How Local Rituals Support Social Healing in Conflict-Affected Societies

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About the Report:

This report explores how rituals have been used to support social healing in conflict-affected societies. It offers five case studies to illustrate the ways rituals have encouraged inter-group trust, restorative justice, co-narratives, healing, (re)integration, and social reconciliation. This report is based on research funding and support from USIP and The Mershon Center for International Security Studies at The Ohio State University.

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Summary

When wars and conflicts end, an official agreement is often signed by the leaders of relevant parties, often stipulating the conditions for the cessation of violence, security, and judicial arrangements. Conflict-affected landscapes are complex, however, and these top-down, timebound, narrowly focused initiatives have often been unsuccessful in achieving widespread social transformation. They rarely address the social impact of violence or provide a framework for social reconciliation.

Because violence embeds itself into the memories, narratives, and relationships of all involved, its enduring legacy is not amenable to healing or transformation solely through legal processes; more holistic approaches are required. One mechanism that encourages social transformation is rituals. Rituals are part of every culture, and they are practiced throughout the world. These symbolic experiences of mutually focused emotion and attention convey powerful messages through emotions, senses, and acts of speech. They may follow deeply rooted traditions, but they are also adaptive and spontaneous.

Through rituals, a unique space can be created apart from everyday social rules and order. They provide opportunities for people to interact physically, emotionally, and spiritually with each other, which may better enable those who participate to catalyze change and experience their shared humanity. In the wake of collective or extreme violence, rituals can even introduce a sense of belonging, helping people find meaning and develop new identities, moving from victim to survivor, soldier to civilian, outcast to community member. The communal sharing of ritual experiences can serve to reinforce these transitions in ways that have deep social and spiritual meanings.

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Forward[1]

Lisa Schirch

Ritual is a part of every culture. People in every region of the world and throughout time have created rituals to mark transitions and to foster meaningful relationships. Humans use ritual to exchange powerful messages via symbols, emotions, senses, and speech acts. In ritual, there is a preference for nonverbal communication using bodies, senses, and emotions rather than words. A unique space can be created apart from everyday social rules and order. Rituals create, reaffirm, or transform people's worldviews, identities, and relationships. Ritual marks and assists the process of personal and relational transformation.

Introduction[2]

Donna Pankhurst

When wars and conflicts end, an official agreement is often signed by the leaders of relevant parties, which stipulates the conditions agreed upon regarding security and judicial arrangements; in effect determining top-down processes framed by political agendas. These are also still commonly determined by male-dominated political and military elites, along with other international or national actors. Such formal and institutional approaches to peacemaking are also often focused on a capital city or urban center and founded on little more than a hope that peace will trickle down to the rest of the population.

Conflict-affected landscapes are complex, however, and such top-down, timebound, narrowly focused initiatives have often been unsuccessful in achieving widespread social transformation. They rarely capture the nuances, or address the histories, of violence for people who live on specific streets, in particular neighborhoods, communities, or the remote rural places where conflict has undone the very meaning of their lives. They rarely focus on trauma recovery or provide the types of mental health / psychosocial support that are necessary for the deep social transformation away from violence and towards peace. By contrast, local people, by definition, are far more attuned, sensitive, and aware of culturally rooted practices that might be leveraged to bring people back into positive relationships with each other. These become even more significant in the implementation of Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration programs which aim to return former combatants to their communities with a commitment to resist the use of violence.

In recognition of the importance of working with local people, some international bodies have developed innovative approaches which aim to elevate the roles of organised civil society (e.g. NGOs, traditional/spiritual leaders, artists, etc.) in building and sustaining peace in fractured and fragile communities, although many challenges persist in this type of co-operation. One of the complications for outsiders is that wars change social relationships and local structures of power. What once might have been an effective local system of spiritual or secular leadership may have been profoundly corrupted or reinvented over the course of a long conflict. For international organizations, the ethics of deciding who are the most effective or legitimate partners is riddled with challenging dilemmas. Yet there is a body of research and experience that reinforces the recognition that local and Indigenous communities and cultural practices can make an important contribution to securing peace both independently but also in partnership with outsiders.

Peacebuilding scholars and practitioners recognize the way violence embeds itself into the psyches, memories, meanings, and relationships of all involved, and they know that the enduring impacts of violence, such as trauma and psycho-social harm, are not amenable to healing or transformation solely through legal and formal processes. Cold rationality cannot touch the most sacred parts of conflict.[3] Instead, these efforts will require alternative and creative approaches; 'non-rational' processes that embrace paradox and pain, and that give voice to complicated and contradictory thoughts and feelings. Ritual practices are increasingly seen as being able to play a key part in such transformations. They may be old and established; remembered and revised; or newly invented. Given the great variety of content and meanings of ritual, agreeing on universal definitions

is challenging, and the word ritual in English does not even easily translate into some languages. We find Schirch's (2005) work useful here, and particularly her broad and accessible definition and understanding of ritual, as *a symbolic act that holds significance and meaning;* and which creates liminal spaces where people in conflict can express themselves, heal themselves, and work towards reconciliation.[4] Such practices are often associated with words like 'local', 'traditional', 'customary' but it is important not to reify these as unchanging, or above politics and power relations; on the contrary they are always shaped by gender and other local power dynamics.

Rituals also exist in all societies with many different purposes and meanings beyond recovering from, and resisting, violence or supporting peaceful transformation. For example, they exist to mark births, deaths, marriages, and other key life moments and social relationships. They can reinforce social cohesion, bring people together, and support or even introduce a sense of belonging. They can also work at a general level in creating and reinforcing group identities, often energized by provoking strong emotions. Rituals are also often connected to ideas of tradition and heritage, with a sense of linking the present with the past and giving social groups a sense of history and communion with ancestors.

These qualities are often very powerful but not inevitably pro-peace, or supportive of mental/psychosocial health. Rituals can be used by people who seek to reinforce social hierarchies and give politicians legitimacy. In the process such rituals can also in effect define who are members and who are outsiders - of social, ethic or national groups. Rituals tend not to stay static over time but can continue to provide emotional communication in changing socio-political environments. As such, rituals are also deployed to great effect by people and organisations who seek to polarize communities and encourage people into violence, as seen in the many parts of the world which currently experience a rise in support for populist leaders. Some of the messages transmitted by rituals "are codified in the liturgy: They are…part of the sacred and can only exceptionally be modified to adjust to present needs."[5] Rituals express beliefs, creeds, symbols, and myths: "beliefs could exist without rituals; rituals, however, could not exist without beliefs."[6] Nevertheless, rituals not only transmit and reinforce social norms but can also shape or create them to respond to new situations.[7] They can affirm or revolutionize the existing social order.[8]

Rituals that have a strong historical connection to local cultures, even when 'remembered', rather than being completely invented, should not be assumed to be inherently virtuous or even to actively promote recovery or peace. Conflicts often have an impact on local politics and leadership roles which may undermine the power held by leaders holding 'traditional' office with good intentions but might also open the way for the reinvention of such positions that facilitate the abuse of power. Just because a ritual may have emerged from a local culture does not automatically mean that it will be to the benefit of all local people who seek peace. Sometimes for instance the (re-)integration of former combatants or refugees into a community may come at a social cost, such as for young women who may face far more restrictive social norms than those they experienced whilst serving in revolutionary forces. Such rituals may also therefore not adhere to international law and human rights, and for instance may include very harsh physical punishment, social sanctions, and public shaming. Furthermore, dealing with some war-time crimes and social transgressions through public rituals is often too challenging for survivors, especially cases of sexual and gender-based violence.

This volume specifically focuses on examples of local rituals which have been used to transcend and transform hostility after conflict and illustrates some of the ways rituals have encouraged inter-group trust, restorative justice, co-narratives, healing, (re)integration, and social reconciliation. We seek to better understand the ethics, textures, facilitation, and the possibility of transformational processes that can encourage peace in certain circumstances. We suggest that these spaces can work like a social parenthesis, or an 'oasis' – where people in conflict can experience respite from conflict's destruction. Anthropologist Victor Turner describes these contexts as "liminal spaces."[9] Liminal spaces are in-between, set-aside, or separate contexts where the rules for acting and interpreting meaning are different from the rest of life. They are "thresholds" or "places in limbo" that are symbolically separated from other social settings.

Schirch observes that 'Ideally, peacebuilding rituals provide opportunities for people to interact physically and emotionally with each other and to act out new ways of being with each other, which may better enable them to catalyze change and experience their shared humanity.'[10] As such they can help people to find meaning and develop new identities; moving from outcast, offender, transgressor, towards community member; or from victim to survivor. Crucially the communal sharing of ritual experiences (even with minority dissent) can (re-) build community cohesion and the rejection of violence by individuals. They can reinforce changed opinions

and identities from painful pasts to new relationships in ways that have deep social meaning expressed through symbolic acts. These rituals range from those focused on small groups of individuals seeking to return to their previous community, to very large groups of people who chose opposing sides in conflict to re-unite with a shared identity. In some cases, people in both communities may regard themselves as both survivors and perpetrators of violence.

We spotlight examples of post-conflict rituals that seem to have found pathways for reconnection, drawing people together, back into relationships with each other, rehumanizing, re-socializing, and strengthening community resilience. They are all examples of Indigenous rituals that have not been conceived of externally, although they have received varying degrees of outside support. They are strikingly distinct in their cultural settings and practice, as well as in their political and social ambitions and outcomes. Perhaps they are unique and not directly replicable, but they illustrate how rituals can make a dramatic difference to people's lives.

What follows are examples where rituals have been used successfully by local communities in the wake of violent conflicts. The first examines the reintegration of Indigenous former FARC combatants in a part of Colombia. Whilst reconciliation and peacebuilding in Colombia receive a lot of international attention, the processes in Indigenous communities are distinctive and much less well-known. In this case, rituals are central to the strategy used by spiritual leaders of the Nasa nation in their leading of the rehabilitation of individuals.

In East Timor, *Nahe Biti*, which means "stretching the mat," is a process and ritual for managing disputes. It is a customary practice that has provided a community level forum for settling family and community tensions since before colonialism. More recently, it has been adapted to re-build trust within and between communities after the Indonesian conflict and eventual recognition of East Timor as an independent state. National leaders recognized the importance of cultural practices and the pragmatism of customary law, and local leaders invited former community members to return, using the process of *Nahe Biti* to encourage reharmonization.

The example of the Yazidi community in Kurdistan focuses on the reintegration of women who experienced extreme stigma and outright rejection from their community after having been kidnapped, enslaved, and sexually tortured by ISIS forces, and who had in some cases given birth to children as a result. A key Yazidi religious leader adapted the community ritual of baptism to facilitate their being re-baptised as full members of the community. The use of this ritual, with key religious leadership successfully overcame the stigma which had been part of long-practiced religious and cultural beliefs and practice.

The *Bhaakal* and *Man Baadhne* rituals in Nepal were used to support child-soldiers returning home. After the 'People's War' ended, children were denied the same support that was given to adult former combatants and were also stigmatized as unworthy of the State's response. Furthermore, they were reluctant to return home as they were not at all certain they would be accepted after their participation in violence. Because communities from all ethnic groups and castes practice *Bhaakal* and *Man Baadhne*, the rituals were accessible to many in welcoming and transitioning the returning child-soldiers.

Finally, the ritual example in Northern Ireland is a service of Lament for remembrance, grieving and reflection. It is a revival of a pre-existing liturgy which notably brings together clergy and participants from both Catholic and Protestant Christian churches and communities. This public service is a forum in which sectarian identities and narratives may be transcended as those attending share in their collective loss and common humanity.

Notes

1. This is from her paper submitted as part of this project in 2023.

2. This volume builds on 2 years of collective work by the Transitioning From Violence International Consortium w/ workshops, hosted 3 public webinars, 3 learning platforms, roundtables, scholar-expert symposia; conducting 3 practitioner case studies, mapped approximately 75 rituals and considered examples from these countries**:** Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe, Palestine, Northern Ireland, Colombia, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, Spain, Yemen, India/Pakistan, South Africa, United States (BLM, Native Americans); Burundi, South Sudan, Bosnia, Afghanistan, Iraq.

3. Lisa Schirch, *Ritual and Symbol in Peacebuilding* (Bloomfield: Kumarian Press, 2005), 35-36.

4. Schirch, 17.

5. A contrary position argues "that rituals are definitely not traditional in the sense of being invariable and not subject to change. On the contrary, rituals are mobile, dynamic, and changing" (see Hoondert and Post);

   Cristabell Lòpez, "El Saakheul como parte del proceso de recuperación y fortalecimiento cultural del pueblo indígena Nasa de Tierradentro, Cauca" (BA thesis, Universidad del Cauca, 2008), 34-35.

6. Catherine Bell, "Constructing Ritual (Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice)," in *The Bloomsbury Reader in Cultural Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Sarah Bloesch and Meredith Minister (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 73.

7. Nicholas M. Hobson, Juliana Schroeder, Jane L. Risen, Dimitris Xygalatas, and Michael Inzlich, "The Psychology of Rituals: An Integrative Review and Process-Based Framework," *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, (2017): 272.

8. Schirch, 17.

9. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969), 94.

10. Schirch, 162-163.

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Reharmonization: Colombia

Rituals for the reintegration of indigenous minor soldiers

Pedro Valenzuela

Introduction

Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programs have significantly transformed since their inception in the 1980s. They have adopted broader peacebuilding objectives, transcended the original focus on ex-combatants and military aspects, included participatory methodologies in their design, and implemented differential approaches to address the needs of specific groups. This has opened the door for greater attention to the reintegration of minors, given their unabated recruitment in armed conflicts and their frequent exclusion from official DDR programs. Under the assumption that local customs contribute to effective and sustainable reintegration strategies, they have also promoted the participation of communities and the incorporation of culturally appropriate practices.

Photo: Fabiammoreno via Wikimedia Commons

Indigenous authorities of the indigenous people of Jambaló, Cauca, Colombia

Relevant aspects of local cultures include the role of rituals in transitional processes from military to civilian status. Rituals are presumed to cleanse ex-combatants from exposure to death and brutality during war, heal war-related psychosocial traumas and reduce social divisions within and between communities.[1] Although not free of criticism, NGOs and international organizations have supported this principle, and several African countries have already included rituals in DDR programs for child soldiers.[2]

This case study examines the role of rituals in the reintegration of indigenous minor ex-combatants in the context of the armed conflict in Colombia. As a case, it has received no attention in the English language, and accounts of it in Spanish are limited. It begins with a brief history of the Nasa nation and the impact of the armed conflict on Nasa society. Discussion is then given to the role of rituals in Nasa life and in the reintegration of minors because of individual and voluntary decisions to leave the ranks of armed organizations. Unlike collective demobilizations resulting from negotiations to bring the armed conflict to an end, individual demobilizations do not imply the cantonment of ex-combatants or the formal dismantling of armed structures, as the organizations to which the ex-combatants belonged remain active. Finally, a summary of key issues and findings are identified and discussed in the conclusion.

