking reminder of the scope of the story.

In sum, the book might consider more the dynamic nature of cultural and other resources, including 'religion' and 'tradition', in the context of evolving needs.

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The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.