The Nasa Nation

Colombia's 1991 Constitution recognized the multiethnic and multicultural character of the country. According to the 2018 census, 1,905,617 people, or 4.4% of the population, identify as indigenous.[3] They belong to 115 nations that speak 65 languages, and the majority live in rural areas, in 840 *resguardos* concentrated in the departments of Guajira, Cauca, Nariño and Córdoba.[4] Indigenous organizations have demonstrated that 62% of the Colombian indigenous nations are at risk of physical or cultural disappearance.[5]

With 243,176 members, the Nasas are the third largest indigenous nation in the country.[6] Their economy, characterized by rudimentary technology, consists of small-scale polyculture essentially for self- consumption.[7] Most Nasas live in Cauca, a department in the southwest of the country with a varied geography: two of the three Andean Mountain ranges and some of the country's most important rivers originate there. Its landscape includes snow-capped peaks, narrow valleys, mangroves and tropical rainforests. The northern part of the department borders one of the most prosperous regions, home to the sugarcane agro-industry and a large part of the national industrial development and import-export activities.[8]

Before the arrival of the Spanish, the Nasas were a warrior people often engaged in violent confrontations with neighboring nations. In alliance with some of their former enemies, they presented armed resistance to the Spanish conquest and obtained important military victories. After Colombia's independence and the renewed

onslaught against their lands and culture, they have engaged, with two exceptions, in nonviolent resistance. Between 1916 and 1919, Nasa chief Quintín Lame staged an armed uprising that ended with his arrest, the collapse of the movement, and an offensive by local authorities aimed at eliminating the *resguardos.* Between 1985 and 1991, a Nasa self-defense organization, the Movimiento Armado Quintín Lame, operated with the aim of protecting the communities from State repression, the violence of large landowners and paramilitary groups, and the recruitment by guerrilla organizations.[9]

As a result of the dispossession of their lands by large landowners, the Church, the State, armed actors and poor settlers, the Nasas lost the most fertile lands and were often forced to pay with free labor within the haciendas the right to live and usufruct a small plot of land (*terraje*).[10] Charged with the education of the indigenous people, considered as minors or savages, the Catholic Church continued the "civilizing mission" of the educational system of the colonial era. The native culture deteriorated quickly, as their languages were forbidden, and education denied the Nasas the possibility to internalize their traditional values.[11]

Their struggle, with renewed impetus since the 1970s, has centered on the recovery of the lands of the *resguardos*, the strengthening of the *cabildos*, the refusal to pay *terraje*, the demand for the fair application of laws regarding indigenous people, the recovery of their traditions, education in their own language according to their needs, the strengthening of communal enterprises and the defense of the natural and environmental resources of their territories.[12]

The armed conflict and its effects on the Nasa nation

The Cauca department has been critically affected by the armed conflict. Its topographic characteristics and strategic location have attracted leftist guerrilla organizations, right-wing paramilitary groups, drug traffickers and the armed forces of the State. The competition for control of communities, territory, resources, illicit crops and strategic corridors has severely impacted the economic, social, political and cultural structures of indigenous communities. The north of the department is one of the areas most affected by guerrilla takeovers and attacks; it is one of the five sub-regions with the highest number of cases of forced disappearance, the region with the highest number of reports of sexual violence, and one of the territories with the highest number of landmines and confinement.[13] Additional humanitarian consequences and violations of International Law include land dispossession, massacres and selective murder.[14]

Cauca is the department with the third highest number of child recruitment. In some cases, as a result of forced recruitment or of "enchanting persuasion," the majority of members of some of the structures of the FARC operating in the territory are indigenous. Factors that have contributed to engagement with FARC include poverty, marginalization, intra-family violence, disillusionment with life as a Nasa, the attraction of uniforms and weapons, among others. Recruitment has generated significant acculturation processes. Along with displacement, it has led to the loss of knowledge, territorial ties and sense of belonging, and denied minors the possibility to be educated according to the Nasa worldview, to learn or practice the Nasa language, and to take part in rituals to be in harmony with themselves, nature and the community.[15]

The presence of legal and illegal armed groups has also had other socio-political impacts upon the Nasa. Armed actors' disregard for the traditional authorities and norms, the efforts to establish social control over the community, and the stigmatization and targeting of leaders have affected their autonomy, governance and political-organizational integrity.[16] Extensive periods of combat, bombings, land mines, forced confinement, control of mobility, displacement, and the fear of recruitment have prevented communities from tending to their crops and animals, restricted access to agricultural inputs and impacted practices like the *minga,* a tradition of collective work for the benefit of the community, in accordance with the Nasa principle of unity, solidarity and reciprocity.[17]

The conflict has also affected the Nasas' cultural cohesion. The armed actors have targeted ceremonial and sacred sites and have forbidden rituals. Military activities, displacement, confinement, and land mines have restricted the spiritual authorities' movement in the territory and prevented the celebration of rituals. Given their role in conflict resolution, collective decision-making and spiritual guidance, the murder of traditional and spiritual authorities, elders, and knowers weakens the spiritual and cultural cohesion of the group and endangers its social and organizational stability. Another critical issue has been the attacks on indigenous autonomy and their forms of justice. Armed actors replaced indigenous norms and the community system of

justice, imposed their own rules of social control, and introduced extreme forms of punishment, such as the execution of people for criminal offenses.[18]

As conflict escalated, the Nasas redoubled efforts to protect their autonomy and territory. They rejected the presence of armed groups, their interference in the life of the communities, the violence against the civilian population and the recruitment in the territory. They reclaimed the right to control and organize their social and political life, prohibited resorting to organizations outside the community to settle internal conflicts, and decreed the loss of rights of indigenous people who joined the armed groups.[19]

Photo: Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies

A mural in Cauca depicting a group of FARC soldiers trekking through a jungle.

Re-harmonization of ex-combatants

Fearful of the reaction of the community, potential reprisals from armed groups or arrest by the police or the army, indigenous youth deserting the ranks of armed organizations, especially FARC, began to live in hiding in the *resguardos*. In response, the traditional authorities decided to offer an alternative to the state's DDR program and to create a system to disengage minors from armed groups based on their ancestral law. In 2007 they founded the program *Recomponer El Camino De Vuelta a Casa* (Mending the Road Back to Home, heretofore the Program), with the objective of reintegrating them into the communities.[20]

Rituals in Nasa society

Rituals are an integral part of Nasa society. Through them the Nasa become part of nature and the territory, materialize norms, transmit information provided by the spirits, and exercise social control.[21] Ritual practices give meaning to life and spirituality and strengthen indigenous culture, identity and unity.[22] Each ritual has its own teleology, according to the circumstances that give rise to it, the scenario in which it takes place, and the needs of the case.[23] Some rituals are performed around the person, others involve the individual and the family, and others pertain to the individual and the community in general.[24]

Nasa rituals are part of a system of reciprocity between the material and the spiritual worlds. They involve interaction between human and natural and spiritual actors. Since the Nasas conceive the territory and the land as living beings, all of nature –thunder, clouds, water, medicinal plants, the rainbow, the rain, rocks, seeds, plants, and animals, among others– is an active participant of the rite. The origin of other actors is spiritual, some can be seen, others can be heard, and still others can only be interpreted through signals by the *Thê'Walas*.[25]

The *Thê'Walas* are spiritual authorities in charge of 'overseeing' the Nasas' relationship with the social, natural and supernatural worlds, mediating family and community conflicts, protecting the culture and the territory, and guiding the authorities for the exercise of good governance.[26] Recognized as traditional doctors, they have extensive knowledge of nature and can interpret messages issued by the spirits and natural elements.[27] Interpreting bodily manifestations, the *Thê'Walas* identify the cause of the disease and determine the way to fight it. However, they are not the counterpart of Western physicians. While *Thê'Walas* specialize "in the social body to better understand the behavior of the body as human and cultural nature" and act as "restorers of social equilibrium," the latter specialize "in fragments of the human body decontextualized from the society."[28] Becoming a *Thê'Wala* is not the result of a voluntary decision. Rather, events or processes through which a person can become a *Thê'Wala* include visions, dreams, a snake bite, or being affected by lightning.[29]

Reharmonization

According to the Nasa worldview, nature assigns human beings a place of belonging in which they must remain in order to live in harmony. To ensure that newborns "take root" in the land and stay and defend the territory, the umbilical cord is buried – "returned to the territory"– immediately after birth.[30] When Nasa minors are recruited, kidnapped, or voluntarily join armed organizations, this harmony is disrupted.

Leaving the territory not only disharmonized the person who participates in violent conflict but also the family, the community, society and the universe. Nasas who "in disobedience did not heed the command of the elder spirits and spiritual and earthly authorities…to resist the armed conflict and not to be an instrument and part of it" broke their bond with the land, their family and their people; they ceased to be part of the community.[31] Individual, communal, and universal harmony can only be reestablished by restoring their identity, spirituality and sense of belonging to the land and the territory. For the Nasa, spiritual practices became an essential pathway to reharmonize and reintegrate these returning youth and minors. Rituals have offered healing and restorative processes for them individually, and between them and their families, communities, and territory.

Cateo and cleansing rituals

Immediately after Nasa ex-combatants leave an armed group and join the Program, a *Thê'Wala* performs the *cateo* ritual, a spiritual analysis to assess their state of mind, including their commitment to the process, and to determine whether they can regain their rights as members of the community and the protection of spiritual authorities. A critical objective is to identify spiritual and physical maladies they may have acquired as a consequence of actions that contravene the laws of culture and nature.[32] The Nasas identify three categories of crimes that cause disharmony: mild, serious, and extreme. Spiritual authorities accompanied by the *cabildo* authorities consult the spirit of CXIWAT (freeing or liberating spirit) and based on the vibrations of the body, determine the category to which a specific disharmony belongs. Homicide and rape are among the crimes considered extreme or very serious.[33]

Cultural understandings of health, trauma and healing are crucial because people express and construe their sufferings locally.[34] The Nasas predominantly view disease as a social rather than a physical phenomenon, an energetic or spiritual imbalance or disharmony of the different components of life, including the relationship between individuals and their environment. Since its aetiology transcends the human body and includes spiritual, relational, and territorial spheres, illness and health are inseparable from the natural and the social.[35] Causes of disease include a violation of the norms and customs of traditional life and contact with the Western world.[36] The Nasas differentiate between their 'own' illnesses, which can be treated with rituals, and 'external' illnesses, for which there are no rituals; people suffering from them are referred to hospitals.[37]

The *Thê'Walas* receive the energy of the cosmos, interpret signals and impulses perceived on the skin and decide whether cleansing rituals –a generic term to designate different procedures applied by the *Thê'Wala* to treat people's ills– are needed to restore the balance.[38] The harmonization ritual takes place in sacred places, commonly water sources, moors, ravines, mountains and forests. A generally standardized procedure is used, although changes may be introduced according to the category of the disease.[39] In most cases, the ex-combatants take a long walk with the *Thê'Wala*, who cleanses their body, removes negative energies, and selects the type of plants needed to "fix their hearts and recover their memory." Besides herbal medicines, on many occasions the therapeutic arsenal to achieve spiritual cleansing and harmonization also includes hybridized non-indigenous religiosity.[40] The ritual normally ends with the ex-combatant diving into a sacred lagoon.[41]

The Tulpa

Especially relevant to this case study, is the *tulpa* ritual, a setting in which authorities deal with those who have broken the laws that govern them. Central to Nasa life and culture, the *tulpa* is a space for communication with Mother Earth and an instrument of harmonious connection between spiritual, cosmic, natural, and human

beings in the territory. It is the focal point for the quest to preserve identity, beliefs and the collective construction of the territory. It is also a communal space to perform harmonization rituals and make offerings to the spirits of nature, to read signals about the future, ward off bad energies and conjure good energies.[42]

The *tulpa* ceremonial bonfire consists of three stones arranged in a triangular shape symbolizing the points where the sun rises, where it hides, and where the sun and the moon are centered.[43] The stones may represent the father, the mother and the son, or the grandparents and the elders who are no longer in the house; the adults, young people and older siblings; and the smallest children.[44] The fire is the spirit that generates "weavings for intimacy" and keeps harmony and balance with all beings.[45] Around it the families engage in dialogue, express feelings and give advice. Mothers teach young girls the secrets of weaving, elders share wisdom, narrate life experiences, stories and legends and disseminate knowledge about the culture.[46] Given the centrality of orality and the *tulpa*, when the language was almost completely eradicated and threatened by extinction, the campfire unintentionally made possible its defense and existence.[47]

When ex-combatants return, authorities entrust them to the elder fire so that they may take the right path.[48] Around the *tulpa,* the route for ex-combatants to be reborn into Nasa life is jointly constructed. The Nasas believe in the importance of narrating the ex-combatants war experience and collectivize it in order to prevent others from becoming part of the armed conflict. Before the *resguardo*'s authorities, ex-combatants recount their reasons for leaving the community and their experience in the war, recognize what the war destroyed and ask for forgiveness.[49] The *tulpa* integrates warmth, word and memory. It "allows to sharpen the ear and liberate the imagination…It seems that the word flows with warmth due to the action of the slow fire and the resting light."[50] Truth atones for thoughts and actions: "fire exorcises painful experiences, smoke takes them away from their daily life, and heat allows to 'cook' new thoughts."[51]

The damage caused by the disharmony is determined, and the traditional authorities and the community decide ways to compensate for it. They also design the route of reintegration based on the family situation, the reasons that led participants to join and leave the illegal armed group, their level of education and their hopes for the future. Without the elders' approval and compliance with other criteria established by the family, the community, and the *Cabildo*, it is impossible to link the disharmonized persons to the community, although work with them can continue.[52]

Unlike 'purification' rituals, the apology by the offender does not suffice; the forgiveness of the "offended party" is also necessary.[53] And unlike "asymmetrical humiliation rituals," the wrongdoer is not forced to participate in a degradation ceremony, and the ritual intends to settle relations instead of simply "settling the score." The ritual seems to fit the category of "symmetrical settlement," as the ex-combatant, the community, and the authorities strive to "restore balance to wounded relationships."[54]

Additional rituals in the reintegration process

The initial rituals do not instantly link the disharmonized person to the community. They place ex-combatants in a state of liminality, where they are no longer part of an armed organization and the war but are not yet full members of the community. As argued by Kohrt (2014), the limits between spaces and roles are still ambiguous.[55]

Ex-combatants remain in the healing process about three years before their rights are fully reestablished. Throughout this process they witness or take part in rituals as part of the regular activities of Nasa life. Some are of an individual nature. They may be defensive, aimed at protecting them from natural forces that represent a risk or danger; liberating, to free them from a negative spiritual force; or formative, including rites of initiation.[56] A common preventive ritual, the *refresco* (refreshment), balances the forces between the cold and the hot, with the aim of avoiding diseases or behavioral alterations that may affect the coexistence of the family and the community.[57] This ritual has always been present in Nasa life and all Nasas must celebrate it periodically in different places –rivers, lakes, mountains, home–, according to the indications given to the *Thê'Wala* by the spirits.[58]

Ex-combatants may also participate in collective rituals related to the territory and the community and the balance between the cosmos and all natural beings. Central among them are the five 'major' rituals of the Nasa nation: the *Khabu fxizehnxi,* or cleansing, purification and freshening up of the batons of the authorities; the *Ipx Fxicxanxi,* or extinguishing of the fire to harmonize the energies of the family, the community, and the

territory; The *Sek buy* (receiving the sun rays), celebrating the Andean new year, the birth of the sun; the *Kiwe kaame´ Saakehlu´, kiwe peda,´* the "awakening of the seeds," a ritual of fertility, gratitude, and protection; and the *Çxapuç*, honoring relatives, friends, and community leaders who have transcended to the spiritual world.[59] In Nasa culture, death is part of the cycle of life. The spiritual and social realms are interrelated and integrated. Those who have transcended to the spiritual world accompany the authorities, knowers and elders in charge of guiding the Nasa nation.[60]

Some of these rituals are celebrated at the level of the *resguardo* and all members of the community, including minors, are welcome to participate. Although children cannot take part in some activities during the rituals, such as drinking *chicha* or chewing coca, they participate actively in the offerings to the protective spirits, as well as in baths in rivers and lagoons, remedies performed by the traditional doctor with a mixture of medicinal plants. Older girls often help their mothers to prepare food and offerings, while boys help prepare traditional beverages, obtain medicinal plants and prepare remedies.[61]

Additionally, all components of the Program include rituals that help ex-combatants to reestablish their links with the community, strengthen their spiritual and physical connection with the territory, recover their identity as Nasas and internalize the Nasa worldview. Economic activities involve rituals associated with the seasons (solstice and equinox), the lunar phases, the learning of crafts, the planting of specific crops, and sheep shearing, among others.[62] Other rituals prepare the *Minga*, the sowing and the harvesting, or are celebrated to avoid exaggerated appropriations of nature's resources.[63] This need to reconnect with Nasa culture and territory explains the traditional authorities' reluctance to take advantage of official programs to train ex-combatants to self-manage their employment or to offer job options with companies in the public and private sectors. Their incorporation into the capitalist labor market or informal jobs is perceived as an obstacle in the process of re-harmonization, as it would separate the ex-combatants from cultural practices and rituals.[64]

The ex-combatants also participate in rituals associated with spaces for political participation assigned by *Cabildo* authorities, especially those where decisions are made, such as assemblies and congresses. They can also become part of the *cabildos* in the educational institutions with the objective of learning the meaning of being part of the traditional authority, an option available to both boys and girls. The participation of minor ex-combatants in political processes may counter, at least partially, the socialization rituals' effect of restoring a submissive role that may deprive them of having a greater voice in social processes. Another space of participation open to ex-combatants is the Indigenous Guard. The Nasas strongly reject the alternative of ex-combatants joining newly created or already existing security forces but encourage their participation in this instrument of peaceful resistance. Established in 2001, the Guard consists of male and female children and adults, and is responsible for the non-violent protection of the community, the territory, and sacred sites.[65]

Conclusion and key findings

Nasa life is fundamentally communal. The recruitment of Nasa minors into armed organizations is not viewed as an individual victimizing event but as a violation of collective rights, and their participation in the war is perceived as a latent threat of spiritual and material death of an entire people.[66] Given that collective identity is a *sine qua non* condition for individual identity and that child development is more sociocentric than egocentric, the reintegration of minor ex-combatants is anchored in the collectivity. As disharmony does not refer exclusively to the individual person, rituals aim to reincorporate the individual into the social order and to protect society as a whole.

Reintegration is a long process involving personal, community and spiritual dimensions. Despite their centrality, no single ritual is responsible for or capable of achieving such a goal. Some rituals address the

Photo: La Comisión de la Verdad

Members of the Nasa nation meeting as a community.

individual ex-combatants' psychological and emotional needs, while others seek to change their relations with the family, the community, the territory, and the cosmos.[67] They are "socializing," based on existing cultural values or structures; "constructive," aimed at meeting the needs of all parties involved; and "transformative," as their objective is to change the ex-combatants' status from military to civilian.[68]

Initial rituals mark the beginning of transition into community life. They indicate the disposition of families and the collectivity to reaccept them in their midst, but comprehensive inclusion is only achieved after the completion of several phases and compliance with a series of measures determined by the authorities and the community. In contrast to rituals in other contexts that do not require acknowledgment of responsibility or some form of reparation for acts committed, elements of 'transitional' and 'restorative' justice are central to rituals related to the reintegration of Nasa ex-combatants. Reintegration without truth, justice and reparation in accordance with Nasa norms and customs is unthinkable.

Rituals allow the *Thê'Walas* to assess the ex-combatants' willingness to change course and to commit them to mend the damage done. They are tied to participation in communal activities, which helps them regain a sense of belonging and reconnect with Nasa spirituality. They contribute to a change of the values acquired during participation in the war – "everything that they put in their heads"– appropriating or re-appropriating a view of the world they had not had the opportunity to experience.

Beyond the symbolic gestures and the emotional response to them as factors contributing to the power of rituals, the case exhibits characteristics associated in previous studies with their effectiveness. First, they are accompanied by measures of transitional and restorative justice, such as truth-telling and reparation, as well as to economic and political activities based on reciprocity and collective thought. Second, the stigmatization and rejection of ex-combatants are uncommon in the Nasa world.[69] This is especially true in the case of minors, which they justify on the grounds that many are victims of forced recruitment, and that they are in a formative phase and therefore lack a real understanding of the implications of joining an armed group. This flexibility in the categorization of 'victim' and 'perpetrator' increases the effectiveness of rituals in reconciliation processes.[70] A third factor is that Nasa minors in the process of reharmonization are accompanied by the family and the community, with a long-term perspective, in accordance with their traditions and spiritual rituals. This "practice of caring jointly, and not in isolation, for the children of the collective" is said to increase the effectiveness of rituals.[71]

Notes

1. Zulfiya Tursunova, "The Role of Rituals in Healing Trauma and Reconciliation in Post-Accord Peacebuilding," *Journal of Human Security*, vol. 4 no. 3 (2008): 59-60.
2. Critics argue that healing rituals do not ensure the long-term psychological healing of minor ex-combatants (see Tursunova) and that rituals of resocialization may force child, women and girl soldiers to revert to socially submissive roles (see Kohrt);
3. Jastine Barrett, "Navigating the Mystical: Child Soldiers and Reintegration Rituals in Northern Uganda," in *Research Handbook on Child Soldiers*, ed. Mark A. Drumbl and Jastine C. Barrett (Lexington: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019), 5.
4. DANE, "Censo Nacional de Población y Vivienda 2018," DANE, updated February 8, 2022, https://www.dane.gov.co/index.php/estadisticas-por-tema/demografia-y-poblacion/censo-nacional-de-poblacion-y-vivenda-2018.
5. A *resguardo* is a legal and socio-political institution formed by at least one indigenous community, comprising communal, inalienable property title over the land, and governed by an autonomous statute and normative system.
6. UNHCHR, "Situaciòn de riesgo de exterminio fisco y cultural de los pueblos indìgenas fronterizos de Colombia," UNHCHR, 2021, https://www.hchr.org.co/eventos/situacion-de-riesgo-de-exterminio-fisico-y-cultural-de-los-pueblos-indigenas-fronterizos-colombia/.
7. DANE, 2022.

8. Andrès Romero and Àngela Muñoz, *Pueblo indígena Nasa. Caracterizaciòn* (Bogotá: Procuraduría General de la Naciòn y Red Colombia Verde, 2019), 10.

9. Gustavo Wilches-Chàux, *Proyecto Nasa: La construcción del plan de vida de un pueblo que sueña* (Bogotá: Programa de Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo, 2005), 37.

10. Daniel Peñaranda, *Guerra propia, guerra ajena. Conflictos armados y reconstrucción identitaria en los Andes colombianos. El Movimiento armado Quintìn Lame* (Bogotá: CNMH-IEPRI, 2015), 15.

11. Wilches- Chàux, 51.

12. Carlos Molina, "La autonomía educativa indígena en Colombia," *Universitas*, no. 124 (2012): 276.

13. *Cabildos* are the structures of governance of the *resguardos*. They exercise authority, manage community affairs and legally represent indigenous communities in their relations with the Colombian state; CRIC, "Plataforma de lucha," CRIC, 2004, https://www.cric-colombia.org/portal/plataforma-de-lucha-5/.

14. Gustavo Cote and Lorena Vega, "La noción de destrucción en el genocidio y la protección de la identidad cultural de grupos étnicos en conflictos armados: el caso del pueblo Nasa en el norte del departamento del Cauca (Colombia)," *Dikaion*, vol. 31 no. 2 (2022): 19.

15. A well-known case is the Naya massacre. In 2001, in the context of an offensive to expand their presence in indigenous territories, a paramilitary group carried out raids on communities, accusing them of collaborating with insurgent organizations. Nearly 100 indigenous people lost their lives, another hundred were kidnapped, and around 1,000 were displaced.

16. Cote and Vega, 23; Yolanda Ramos, "Efectos socioeconómicos del conflicto armado en las comunidades indígenas en el departamento del Cauca 2000-2012" (BA thesis, Universidad la Gran Colombia, 2014), 56.

17. Cote and Vega, 26.

18. Kelly Quilcué, "UMNA ÇXAÇX ÇXHA ÇXHA FXI'ZENXI. *Tejiendo resistencias*," (BA thesis, Universidad Externado de Colombia, 2017), 7.

19. Comisión de la Verdad. "Resistir no es aguantar. Violencias y daños contra los pueblos étnicos de Colombia," in *Comisión de la Verdad*, *HAY FUTURO si hay verdad. Informe final* (Bogotá: Comisión de la Verdad, 2022), 171.

20. Pedro Valenzuela and Zabrina Welter, "Recomponer el Camino de Vuelta a Casa. Estudio de un proceso comunitario de reintegración de excombatientes indígenas en Colombia," *Papel Político*, vol. 25 (2020): 4.

21. Reintegration is understood as "a reciprocal process in which a child soldier is reintroduced to civilian life and is accepted by his or her family and community" (see Barrett).

22. José Luis Collo, ""El saber del Kiwe Thë y la cosmovisión del pueblo Nasa para la defensa de la vida y el territorio," (master's thesis, Universidad del Cauca, 2019), 5.

23. Javier Lasso, Pedro Dizzú, and José Chocué, "Sentidos de la ritualidad Nasa. Miradas desde los adolescentes de la Institución Educativa. Chimicueto, Jambaló Cauca," (thesis, Universidad de Manizales, 2020), 7.

24. Cristabell López, "El Saakhelu como parte del proceso de recuperación y fortalecimiento cultural del pueblo indígena Nasa de Tierradentro, Cauca" (BA thesis, Universidad del Cauca, 2008), 34;

    Herinaldy Gòmez and Hugo Portela, "Territorio, cultura y The'Walas" in *Cultura y Salud en la*

Construccion de las Americas, ed. Carlos E. Pinzòn, Rosa Suarez, and Gloria Garay (Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de Antropologia, 1993), 281-294.

25. Collo, 37.
26. Lasso et al., 12.
27. Sandra Nogera, "Refrescamiento de los guardianes de la medicina tradicional Nasa. Actitudes y prácticas en el Instituto Técnico Agropecuario e Industrial Juan Tama del resguardo indígena de Canoas, municipio de Santander de Quilichao" (undergraduate thesis, Universidad del Valle, 2012), 48;

    Manuel Sisco, "Cosmovisión indígena Nasa," Existenciarius, https://existenciarius.blogspot.com/2010/02/cosmovision-indigena-nasa.html.
28. Noguera, 78.
29. Gómez and Portela, 291.
30. Sisco, n.d.
31. Other Colombian indigenous peoples tie a rope to the newborns' hand, symbolizing that they are part of the territory, and others bury the placenta and only after 30 or 60 days bury the navel (see Urrego-Mendoza).
32. ACIN, 1.
33. Valenzuela and Welter, 5.
34. OEI, Ministerio de Justicia,"Informe de actividades en ejecución. Iniciativas de proyectos de fortalecimiento a la justicia propia" (2021), 11-12.
35. Tursunova, 54.
36. Noguera, 70.
37. Zulma Urrego-Mendoza, Daisy Moreno, Giovanni Numpaque, and Rodrigo Fuentes Arias, "Narratives of Indigenous University Students in Bogotá about the Indigenous Human Life Process 2021," *Revista Ciencias de las Salud*, vol. 20 no. 2 (2022): 8.
38. Gómez and Portela, 281-294.
39. Noguera, 74; Lasso et al., 19.
40. López, 82.
41. Urrego-Mendoza et al., 8.
42. Collo, 97.
43. Luz Eneida Tumbo, compiladora, *Ipx kwet peku'j. Alrededor de la tulpa, creencias y costumbres de los mayores nasa* (Bogotá: Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2014), 27.
44. Quilcué, 26.
45. Lida Jiménez and Lucia Largo, "Despertando el fogón. La Tulpa como estrategia pedagógica para la producción de textos narrativos con los niños y niñas del grado segundo en la Institución Educativa Agropecuaria Carrizales" (master's thesis, Universidad del Cauca, 2018), 13; Yenny Astaiza, Luis Vásquez, Kevin Vásquez, Jorge Andrés Vásquez and Pueblo Kokonuko, "El fogón, un espacio sagrado," *Revistau*, 2022, https://revistaunidad.cric-colombia.org/el-fogon-un-espacio-sagrado/.
46. Quilcué, 27.

47. Astaiza et al., 2022.

48. Arnulfo Hurtado and Víctor Molina, "Tejido y re-creación de la vida alrededor del fogón. Comunidad indígena Nasa de Caldono (Cauca) Colombia," *Educación y Territorio*, vol. 3 no. 1 (2013): 25.

49. Quilcué, 27.

50. Valenzuela and Welter, 8.

51. Jiménez and Largo, 13.

52. In contrast to other cases, where "To talk and recall the past is not necessarily seen as a prelude to healing or diminishing pain. Indeed, it is often believed to open the space for the malevolent forces to intervene. (see Honwana).

53. Valenzuela and Welter, 15.

54. Zohar Kampf and Nava Löwenheim, "Rituals of apology in the global arena," *Security Dialogue*, vol. 43 no. 1 (2012): 54.

55. Kampf and Löwenheim, 54.

56. Brandon A. Kohrt, "The Role of Traditional Rituals for Reintegration and Psychosocial Well-Being of Child Soldiers in Nepal," in *Genocide and Mass Violence: Memory, Symptom and Recovery*, ed. Devon Hinton and Alexander Hinton (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 371.

57. Sisco, n.d.

58. Collo, 48; Noguera, 70.

59. López, 102.

60. Sisco, n.d.

61. Mònica Cataño, "El ritual del Çxapuç: saberes y prácticas nasa que perviven para recordar los ancestros," in *Formación y creación en tiempos de crisis*, ed. Juan Carlos Amador Baquiro, Germàn Garcio Orozco, and Jorge Eduardo Ureña Lòpez (Bogotá: Universidad Distrital Fracisco Josè de Caldas, 2017), 117-133.

62. Katy Canas. "KWE'SX FXI'NZENXIS USYA'/PA'KYA', Rituales de ofrecer y recibir. Prácticas culturales de socialización en niños y niñas Nasa del resguardo indígena de Munchique los Tigres" (BA thesis, Universidad del Valle, 2018), 7.

63. Sisco, n.d.

64. Noguera, 103.

65. The Special Indigenous Jurisdiction (*Jurisdicción Especial Indígena*) recognizes the indigenous nations' right to apply their own norms in their territories. The Legal Indigenous Route (*Ruta Legal Indígena*) allows traditional authorities to decide the measures of protection for demobilized indigenous minors.

66. Like any institution charged with the protection of a specific territory and population, the Guard has a history of success and setbacks. It has managed to temporarily stop confrontations in the territory, protect civilians in combat situations, free victims of kidnapping by armed actors, and prevent the recruitment of minors, among others. However, just like the official army and Police, it has not managed to eradicate the presence or illegal armed groups, and the lives of some of its members have not been respected.

67. Valenzuela and Welter, 9.

68. Even so, they recognize that rituals may not necessarily take away the memories of ex-combatants haunted by what they did or saw in the war. In such cases, to ensure their long-term psychological healing, they accept the collaboration of psychologists and social workers to give more specialized psychotherapeutic treatments, in accordance with the Nasa authorities.

69. Lisa Schirch, *Ritual and Symbol in Peacebuilding* (Bloomfield: Kumarian Press, 2005), 19; Kohrt, 369-387.

70. Rocìo Rubio, *¿Y por qué tantos colores? Tres casos de reintegración de jóvenes, víctimas de reclutamiento ilícito* (Bogotá: Organización Internacional para las Migraciones (OIM), 2015), 59.

71. Ilundi Cabral, "Rito y reconciliación en Mozambique. La cultura como mediadora de la experiencia bélica," *Revista CIDOB d'Afers Internacionals*, no. 87 (2009): 123-145.

72. Cabral, 123-145.

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Nahe Biti: East Timor

A ritual for return, reintegration, and social reconciliation

Teri Murphy

Introduction

Timor, an island in Southeast Asia, is currently divided into two parts. The western side of the island is part of Indonesia's archipelago, while the other half is Timor-Leste (East Timor). Established in the early 21st century, Timor-Leste is a young country with a long and complex history of imperialism and occupation. Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch colonists fought over its harbors and natural resources, until Portugal eventually claimed sovereignty of the area toward the end of the 19th century. Although Japanese forces occupied Timor during World War II, the east remained in Portuguese possession until the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (FRETILIN) gained control over much of the territory and declared its independence in 1974.

Timor-Leste's fight for independence was not without internal struggle. After Portugal extended the right of self-determination to its colonies in 1974, a *Committee for the Self-Determination of East Timor* was installed. Portugal authorized the creation of political parties, and partisan organizations emerged. The three most dominant parties rising to power had different visions for what self-determination would mean. The Timorese Democratic Union (UDT) advocated for continued association with Portugal, while the Popular Democratic Association of Timor (APODETI) advocated for integration with Indonesia. FRETILIN, drawing from revolutionary national movements in Angola and Mozambique, advocated for complete independence. From the onset, Timor-Leste's road to self-determination was marked by internal division and political foment.

As Timor-Leste decolonized and the colonial empire dissolved, fierce and polarizing partisanship emerged. Elections took place in local districts, and after a popular consultation in 1975, it was clear that APODETI lacked support. A high majority of people refused to accept integration with Indonesia. After an internal political conflict broke out between rival parties (1974-1976), a "radical nationalist" FRETILIN was left in control. Many members from the opposing parties fled across the border, joining an Indonesian army already mobilizing for invasion. Indonesia's President Suharto's anti-communist regime was in the height of its powers and regarded FRETILIN as a security threat to its peripheral eastern archipelago. Within nine days of FRETILIN's unilateral declaration of Timor-Leste's independence, war with Indonesia broke out. Under the pretext of protecting its citizens in Timorese territory, Indonesia invaded and annexed the area, renamed it Timor Timur, and declared the area its province.

For the next twenty-four years of Indonesia's occupation (1975-1999), the eastern half of the island became caught in the crossfires of two regimes: Indonesian soldiers and their Timorese collaborators in towns and cities, and FREITLIN's armed front (FALINTIL) from the interior mountains. Indonesian troops were particularly brutal. They repeatedly committed public massacres, targeted killings – including children - and disappearances of civilians. Sexual and gender-based violence was rampant. As troops advanced into the interior, subsistence farmers were not able to produce food and people began to starve. The military began to systematically destroy crops and cut off food supplies to the interior as a strategy to force people into surrender. It also bombed populated mountain areas with napalm. Those who did surrender were either summarily executed or contained in "concentration camps".[1] As the war continued, an estimated 180,000 East Timorese (a third of the population) died from starvation, massacre, and bombings.[2]

Over time, FREITLIN's leadership, tactics, and organizing strategies developed into a continuum of resistances. The constellation of armed fighters in the mountains, clandestine operations in towns, students on scholarships in Indonesia, East Timorese diaspora, and international activists was a decisive factor in East Timor's eventual independence.[3] During this period, eastern Timor was largely closed off from the outside world. But due to effective diplomatic engagement, media strategies, and the changing nature of international politics, inter- and non-governmental organizations began to recognize the plight of Timorese people; international pressure mounted.

Although Indonesia steadfastly rejected withdrawing from eastern Timor, by May 1998, President Suharto was forced to step down. His resignation opened the door for negotiations and a political solution. The United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) would supervise a 'direct ballot' to accept or reject autonomy for eastern Timor within the Republic of Indonesia. Pushback from pro-Indonesia supporters, however, was so fierce and violent during the lead up to the ballot that it had to be delayed. Finally, on 30 August, a remarkable 98.6% of registered voters came out to vote. An emphatic 78.5% of East Timorese voted against autonomy and in favor of full independence.[4]

Transitioning to independence (1999-2002)

Photo: Manufahi

Nahi Biti

Important to Timor Leste's social reconciliation are the severity of crimes that took place prior to the ballot in 1999 and in its direct aftermath. Widespread violations such as extra-judicial killings – including mass killings – occurred in town squares, places of refuge, Catholic churches, and on the premises of the Indonesian Army and police forces. Victims were beaten, hacked with machetes, and their bodies mutilated. The dead were often left in public places to control and terrorize the population. Women were taken captive, repeatedly raped, and forced into sexual slavery by militias and soldiers.[5] After the vote, due to escalating violence and fear, 400,000 people, or approximately half the population, took refuge in the mountains and forests of East Timor, or were forced into squalid refugee camps in West Timor.[6]

Between the end of August and late October, Indonesian forces and their militias launched a coordinated "scorched earth campaign" against supporters of independence.[7] They burned and looted towns and villages, destroying almost 70% of physical infrastructure of this newly birthed country. As a result, public and private sectors suffered near total collapse. The economy was hit by a dramatic supply shock due to disruption of the agriculture cycle. Local inventories of manufactured goods were destroyed, and because of the border closure with West Timor, civilians were unable to access facilities to import goods from abroad. An already precarious health situation was further exacerbated by mass displacement, psycho-social stress, a breakdown of water and sanitation infrastructures, and the collapse of most health services.[8]

An Australian-led multinational peacekeeping force (INTERFET) was sent to restore peace and security in East Timor with a mandate to protect and support UNAMET in carrying out its tasks and the facilitation of humanitarian assistance operations. Immediately after INTERFET had successfully quelled the violence, waves of refugees began returning to their communities. During the first six months of 2000, more than 167,000 refugees successfully returned home, but an estimated 85,000-120,000 remained in the camps.[9] Their voluntary repatriation was hindered in many ways including the closure of land borders, militia intimidation in several camps, pervasive disinformation campaigns, media manipulation by hardliners, and UNAMET's withdrawal after the murder of three humanitarian aid workers in 2000. Many who willingly remained in the camps were civil servants, members of the armed forces, or police formerly linked to Indonesia. They shared deep fear about the sustainability of security in East Timor and the risk of private revenge acts against them.[10]

As Timor-Leste continued its transition, gaining international recognition as a State, national efforts were primarily concerned with resolving political differences between opposing parties. Eventually, several transitional justice mechanisms emerged, beginning with the UNTAET launched Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation Commission (CAVR) in 2002. At the national level, there was an underlying assumption that public displays of political reconciliation would trickle down, influence social reconciliation, and ultimately the return home. These elite driven processes paid little attention to the anxiety and fears within the wider population resulting from past violence. Impunity, the lack of justice from the civil war, the severe violence of 1999, pervasive animosity between independence supporters and a pro-integration minority, alongside widespread human insecurity, quickly became significant obstacles to the success of top-down reconciliation efforts.[11]

Rural areas could not wait on international or nationally driven reintegration and reconciliation initiatives to trickle down.[12] The country's social fabric had been torn by decades of violence. Communal factionalism and social cleavages were crisscrossing the countryside.[13] Spontaneous returns had already taken place and refugee camps were fomenting with internal conflict-related tensions. The demand for justice and a need for stability

was pressing. Durable solutions for return and reintegration would require that whole communities - victims, perpetrators, estranged families, and political enemies - find ways to settle their histories and differences peacefully. In the absence of expedient formal processes and an effective judiciary, reliance on customary justice practices (*lisan*), became the primary mechanism for social reconciliation at the grassroots level.[14]

Customary law, practiced all over the world, is derived from long-established traditions and practices that have been accepted by a community. Types of methods may include dispute resolution, peace-making, talking circles, community gatherings, and traditional mediation. Although culturally specific, there are also common characteristics across these practices such as the role of elders, storytelling and orality, the integration of spiritual beliefs, and the primacy placed on social harmony (see Figure 1). Victims and their families are central in these processes, and the surrounding community participates in procedures. During assemblies, perpetrators make a full disclosure to the public, and there is generally an expectation for remorse and an apology. After a confession is given, discussion among all the parties takes place until an agreement is finally reached. Presiding elders typically render a decree which stipulates reparations – and at times – punishment, including the steps required to make amends. These proceedings are often concluded with cleansing rituals, animal sacrifices, or the sharing of food.[15]

Differences in Justice Paradigms

Figure 1

Western Justice Paradigm	**Indigenous Justice Paradigm**
Hierarchical	Holistic
Communication is rehearsed	Communication is dialectic
Dominant language is used	Native language is used
Written statutory law is derived from rules and procedure, written record	Oral customary law is learned as a way of life and by example
Separation of powers	Law and justice are part of a whole
Separation of institutionalized religion and the state	The spiritual realm is invoked in ceremonies and rituals
Adversarial and conflict oriented	Building trusting relationship to promote resolution and healing
Time-oriented process	No time limits on the process, long silences and patience are valued
Limits participants in the process and solutions	Inclusive of all affected individuals in the process and solving problems
Represented by strangers	Representation by extended family members
Focus on individual rights	Focus on victim and individual rights
Punitive and removes offender from society	Corrective, offenders are accountable and responsible for change
Prescribes penalties by and for the State	Customary sanctions used to restore victim-offender relationships
Right of accused, especially against self-incrimination	Obligation of accused to verbalize accountability
Vindication to society	Reparative obligation to victims and community, apology and forgiveness

Adapted from Ada Pecos Melton, "Indigenous Justice Systems and Tribal Society," *Judicature*, vol. 79 no. 3 (1995): 126-133.

Nahe biti

Although the word 'reconciliation' was a new term to many East Timorese, the spirit and practice of reconciliation had long been expressed through the ritual of *nahe biti*. *Nahe biti*, which means "stretching or laying the mat," is a customary practice that has provided a community level forum for settling family and communal tensions since before the Portuguese arrived. After the civil war in 1974 and then again in 1999, these processes were expanded to include the settlement of political conflicts and to encourage refugee return and reconciliation.[16] During the decades of Timor's recurring political upheaval, customary law and traditional leaders had provided the only consistent means for resolving conflicts, particularly in remote areas where up to 70% of the population lived.[17] Because the historical conflicts in Timor Leste had fostered a culture of violence and distrust, there was little confidence in formal systems such as the police or judiciary. Instead, grassroots communities relied on their elders, customary law, and the *nahe biti* ritual when seeking justice, truth, and restoration.

Nahe biti is a highly symbolic ceremony. At the center of this ritual is a *biti*, a type of woven floor mat commonly found in Timorese households. It is made from *heda*, a leaf of a palm indigenous to the region. Pre-woven leaves represent the different stories and conflicting views that participants share as they discuss what has happened, why it happened, and as they collectively work towards healing. The difficult process of confession, dialogue, and accountability is an act of plaiting, the way a community begins to weave their lives back together and rebuild social harmony. Metaphorically, when the process is successful, the community's social fabric is no longer torn but tightly woven, able to bear whatever weight the future may hold.

The following figure illustrates the parallels between mat-making and the *nahe biti* ceremony:

Figure 2

Steps	Weaving *biti*	Meaning
1	Preparing to weave	Making contact
2	Selecting *heda*	Parties agree to enter the process
3	Ensuring the *heda* leaves match	Parameters and mutual expectations are established
4	Plaiting *heda*	Dialogue, discussion, eventual consensus
5	Completion of mat	Ceremonial acts and rituals

Adapted from Dionìsio Babo-Soares, "*Nahe biti*: The Philosophy and Process of Grassroots Reconciliation (and Justice) in East Timor," *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 5 no. 1 (2004): 20-21.

A *lia nain* (customary leaders) officiates *nahe biti* ceremonies. Often dressed in woven cloth, wearing anklets made of horsehair, and other ceremonial objects, they begin by performing a dance, chanting, reciting incantations, and inviting ancestral spirits to witness and bless the process. They may also carry a *rotu* (stick) or dagger that represents the community's customary law. Next, a procession made up of community members brings a *biti* into the center of the gathering, where it is solemnly unrolled and stretched out (*nahe*). Straw baskets containing limes, tobacco, palm wine, and betel nut are then laid onto the mat. These rituals mark the opening of the proceedings and indicate that all who are seated on the mat have agreed to a process of dialogue and resolving their differences. Typically, the mat is not rolled up again until the issues have been settled. Most *nahe biti* processes begin in the morning, and depending upon the extent or seriousness of discussion, may continue well into the night.[18]

During the ritual, parties are given an opportunity to present their cases to the *lia nain* and other community leaders facilitating the process. Generally, they are invited to share their stories, describe the events that have taken place, and depending upon the issue, discuss what they need or want. Leaders may ask questions throughout the process. A characteristic of customary law in Timor-Leste is that the wider community is actively engaged in proceedings. Members are not only part of the hearings, but they also offer input on how the dispute will be resolved. These decisions are reached through extensive discussion and debate between all who have been involved – a tradition that emphasizes and reaffirms the community's collective identity. *Lia nain*

Photo: Manufahi

Nahi Biti

have the formal authority to stop proceedings, and they are ultimately entrusted to render a final decision. When cases involve an injustice, compensation may be given to the victim, punishment may be extended to the perpetrator (such as a fine, ostracization from communal activities, or community service), or both.

Once an agreement or plan has been put in place, the *lia nain* and participants chew betel nut, tobacco, and lime, and drink palm wine together as a gesture of friendship. This signals that harmony has been restored – an act that symbolizes to the rest of the community that they are now reconnected and at peace with each other. Sometimes a sacrificial animal is slaughtered, and their entrails are read to see if the ancestors are appeased. After the ceremony, it is customary for everyone to join in a shared meal. This additional ritual is especially important for returning and reintegrating parties because of the wider communal implications. The act of eating and celebrating together collectively seals a binding agreement and affirms their acceptance back into the community.[19]

Grassroots reconciliation

Although elements of the *nahe biti* ceremony were eventually incorporated into formal repatriation efforts between Timor-Leste and Indonesia, as well as within national reconciliation processes, it became immediately applied at the grassroots level. During the initial wave of returns in early 2000, former militia members and people displaced by conflict began returning to their villages of origin. And by the time CAVR launched their operations in 2002, half of the refugees from West Timor had already returned.[20] East Timorese villages are small, and political violence was intimately felt. It had been expressed between family members, neighbors, and it had ruptured community life. In such small proximities, people were also aware of who was responsible for violations. As people began to return, hostility and tensions quickly mounted which often led to retributive violence, reprisals, and counter reprisals. These dynamics not only threatened stability within the village itself, but also the wider security of the country.

Many rural villages in East Timor turned to the *lia nain* to re-establish peace and security, and *nahi biti* to address the past. Elders played an instrumental role in the return of refugees by initiating their own processes for reintegration. They offered reassurance through border conversations, visited camps, and invited former community member to come home. They also carried out welcoming ceremonies between East and West Timor. Another critical function that the *lia nain* played was to assess an individual's suspected militia involvement and their eligibility for reintegration.[21] In these cases, it was important to determine whether someone was *mos* (clean) or if they had become unclean by committing serious crimes such as murder, sexual violence, or the razing of properties. When it was determined that an individual had committed a serious crime, they were handed over to the United Nations Civilian Police and detained until due process was ensured.[22]

Social reconciliation efforts require a gradual process of rebuilding trust and relationships, the repair of harm, and for former adversaries to develop a vision for a shared and interdependent future. This is especially true at the grassroots level where people live side by side and interact daily. After Timor-Leste's independence, justice and reconciliation were encouraged through *nahe biti* because as a time-honored tradition, it was respected. The ritual was inclusive of the broad community, determinations were made on a based on a case-by-case basis, and the recovering of a disrupted peace was prioritized. As people sat together on a traditional mat, to speak, to listen, and to be acknowledged, the ritual process held the possibility of transforming social narratives, identities and relationships – and to ultimately begin weaving the community back together.

Conclusion and key findings

Once agreements have been signed and peacekeeping measures have stabilized conflict dynamics, former enemies, perpetrators, direct, and indirect victims begin to resume life side-by-side. Because trust is low, the gradual rebuilding of social relationships, alienated and severed by sustained violence, becomes critical to a durable peace. Facing the past while negotiating a mutually acceptable and interdependent future – at the very least – requires coexistence. In these settings, social reconciliation becomes particularly significant and must be intertwined with political reconciliation agendas.

High level reconciliation often requires complex bureaucratic procedures, financial resourcing, and goodwill between former adversaries. Not only do these processes take a long time to design and launch, but they are also heavily politicized and often obstructed. Additionally, national initiatives are now bound to international norms and laws, and as was the case of Timor-Leste, they may become stymied by a weak judiciary system. For these reasons, customary laws and traditions can be useful at the grassroots level and even supplement international and national level frameworks.

The use of customary laws and rituals does warrant caution. Not all customary laws and traditions adhere to international human rights standards. For example, in some contexts, beatings, whippings, mutilations, retributive killing, and tribunal approved gender-based violence are common punishments that should not be permitted. Additionally, many customary laws and ritual practices are not gender inclusive. Women do not meaningfully participate as leaders or participants, and they are spoken for by male family members. Processes are also not gender sensitive, as some crimes should not be addressed publicly unless consent is given by the victim. And there may also be inherent tensions between Western or individualistic notions of rights and collectivist worldviews.

This local peace process highlights ways in which grassroots reconciliation rituals can offer immediate triage to communities in areas where state and judiciary structures are weak. Customary practices are embedded in the life of a community; they are familiar, inexpensive, and can be readily accessible. In East Timor, traditional leaders – not just State actors - initiated the return of displaced and disenfranchised people. Using ceremony and rituals, they created public forums and provided collective processes that involved everyone who would be impacted by return. During decision-making processes, the histories, expressed interests, and the needs of the whole community were woven together through the ritual of *nahe biti* in ways that encouraged a collective and durable peace.

Notes

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5. Geoffrey Robinson, "East Timor 1999 Crimes Against Humanity: A Report Commissioned By The United Nations Office Of The High Commissioner For Human Rights (OHCHR)" (report, 2003), 41.

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14. Senier, 80.

15. Ada Pecos Melton, "Indigenous Justice Systems and Tribal Society," *Judicature*, vol. 79 no. 3 (1995): 125-133.

16. Ben Larke, "'. . . And the Truth Shall Set You Free': Confessional Trade-Offs and Community Reconciliation in East Timor," *Asian Journal of Social Science*, vol. 37 no. 4 (2009): 646-674.

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21. Babo-Soares, 15-30.

22. Babo-Soares, 27.

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Rebaptism of Yezidi Women: Kurdistan

A ritual for reintegration of women survivors of conflict-related sexual violence

Aram Habeeb & Teri Murphy

Introduction

When The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) – also known as The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), or Daesh – swept across Iraq's territory in June of 2014, they began a campaign to 'purify' their Caliphate of non-Arab and non-Sunni Muslim communities. The Yezidis, a religious community living in the Sinjar region, located in the Nineveh Governorate of northern Iraq, were among the most severely affected. Referred to by ISIS as *mushirkin*, 'those who commit the sin of idolatry/pagans', they were targeted because of their non-Abrahamic religion and for being stigmatized as "devil-worshippers". Two months later, ISIS launched a genocidal campaign against them, killing and enslaving thousands of men, women, and children, while driving the remaining population of nearly 350,000 Yezidis into camps for internally displaced persons.[1]

Abducted women and girls were considered chattel. Many were forced to convert to Islam, sold as slaves, traded between ISIS members, and subjected to brutal sexual violence. Those who survived either managed to escape their captors, or family members successfully paid for their release. Others were eventually liberated by Iraqi and Kurdish forces. But when they returned, these women and girls were treated more harshly than men and boys. They faced immense stigmatization and ostracization from within their own communities. In the Yezidi tradition, anyone who converts to another religion or who sexually engages with someone outside of their group, even if coerced, is excommunicated.[2]

In 2014-15, Baba Sheikh, the High Spiritual Councilor of the Yezidis, broke from religious and cultural tradition by issuing an unprecedented public declaration to welcome women and girls who had been raped or forced to convert to Islam fully back into the community. Waves of women began making a pilgrimage to the holy site of Lalish where they were re-baptized in the sacred waters flowing from springs hidden beneath the temple. This ancient ritual, reframed by religious leaders as a rite of purification, renewal, and resilience, offered them personal healing, and a symbolically important reintegration into their community.

Photo: Levi Clancy via Wikimedia Commons

A group of Yazidi women gathered at Esiyan village in the Dohuk Governorate of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq

Yezidis

The Yezidis are an ancient religious community. Their members live throughout Syria, Armenia, Georgia, and Turkey, in the 'periphery of the periphery' of these states, but most reside in Northern Iraq, close to the Syrian border, in the Sinjar and Shekhan districts.[3] For the past century, they have remained relatively isolated and scattered and, prior to the ISIS invasion, numbered 550,000-600,000.[4] Their history and religious beliefs, not well-known by outsiders, have been debated by scholars and manipulated, at other times, by external and regional leaders to achieve their political and ideological ends.[5]

The Yezidis view their homeland as sacred. Mausoleums of saints, small temples, and shrines are scattered throughout, mainly in rural areas and on top of hills. Prior to the arrival of ISIS, approximately 150 distinctive, conically roofed shrines – where Holy Beings are believed to have descended to earth - dotted the Shekhan and Sinjar regions and were sites of religious festivals and pilgrimages, as well as community and public gatherings.[6] The most holy of these places is Lalish (source of light), a temple complex that is nearly 4,000 years old. Lalish is considered the spiritual and cultural center of the Yezidis and believed to be both the birthplace of Adam and where Noah's ark first touched dry land after the flood. Waters of *Kanîya Spı̂* (the White Spring) that run underneath the complex, are considered the primordial source of creation. These waters hold holy and healing properties. Every Yezidi must be baptized by these waters, sealing their purity and membership in the

community, and assigning their status as clean (*halal*) as opposed to unclean (*haram*). Although members need only to be baptized once, they are encouraged to return to the spring throughout their lifetime. These waters offer initiation and purification, but also preservation and renewal.[7]

The unique tenets of the Yezidi faith, coupled with perceptions of them as a 'deviant' community, led to persistent discrimination and persecution backed up by violence from communities with Arabic, Mongol, Turkish, and Kurdish ethnicities.[8] Labelled 'Satan worshipers' and 'heretics', they had previously experienced 73 instances of attempted genocide, prior to the onslaught of ISIS.[9] In recent decades, they have also experienced political and social disadvantage created by Iraqi and Kurdish politics, providing the key context for ISIS attacks.[10] Yezidism has been influenced by Islamic Sufism, Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism, but has its own distinctive beliefs and practices. Some scholars attribute the name's origin to "*Yazdan*" which means pure, merciful, and generous God, and "*Izid*" which means angel. A principal belief of Yezidism is that "both good and evil come from the same door" or that there is one source of both good and evil. Rather than believing that God is the source for good, and that evil comes from Satan, they believe people's choices generate goodness and evil on earth. Yezidism is also set apart from other religions by its unique prayer rituals, belief in reincarnation, and the central role of the Peacock Angel, *Melek Taus* – God's messenger – who guides humanity in decisions between good and evil.[11]

Yezidism is an identity-forming belief system because of its ethno-religious character. Its esoteric theology, contained in religious texts, is interpreted by only a small number of *Sheikhs* and *Pyir* (clergy). Religiosity focuses on orthodox practice and correct living. A key concern of Yezidism is purity, made visible through various rites such as baptism, and through highly prescribed rules about social mixing. Religious conversion into the community is not theologically permitted; an infant is born into it by two Yezidi parents; endogamic marriages and families are highly protected. Norms related to shame and honor are embedded in Yezidi religion, culture, society, and individuals.[12] Anyone who transgress these boundaries is ostracized and marriage outside the community, or even outside of the three castes, is strictly prohibited. Such acts are punishable by excommunication and, in some cases, honor killing, leading to a highly isolated community.[13] As in many closed communities, gender relations are strictly regulated by patriarchal norms. Women's choices, labor, and bodies are tightly controlled in both private and public spheres. Typically, women victims of rape suffered community rejection because it rendered female victims socially infertile, unmarriageable, and 'damaged goods'.[14]

ISIS and the genocide of Yezidis

ISIS emerged from the remnants of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in 2011. Taking advantage of the growing instability in Iraq and Syria, and the withdrawal of US forces, ISIS began seizing territory and bolstering its ranks. When ISIS launched its offensive on Mosul and Tikrit in June 2014, its leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi announced the formation of a caliphate stretching from Aleppo in Syria to Diyala in Iraq and rebranded the group as ISIS. Baghdadi also demanded that Muslims and other jihadist groups avow allegiance to ISIS. He was declared the caliph, the "leader for Muslims everywhere".

ISIS' ideology was rooted in Salafism, a fundamentalist, but not inherently violent, movement within Sunni Islam. While Salafism was once associated with late nineteenth and early twentieth-century modernists like Muhammad Abduh, modern Salafis, such as ISIS, have been heavily influenced by Saudi Wahhabism and its conservative emphasis on combating innovations within the faith. Salafis believe the most authentic and virtuous form of Islam is found in the lived example of the first three generations of Muslims known as the Salaf. Any practice or belief outside of this is considered an innovation and therefore labeled non-Islamic. Described as ultraconservatives, members of the movement believe in the 'spirit' and the 'letter' of Islamic law. Separating themselves from other conservative Islamists, Salafis strive to uncompromisingly adhere to these religious tenets and recreate the actual lifestyle and behavior of these earlier Muslims.

While all Salafis seek to re-create this utopic version of the lifestyle of the Salaf using different methods, ISIS argued that the way to achieve this vision was to bring about an Islamic state through military jihad, a contemporary interpretation of Islam's concept of struggle which is often used in the context of warfare. Salafi Jihadism emphasizes the military exploits of the Salaf, linking their violence to an immediate divine imperative. Their exclusivist view of what being Muslim entails meant that other Muslims were considered non-Muslim or apostates, which was used to justify violence against them, including non-combatants. Violence against

groups they deem polytheists, even enslavement and rape, was regarded as a legitimate prerogative, and one that brought them closer to God.[15]

On 3 August 2014, ISIS launched its genocidal attack against Yezidis. The attack came from Mosul and Tal Afar in Iraq, and from Al-Shaddadi and the Tel Hamis region in Syria, essentially surrounding the population from all four sides. Although the Kurdish Peshmerga forces had been mandated to protect the area, troops abandoned bases and checkpoints, leaving local populations unprotected in the face of ISIS's advance. Some villagers put up resistance, but this was futile, and others managed to escape to the Duhok region of Iraq, or Sinjar Mountain. Tens of thousands of men, women, and children became trapped at the top of the mountain and a humanitarian crisis quickly unfolded.[16] Within days, hundreds of Yezidis – including infants and young children – had died on Sinjar Mountain before the Syrian Kurdish forces and the People's Defense Units (YPG) were able to open a safe corridor and evacuate them through Syria into the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.[17]

On lower ground, ISIS captured thousands of Yezidis in their villages, or alongside roads as they were fleeing. Estimates vary, but approximately 6,400 Yezidis are thought to have been abducted and forcibly transferred into captivity. Initially these attacks were indiscriminate, targeting any Yezidi, regardless of age or sex. The mass executions were systematic, and included men, women, and children. Persecutions soon became gendered as ISIS victimized boys, men, women, and girls in different ways. Men faced forced conversion or death in mass executions. Older boys and men who refused to convert to Islam, or in some cases even those who agreed to convert under pressure, were summarily executed. Bodies were left on the side of the road or dumped in mass graves. Others, who were spared after being forced to convert to Islam, were relocated by ISIS to abandoned villages where they were enslaved. Young boys were sent to recruitment camps in Syria to be indoctrinated and trained as child soldiers.[18]

Older Yezidi women were often sold into domestic servitude and given as gifts to female ISIS members by their husbands or brothers. Young women and girls, considered *sabaya* (prisoners of war), were forcibly converted, transferred, exchanged, and sold into slavery.[19] They were then split up into small groups and placed in viewing areas to be inspected, bought, and sold. Their worth was measured by factors such as age, marital status, beauty, and sexual purity. The "best" girls were sent to Raqqa, the capital of the Caliphate, while the rest were sold in markets, either electronically over mobile phone messenger apps, or in open halls and bazaars.

These 'sold' women and girls endured extreme violence. They were beaten and raped, sold, and resold to new ISIS members as sexual slaves.[20] Many became pregnant and contracted sexually transmitted diseases. If they were caught trying to escape, the consequences were severe. One woman reported that her fighter-owner killed several of her children to punish her, and then he continued to rape her for the next several months. Captors also ordered gang rapes of women and girls trying to escape. In the homes of these men, they were handcuffed and imprisoned for days, left in hunger and thirst.[21] Women and girls struggled to endure and survive the horrors of ISIS captivity, sometimes for years, although hundreds did manage to escape.[22] The UN-backed International Organization for Migration (IOM) recently estimated that approximately 2,700 Yazidi women and children remain missing, presumably still being held by their captors or now dead.[23]

Understanding return and reintegration

ISIS's attacks were particularly destructive to the community because of the gender norm that men's and families' honor are represented through women's bodies.[24] When captured women return to these types of contexts, the consequences of their sexual violation generate intense social precarity for them. Standards of communal morality and internalized attitudes about honor often lead to significant anxiety and fear – for the returnees - as well as communities.[25] For these reasons, feelings of shame, and the act of shaming or stigmatizing, play a particular role in individual and collective reintegration.

As ISIS began to lose territorial control and the Caliphate collapsed, captive women faced a difficult return and reintegration into Yezidi communities, facing new security and psycho-social challenges.[26] ISIS had wiped out entire villages, decimated agricultural livelihoods, razed religious shrines, and pushed Yezidis out of their sacred homeland. Returning women would not be going back to the previous security of their homes, families, and communities. Instead, return meant learning to cope with the multiple losses incurred during the war. It also meant finding ways to re-establish their lives in the context of a dispersed and uprooted religious community

that remained bound together not only by collective trauma, but also orthodoxy, and the purity of sacred bloodlines. The challenges of this context would severely impact women because of their sexual contact with outsiders, albeit forced and violent. They knew that they would face real or perceived stigma, discrimination, and social rejection. ISIS had effectively manipulated Yezidism's traditional values of purity and endogamy in ways that ensured women's dishonor, humiliation, and collective shame.[27] Knowing this, some women did not even try to go back and migrated to other parts of the region and Europe.

Stigmatization reduces a person from a whole, to a person tainted and discounted, and leads to social devaluation.[28] It marks them as having a condition identified by their community as deviant, in which the individual is seen as flawed or spoiled. Based upon their cultural norms and religious obligations, many Yezidi women knew that what they had survived would 'contaminate' their families and community. They were returning marked by forcible conversion and rape and marriage to ISIS fighters, often with consequent children.

Methods of stigmatization include labelling, stereotyping, and social reaction such as shunning. Shaped by shared cultural meanings, these reactive social responses are observed and experienced by the stigmatized person. Theorists argue that while stigma has an individual dimension, it is fundamentally social because the stigmatized condition threatens the highest principles and values of the surrounding community. For individuals who respond in stigmatizing ways, rejection seems an appropriate and natural reaction, not only because it is an act of self-preservation or defense, but because morality itself is being threatened. But as the marked individual is perceived to threaten the status quo, so too are they being threatened by it.[29] Stigma takes on a character of danger because it threatens the individual, the collective, and the cultural and religious values most prioritized. This is how it threatens both the moral standing of an individual as well as the community. A natural conclusion, then, is that if a tainted person returns to a community, the members themselves might somehow become tainted by their association with them.

The invention of reintegration for women returnees

Baba Sheikh's leadership was instrumental in the return and reintegration of female survivors. He issued two public decrees asserting the enduring purity of the Yezidi women who had been forcibly converted or physically violated and welcomed their return home. His message was widely broadcasted and translated via television in Kurdish, Arabic, and English.[30] This announcement emerged for two primary reasons: a dedication by Baba Sheikh to safeguard the Yezidi social fabric against the atrocities committed by ISIS, and as a response to the community – particularly family members – who had been advocating for their return. Given its highly prescribed rules about conversion and its protectiveness of marriage and sacred bloodlines, this public declaration was a direct challenge to Yezidi historical exclusionary practices and traditional gender norms. His decision was not just radical and unprecedented, it also required courage and religious imagination.

Baba Sheikh and other spiritual leaders re-imagined and adapted the ritual of baptism on behalf of the women who had endured forced conversions or defilement by ISIS. Baptism, which symbolizes spiritual initiation into the religious community, became a threshold for individual and social transformation. It was reinterpreted to include the symbolic and literal cleansing of the soul, purification from violation, and re-acceptance into the Yezidi religious fold. Instituting this ritual as the pathway to reintegration stood as a powerful counter-narrative to ISIS's attempts at cultural erasure. In effect, Baba Sheikh found a way to erase the stigma of these women's past while circumventing community fear by re-asserting Yezidi identity for all who had suffered under their regime.[31]

The Re-Baptism Ritual

Re-baptism became a deeply meaningful healing process that validated women's identity as Yezidi. It involves a pilgrimage to *Kanîya Spı,ˆ* the holy spring at Lalish, and includes various religious leaders, religious teachings, and blessings. Women have the option of being baptized individually or in groups, but each person is baptized separately. Because healing is a process, they are also allowed to visit these holy springs multiple times. The ritual process is conducted openly and publicly, although entrance to certain areas within Lalish – such as *Kanîya Spıˆ* – is prohibited to non-Yezidis.

When survivors arrive, they are welcomed by Baba Chawish, a devoted individual who has dedicated his life to serving the temple. He escorts them to the cleansing waters of the spring where they are met by a *Daya* (mother) who serves as the baptismal officiant. The presence of a *Daya* is mandatory but clergy, community leaders, and relatives of the women are allowed to attend. During the ritual, the *Daya* recites sayings, places her hand on the person's head, and pours water over them three times, marking the restoration of their status as a Yezidis. Recitations vary but consist of religious teachings or verses related to baptism, religion, life, and nature. Afterwards, the *Daya* lays her hand on the person's head again and blesses them. At the close of the ritual, the *Daya* gives newly baptized women a white headscarf, and gifts are exchanged.[32] Once the ritual has been completed, women proceed on to the Spiritual Council where these leaders receive them, offer prayers, and officially accept them back into the religious community.

Photo: MikaelF via Wikimedia Commons

Baptism at Kanîya Spî ("White Spring") in Lalish.

Lalish is a large temple complex with many sacred shrines to visit and other non-obligatory rituals that women may choose to perform. For example, some participate in the Yezidi tradition of tying and untying *girêk* (knots) in colorful silk scarves hung on pillars and trees throughout the site. Different colors represent the heavenly angels and elements of nature, but for re-baptism, white is the preferred color. Yezidis believe that tying a knot is an act of prayer, and that when another pilgrim unties their knot in the future, their prayer will be answered. Women may also participate in additional celebrations such as processions, communal meals, theatrical performances, and the lighting of candles.

The Yezidi baptismal ceremony reflects the community's commitment to tradition, spirituality, and communal celebration, a rich tapestry of belief woven around the sacred waters of *Kanîya Spî*. Even before the ancient rite was re-imagined for the returning Yezidi women, elements of it were not static. It has continued to adapt over the years. For example, as part of the celebration after a baptism has been performed, candies or chocolates are tossed instead of the traditional scattering of dried fruits – blending solemnity with contemporary revelry. And now, these rituals hold additional cultural and spiritual significance, serving as a tangible expression of readmittance and acceptance into the community.

Ongoing challenges to reintegration

The journey to recovery for Yezidi women and girls continues to carry multiple challenges. Beyond their spiritual and psycho-social needs, they face poverty; barriers in accessing basic services; and access to safe and private housing. Prior to their abduction, many women, particularly those from rural parts of Sinjar, had limited education. They had married early, experiencing motherhood at a young age. Connection with the world beyond their extended families had been mediated through husbands or male relatives. With numerous Yezidi men deceased or missing, these returning women's capacity to navigate life independently and financially was limited.

The enactment of the Yezidi Female Survivors Law by the Iraqi Parliament in March 2021 – though not without controversy and applicable to other ethno-religious minority groups - marked a significant step toward addressing legacy of violations committed by ISIS. This groundbreaking legislation established an administrative reparations program designed to enact the rights of survivors. Provisions for qualifying women included a monthly pension, land, education and employment opportunities, and on-going mental health services. It included measures such as inter-agency coordination for support services, the creation of medical centers, the continued search for kidnapped Yezidis, and the on-going investigation of crimes committed by ISIS. A lack of clarity about confidentiality and privacy, however, raised concerns that the implementation process might not be sensitive to the needs, interests, and security of these women. Additionally, the law did not contain any

measures to address the future of children born of rape.[33]

Baba Sheikh's decision to reintegrate female Yezidi survivors confronted taboo subjects such as rape and cross-group sexual "contamination". Nonetheless, his benevolence, did not extend to ISIS born children. After intense public debate and some backlash against his initial decree, he issued public clarification that children conceived in ISIS captivity and born to Yezidi women would not be accepted into the Yezidi community.[34] He argued that legally they were Muslim because Iraqi law upholds patrilineal descent, which prohibits women from passing on their religious identity. Therefore, he argued, these children threatened Yezidism's religious tenets of blood-succession. Additionally, they were a painful reminder of desecration and genocide. Since then, local clerics have played a central role in sustaining this public opinion, particularly by actively opposing their integration.

The rejection of children born of rape became a significant obstacle for the returning women.[35] In a context of minimal choices, mothers' ability to reintegrate was directly tied to the fate of these children – and their reactions varied. Some women perceived them as a painful stigma and willingly abandoned them. Others felt forced by their families and were compelled to give them up for adoption. Fearing their own social stigma, many families pressured reintegrating women to stay silent and not talk about their experiences during the war. But the lack of acknowledgement and pervasive secrecy surrounding their history has generated significant stress and mental health repercussions.[36]

Conclusion and key findings

Ritual has played a critical role in the reintegration of female Yezidi survivors. For women who endured captivity, rebaptism emerged as a vital way to restore their faith in God, reconnect to their spiritual community, find solace, and begin to rebuild their lives. Undergoing the rite was deeply sacred and intimate, and washing away the defilement they experienced under ISIS signified a spiritual and social return to purity. It helped to reduce shame, de-stigmatize, and mend a ruptured connection to their communities. Participating in a rebaptism ceremony also provided a way for these women to publicly demonstrate their resilience, and their determination to rebuild their lives. Through the ritual of re-baptism, many female Yezidi survivors found strength, hope, and a renewed sense of belonging that has enabled them to better navigate the complex path towards their recovery.[37]

The proactive involvement of religious leaders was fundamental to changing the social status of returning women and girls. Through the incorporation of religious rituals and cultural celebrations, public announcements, and education, they were able to instigate a powerful shift in social attitudes. These clergy pre-emptively sought to address communal fears of contamination and they deliberately encouraged societal acceptance. The strategies they employed challenged historical patterns of exclusion, moving communities away from a response of stigmatization and social rejection toward that of compassion and inclusion. It was through the teachings and blessings of clergy that communities were enabled to circumvent social norms and prescribed religious obligations, and welcome women and girls back home.

Overall, rebaptism has been widely accepted throughout Yezidi communities as a healing ritual for women and girls that were victims of previous violence. However, internal tension and disagreement continues to impact responses to mothers and their ISIS-born children. This same challenge persists in other conflict affected countries such as Bosnia, Sierra Leone, Peru, and Nigeria where war-related sexual violence was prevalent. How to respond to mothers and their children demands further legal, theological, and ethical reflection because they face immense vulnerabilities such as abandonment, statelessness, stigmatization, physical violence, poverty, and lifelong rejection from their families and societies.[38] Additionally, children born of wartime rape are generally overlooked in post-war reintegration programs; very little support or protections are given to them. Although the international community has more recently become responsive, international public policy and legal frameworks that address the specific needs and vulnerabilities of these children has been broadly absent.[39]

How the Yezidis reintegrated women returning from ISIS captivity showcases the significant role that religious rituals and cultural practices can play in social healing. In this context, the ancient and deeply rooted ritual of baptism was reframed to become a pathway for their homecoming. The Yezidi's highest spiritual authority played a significant role in this process by re-imagining and validating baptism as a source of their purification

and renewal. For women who survived ISIS atrocity and violation, re-baptism offered healing and reassurance. It also publicly reaffirmed their collective identity. For their families, baptism acknowledged the dignity and belonginess of violated women, making it socially acceptable for them to be welcomed back. And, for the community, baptism ultimately protected Yezidism more broadly. It recognized women and girls' victimhood, dispelled fears of contamination, and challenged unjust gender norms in ways that would protect the future survival of their religious community.

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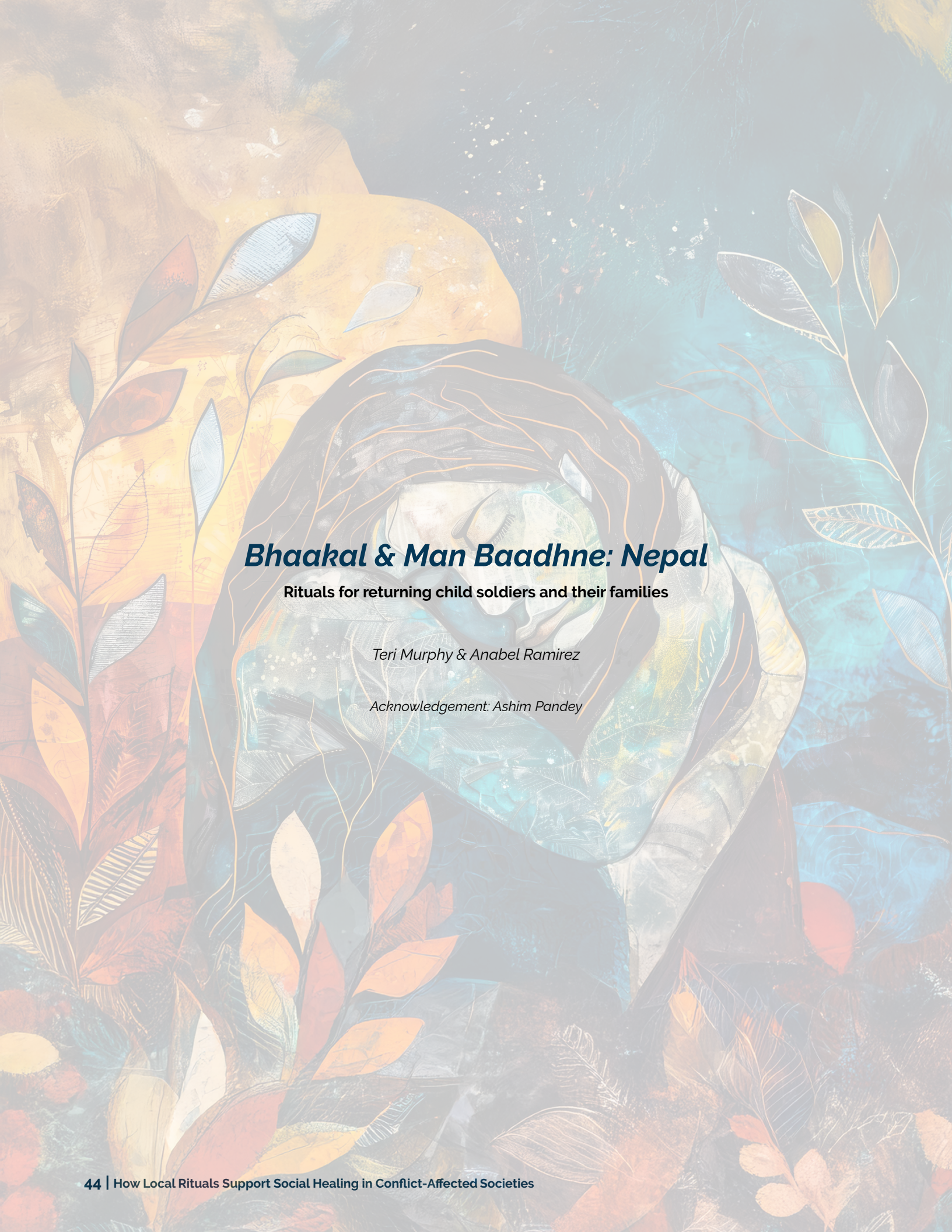

Bhaakal & Man Baadhne: Nepal

Rituals for returning child soldiers and their families

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Acknowledgement: Ashim Pandey

Introduction

In 1996, the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M) presented demands to the government of Nepal to address the country's extreme social and economic disparity. They called for the abolishment of the monarchy and the creation of a constituent assembly to draft a representative constitution. In solidarity with the grievances and aspirations of large sections of the Nepali rural populations, CPN-M asked for an end to caste and ethnic discrimination, land reform, and a "people's democratic system" of governance.[1] When the government refused, CPN-M began an agrarian revolution (popularly known as "The People's War") that would last for the next ten years. In 2006, a Comprehensive Peace Agreement was finally signed between the Maoists and Nepal's main political parties. After the CPN-M won the Constituent Assembly elections held in 2008, former insurgent leader Prachanda became Nepal's Prime Minister.

From the onset of the war, Maoists were exceptional in their ability to build popular support, especially outside of Kathmandu and in rural areas where 89% of the population lived.[2] CPN-M's ideology not only had broad appeal, but it was relevant to the real-life experiences of rural people. That appeal is often explained as stemming from their ability to tap into existing grievances and "rage against the legacy of oppression based on caste and ethnicity."[3] But geography, landlessness, relative deprivation, poverty, and general underdevelopment were also contributing factors.[4] CPN-M's platform resonated with the people, and they were quickly mobilized from a wide range of castes and ethnic groups. The Maoist's ability to build ties throughout the countryside enabled them to bolster the ranks of their armed wing, the People's Liberation Army (PLM), and generate the resources required to wage war. What initially started as relatively small insurgency in a few isolated districts became a revolutionary movement that ended up controlling most of the Nepali territory by the end of 2004.[5]

The People's War was not just an armed conflict, it was also a social movement that captured the hearts and imaginations of people. Nepal's Maoist ideology was liberating to the disenfranchised. They were prolific writers and skilled propagandists, producing their own publications, running FM radio stations, and using domestic and international media. As their message spread, young people mobilized and took on leadership roles, doctors began caring for the wounded, and village militias provided safety and security. In base areas, there were social clubs for children and youth, and unions for women, teachers, and Janajatis (indigenous groups); no one was left out. Many women were drawn to Maoist ideology because of its inclusivity and egalitarian principles. In CPN-M's original demand to the government, they had insisted that patriarchal exploitation and discrimination against women be stopped, and that daughters be allowed access to paternal property.[6] While mainstream parties had shown little interest in issues affecting women, the importance of their rights protections were highlighted by the CPN-M.

Before the groundswell of its insurgency, Maoist activities were limited. They had almost no weapons, and a tiny organizational base. Skirmishes mainly took place in remote districts through direct confrontations with police. Over time, however, PLM's tactics changed, and they widened the scope of their attacks.[7] By 2001, the Prime Minister had imposed a state of emergency, which gave sweeping discretionary powers to the security forces in dealing with anyone deemed to be a terrorist. The Royal Nepal Army (RNA) was mobilized to counter the uprising, prompting a militarized intensification of violence. Faced with an unseen enemy, the government cracked down tightly, arresting hundreds of politicians, journalists, and human rights defenders. State sponsored vigilante militias conducted lynchings, burned villages, and brutally beat supposed Maoist sympathizers.[8] One of the greatest factors that galvanized continued support for the Maoists and alienated the public from the government was its inability to control the widespread and indiscriminate violence of their official forces.[9] Fear spread throughout Nepal's complex caste and ethnic system, provoking an array of festering grievances. In some settings, these fears triggered communal rioting.

Over time, a war waged on behalf of the people began to turn on the people. As part of their "People's War," the Maoists began to target and kill civilians suspected as informers. They often tortured and executed their victims in public. Because the government had little presence outside the administrative capitals, citizens were left without protection. Despite increases in international military aid, the insurgency remained an intractable challenge to the government. Thousands of civilians were displaced and were forced to migrate to nearby cities, often in India, for their security and survival. Human rights violations and abuses by both Security Forces and by CPN-M became rampant. In addition to serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law such as enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, torture, sexual violence, and arbitrary arrest, people caught in the conflict were also affected in other ways. Families and communities were displaced from their

homes and critical infrastructures were destroyed. There were large-scale disruptions to education, health, and basic services across the country.[10]

An end to the war came slowly, and it did not come through a decisive military victory. Instead, a range of factors shaped the outcome. The consistent communication between parties, including several cease fires, secret meetings, and negotiations had remained on-going. At times, the government attempted concessions such as offering amnesty to those who would lay down their weapons. Eventually, they also dropped the "terrorist" label. There was a shocking and tragic royal massacre in 2001 in which ten members of the Nepal royal family were killed, including the king. The international community had also become increasingly involved. The International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) established a presence in Nepal, began monitoring the conflict, and became active in working to protect civilians and prisoners of war. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights negotiated an OHCHR mission, allowing them to set up field offices, monitor and investigate allegations of human rights violations, provide technical assistance to the Government, and engage with non-state actors. And both the Maoists and the government became progressively more open to ending the conflict through political dialogue.

These contributing factors, and both conflicting parties' inability to win militarily, eventually led to a Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA) between the Government and the CPN-M in 2006. Although the Maoists did not achieve power by winning the war, provisions in the Accord acceded to their original demands. An interim government was formed to oversee an election of a Constituent Assembly. There would be an inclusive restructuring of the State to address oppressed and neglected communities. The monarchy would no longer have any authority in ruling the country.[11] The CPA also provided a roadmap for the peace process, including provisions for how to address crimes that had been committed by both sides during the conflict. All parties expressed a commitment to impartial investigations and ensured that impunity would not be tolerated. More specific to this case study, there was a clause to provide special protection for the rights of women and children, to immediately stop conflict-related violence against them, and to no longer include or use children who were 18 or below in armed forces. Children that were part of the ranks were to be immediately rescued and given the necessary and appropriate assistance for their rehabilitation.[12]

Child soldiers

The 1992 Children's Act of Nepal had been in effect during the civil war. It defined children as a person below the age of 16, but there was no mention against the use of children during an armed conflict. In the broader context of international norms during that era, such as the 1989 Rights of the Child Convention, and the 1997 Cape Town Principles, a "child" was understood as anyone under the 18 years of age. The concept of "child" versus "adult", however, is socially understood and not necessarily an age- or time-bound experience in many cultural contexts.[13] Instead, the distinction between a child and adult may more be related to social expectations, developmental milestones, marriage, and maturity. The discrepancies between international and national definitions of the "child," and varying cultural understandings and expectations, became problematic loopholes for post-Accord impunity and eventually contributed to the lack of a formalized, comprehensive framework to reintegrate Nepal's child soldiers.[14]

Thousands of children were drawn into Nepal's civil war. The PLA's ranks had been filled by children, with estimates that as high as 30% of their forces consisted of boys and girls under the age of 18.[15] They had been conscripted and abducted to become combatants, sentries, messengers, and spies (United Nations, 2006). The tactics PLA used varied, including intimidation, the kidnapping of individuals, mass abductions of students from schools and rallies, and using propaganda campaigns to attract volunteers. These children, drawn mainly from poor and rural communities, were also indoctrinated through the Maoist's cultural and educational programs.[16] To a lesser extent, the Royal Nepal Army Security also conscripted children, but more typically used them as informants for their forces. During the war, they had also targeted children in a variety of ways. By the time the Comprehensive Peace Agreement had been signed, all parties were accused of committing crimes against children including maiming, extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, torture, and sexual violence.

Unlike other contexts in which children have been conscripted, not all child soldiers in Nepal were forcibly recruited. Many of them joined the Maoists because of shared political ideology and self-motivation. CPN-M

Photo: Pavel Novak via Wikimedia Commons

A family posing underneath a memorial gate located in a valley formerly controlled by Maoist rebels in Nepal.

gave them hope that armed efforts would help them to achieve a better future. These children came from marginalized backgrounds, had experienced low standards of living, child labor, and other forms of hardship. Although they were young, their experience with poverty was visceral. They knew what discrimination was, and they knew it was unfair. Other motivating factors to join the cause included the disruption of schooling, destruction of crops and property, the lack of opportunity, and to escape marriage. The promise of immediate financial assistance and a way out of unemployment were strong pull factors, as well as a desire to avenge the deaths of family members.[17]

Nepal's Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) program was significantly delayed due to political interference and extended negotiations. During this pause, ex-combatants and child soldiers were left in limbo, and many chose to self-demobilize.[18] When the official program eventually commenced, the United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) carried out an initial screening process during which children were separated from adult combatants.[19] Former Maoist adult combatants were moved into cantonments and satellite camps across the country, while Royal Nepal Army soldiers remained in barracks. Adults verified as ex-combatants were given reintegration options, including voluntary retirement, integration into the Nepal Army, or a rehabilitation and reintegration package. And they were eligible for financial compensation seven times higher than that available to child soldiers.[20]

There was little vision for a child-centered DDR program. The 4,008 child soldiers screened and classified as Verified Minors and Late Recruits (VMLRs) were afforded very few options. They received limited – if any - financial compensation.[21] The programs offered to them were social rather than economic and political, so their pathway to return was not empowering or enabling. The UN's classification of them as *ayogya* (disqualified), though not intended, ultimately undermined their contribution and achievement as CPN-M combatants. It also had important consequences to their social identity because it shaped popular perception of their potential value to society. In Nepali, *ayogya* means incapable and unworthy – not just disqualified.[22] This derogatory framing, coupled with children missing out on basic education and employable training during the war, meant that they were returning politically dishonored and socially disqualified.

Reintegrating Nepali child soldiers were anxious about returning to their homes. Not only were they described as *ayogya*, but they were also left to negotiate complex identities and expectations. Neat international and national definitions did not fit their experiences. As soldiers, they had not been treated like children. They were given responsibilities and required to act as adults. They made decisions, assumed leadership, and some had even commanded units. Having left as children, and in many cases, now returning older than 18, they would face pressure from families to find employment and get married. They were caught between worlds. Customarily, family members occupy a central role in negotiating social milestones, but child soldiers had been away during those formative years and unable to go through these social transitions. Additionally, the skills and achievements that they had gained while in PLN were not recognized as worthy or relevant to the adult lives they were returning to.[23]

Child soldiers also existed in a grey moral space regarding their identities as victims. During the war, they had simultaneously drifted between being the victims of violence and perpetrating acts of violence against others. They had experienced coercion, terror, violence, and deception. And they may have caused these same experiences in others. The dual relationship they had with violence generated hostility and fear from their communities, and rejection by their families.[24] Many human rights violations and war causalities had

been inflicted upon civilians, and strong resentment about child-soldier involvement was prevalent. As a result, returning soldiers faced the psychological, social, and moral challenges of reconciling their own acts of violence, being victims of violence, while attempting to seek community acceptance.[25]

Additionally, in some contexts, being associated with the PLA was perceived as having violated Hindu cultural norms such as carrying dead bodies, eating in another ethnic group's home, and both sexes sleeping in the same tent. Returning child soldiers were considered unclean and socially taboo. Because of Nepal's entrenched patriarchal structures, girls faced additional challenges as they attempted to reintegrate.[26] They had fought for a revolution that was not successful in changing gender equality and norms. Former girl soldiers were returning to contexts where their mobility would be restricted, and where they would have minimal decision-making power or access to resources. If they were no longer perceived as pure, they also faced physical punishment and social ostracization. Fear and suspicion became a mutually shared reality between the soldiers, their families, and the community.[27] For these reasons, the use of rituals became an important mechanism for the return of Nepal's child soldiers, and to address the concerns of all involved.

Bhaakal and Man Baadhne

Traditional healers make up a significant part of the mental health workforce worldwide. Defined as "those who explicitly appeal to spiritual, magical, or religious explanations for disease and distress," they hold a unique position and capacity in society to offer practices with bio-psycho-social- and spiritual dimensions.[28] Although healing practices vary greatly from country to country, and are influenced by culture and context, traditional healers are especially appealing because they share common knowledge and incorporate the beliefs and practices of the local community. Since in many contexts, the causations of illness are understood through spiritual cosmologies, individuals are likely to seek practitioners and practices that incorporate their beliefs. Additionally, in areas where access to medical and psychiatric services are scarce or unaffordable, traditional healers can be an especially useful resource for mental health care.[29]

In the rural areas of Nepal, traditional healers played a distinct role in the return and reintegration of child soldiers.[30] Many of them came from the same village or town, they were already familiar with the long-standing family histories and how the civil war had impacted the community, so they were sensitive to the unique challenges facing the returning soldiers. This familiarity also made them less frightening and enabled them to generate empathy and trust more quickly. For these same reasons, traditional healers also had the relational resources to better mobilize the social support required to reintegrate child soldiers back into community. The healing rituals and practices they offered individuals were cathartic, at the family level they encouraged transformation, and for the wider community, they provided a pathway toward restoration and reconciliation.[31]

Puja is a name given to a wide range of spiritual and ceremonial practices in Hindu and Buddhist traditions. The Sanksrit word for *puja* means 'reverence, honor, homage, adoration, and worship'. In ancient Tamil, the name comes from the root of the cultural meaning of "to do with flowers" which was likely developed from the custom of offering the Buddha flowers upon his arrival during his travels. Pujas consist of placing flowers, candles, food, and incense in front of a symbol or image of a deity. During a puja, worshippers carry out breathing actions to clarify the body and mind, chant to honor the god, and indicate their intentions and special requests. Pujas can be done privately in the home, be assisted by a priest at a temple, or performed by a traditional healer. In priest-assisted and traditional healing ceremonies, food, fruits, and sweets included as sacrificial offerings are shared after the prayers with those who attended. These types of public ceremonies can become symbolically meaningful, assist in mobilizing the community, express vows and intentions publicly, and thereby hold the potential to encourage peace and social healing.[32]

Bhaakal (to promise or offer something) is one type of puja and is a very common ritual used across all caste and ethnic groups in Nepal. It was the most practiced ritual for reintegrating returning children soldiers.[33] In *bhaakal*, pledges are performed to a deity in which a sacrifice is promised if the worshipper receives a blessing or if a special request is granted. During the war and reintegration process, *bhaakal* was performed for different reasons. For example, prior to their child's return, some parents performed it during a *kul devta* puja, which more specifically offers thanksgiving to the family's ancestors. Many parents believed the Maoists had abducted their children because ancestral deities were angry with them. Offering *bhaakal* was a form of atonement, sacrifice, and a desire to appease. To bring their children back safely, promises and intentions were offered during the worship that would

be fulfilled when they returned.

Bhaakal was also used as a restorative ritual to reintegrate the returning child. It served as a rite of passage, moving the child from having the identity of a Maoist soldier to the identity of being a family member again. For the returning child, this type of *bhaakal* was especially beneficial. Many children were reluctant to return, but going through the ritual symbolized their membership within the community. It also demonstrated their parent's acceptance, that their families cared for them and wanted them to come home. Sometimes families celebrated their child's homecoming by placing flower necklaces around their necks (*malla laaguane*), while others offered sweets to neighbors, celebrating their child's healthy return. In some cases, white doves were released, while in others, the traditional healer sacrificed animals as an act of thanksgiving. When offered by the community, a public commitment was made not to seek revenge or to harm the former soldier. In return, the soldier would pledge a commitment not to use violence in the future. These types of *bhaakals* were often offered during community gatherings and feasts, or during special religious and cultural functions as a public expression of joint commitments and a willingness to reintegrate.

Photo: Teri Murphy

Bhaakal Ritual

Another ritual used to address the spiritual and psychological distresses of child soldiers was *man baadhne*.

The cosmological view of many Nepalis is that the self and life are fluid. The self is composed of *man* (heart-mind), *dimaag* (brain-mind), *iu/saarir* (physical body), *saato/atma* (spirit/soul), *ijjat* (social status/honor), and *samaaj* (social world). They do not make the mind-body distinction that is found in many Western societies. Instead, physical and emotional illness, spiritual problems, and life obstacles are deeply intertwined. Wholeness and health occur when there is balance between the individual, collective, and spiritual compositions of the self. *Man*, the seat of emotion and memory, is the site where negative emotions, sadness, and nightmares may emerge. These emotions effect the *dimaag* and influence social behavior. For example, if the brain is overwhelmed by strong emotion, an individual may not have the capacity to regulate aggressive and anti-social behavior such as violence towards others, anxiety, distraction, or depression. When this happens, *ius/saarir, saato/atma, ijjat*, and *samaaj* are deeply impacted.[34]

Many children exiting the conflict reported problems with their *man* and *dimaag*.[35] They experienced symptoms corresponding to the Western medical diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) such as flashbacks from the war, intrusive memories and rumination about traumatic events. Their heart-minds were overactive and not regulating. To address these emotional and spiritual distresses, many families relied on traditional healers to "bind the heart-mind" (*man baadhne*) and reduce these troubling memories.[36] The traditional healer would begin by diagnosing what was agitating the child's heart-mind and spirit/soul. They used techniques such as pulse checks, social interpretations, magico-religious divinations, recitals, or offerings. To quiet and rebalance the heart, mind, and spirit, healing practices varied but often included elaborate ceremonies and performances, fire, and offering sacrifices to the gods or ancestors. At times, the traditional healer might transfer the overwhelming emotions of the child to a transitional object such as an animal or egg, which they would sacrifice and consume. To raise the saato/atma, they might use a range of treatments such as delivering a mantra (spoken prayer, hymn, chanting) or tantras (reciting religious/spiritual texts).[37]

The successful reintegration of children previously involved in armed conflict is complex and difficult. Former child soldiers transitioning back into civil society come bearing the psychological and spiritual burdens of war. They also return with ambiguous and confusing identities, finding themselves caught between the roles of a child and adult, victim and perpetrator, soldier and civilian. In the case of Nepal, rituals such as *bhaakal* and *man baadhne* were particularly restorative in the reintegration process. They created the potential for the returning solider to go through a rite of passage, one that addressed their psychological and spiritual afflictions while also reaffirming their

old identities as children or affirming their new identities as adults. These ritualized transitions also assisted in their ability to re-enter society meaningfully and with roles and identities accepted by their families and communities.

Conclusion and key findings

Nepal is a land permeated with cultural traditions, where spirituality and modern life are intertwined. Pujas and other religious rituals take place in the privacy of homes, in front of small shrines that speckle streets, or at temples built in the first century. Offering *bhaakal* or healing through *man baadhne* were already part of Nepal's rhythm of life; these rituals were not created, contrived, or reinvented to encourage the reintegration of children soldiers. Instead, they were everyday rituals – common practices that ordinary individuals and communities used to navigate their lives. These types of "bottom up" or local ritualized practices hold great potential because they are not imposed. Instead, they are based upon values and spiritual practices that already exist and are meaningful to people.

There are cautions and limitations when considering the use of rituals for reintegrating children associated with armed conflict. Their return takes place against the backdrop of a community still recovering from conflict. In settings that have been torn apart by violence, and where anger towards child soldiers remains, resentment may be too strong for their successful and secure return. Not only do returning soldiers need time to heal and reintegrate, so do families and communities. If, when, whether, and how ritual processes take place needs careful consideration. For example, in the case of Nepal, the Maoists had indoctrinated children against religious and cultural practices. During the war, some of the child soldiers had beaten traditional healers, burned ritual sites, and even urinated on ritual artifacts. As a result, upon their return, some traditional healers rejected the children and refused to perform restorative rituals for their families.

Traditional healing rituals are also not risk-free simply because they are culturally rooted and stand outside Western medical models. They are not necessarily or essentially holistic. In some cases, they may be entrenched in significantly biased practices or exclusionary symbolism that marginalizes women and children. For some returning Nepali girl soldiers, demobilization represented a step backwards. It meant facing a possible forced marriage or a life of servitude. Although some of the rituals may have led to an increase in community acceptance of the girl soldiers, for others, their ritual participation represented patriarchal subjugation. They also perceived rituals as superstitious and backward.[38] For these reasons, many girls refused to participate in reintegration rituals.

At the same time, traditional, religious, and cultural rituals do have the potential to promote psychosocial wellbeing during the reintegration process. Research indicates that common psychological symptoms expressed as depression, anxiety, somatization, and interpersonal and social difficulties – often found in soldiers - are receptive to traditional healing practices.[39] Though not a replacement for behavioral and mental health care, these interventions are trusted, accessible, and can serve as front-line responses. Socially, rituals can hold significant meaning to a former child soldier and to the community, serving as a supportive pathway for their return. *Bhaakal* and *man baadhne* offered a way for children to transition and regain social positioning within their families and communities. But families and communities also needed to make a transition. Rituals became a collective way for them to deal with the past, detach from fear and hostility, begin seeing the returning child as more than a solider, and to express a public commitment to their reintegration.

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Service of Lament: Northern Ireland

A ritual for collective healing

Shona Bell

Introduction

Northern Ireland (NI) became embroiled in a violent political struggle between the late 1960s and the late 1990s. Bombings, assassinations, and disappearances were common as people battled over whether the region would remain part of the United Kingdom (UK) or be reunited with the Republic of Ireland. Most Catholics identified as pro-Irish and nationalists, and they wanted NI to reunite with the Republic of Ireland. Protestants largely called themselves pro-British and unionists, and they strongly resisted leaving the UK. These identities coalesced in acutely polarizing ways and eventually erupted into acts of extreme violence. Unofficial and illegal paramilitaries bombed city centers and assassinated rivals. For over three decades, communities throughout NI, the Republic of Ireland, and Great Britain were subject to violence from paramilitary groups, the British army, and the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC – the police force for NI) that was marked by terror, intimidation, sniper attacks, and internments. Nearly 4,000 people eventually died during these decades of conflict that became known as the "Troubles."

The narratives about NI's Troubles are rooted in centuries of struggle and remain contested. It wasn't until the 1920s, when the Irish fought for independence from the UK, that the island of Ireland divided. The Irish Free State – which would eventually become the Republic of Ireland - gained sovereignty over most of the island, while six counties in the northeast were partitioned as a concession to Unionists. Territory that became NI had the highest majority Protestant population, therefore ensuring an inbuilt political alignment with the UK. But by the 1960s, the Catholic minority had grown in number and become increasingly frustrated with the electoral system, policing, and unequal access to housing and jobs. Discontent across the region escalated into a civil rights movement which was eventually suppressed by the predominately Protestant RUC. In 1969, British troops were deployed, causing an intense escalation of violence. During a march against internment in Derry/Londonderry on January 30, 1972, thirteen people were killed when a military regiment opened fire upon marchers. This day, known as Bloody Sunday, became a defining moment in the conflict because it fed into the perspective that the British State was complicit in the violence, not merely an impartial peacekeeper. In response, recruitment for Republican paramilitary groups soared and 1972 became the bloodiest year of the Troubles.[1]

In the early 1990s, the provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) began to rethink its commitment to violence. Locked in a stalemate with both the British state and other paramilitary groups, many members had become weary of fighting. There was also widespread popular pressure to end the violence. After the IRA declared their first cease-fire in 1994, pro-British paramilitaries soon followed, but violence continued to erupt. Finally, with the support of the British and Irish governments, a peace accord known as the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) was negotiated and signed on April 10, 1998. It created a blueprint for NI's governance structure that ensured power-sharing between pro-British and pro-Irish parties. The plan also included the reform of policing and the criminal justice system, a decommissioning process for paramilitary weapons, the release and reintegration of political prisoners, and the development of the NI Human Rights Commission. In contrast to other transitional justice frameworks, the Good Friday Agreement did not include an overarching process for truth recovery, or reconciliation – an omission that has made a significant impact on the quality of NI's peace and reconciliation efforts.

The GFA began by acknowledging that "(t)he tragedies of the past have left a deep and profoundly regrettable legacy of suffering. We must never forget those who have died or been injured, and their families". It went on to place conditions on this sentiment: "But we can best honour them through a fresh start, in which we firmly dedicate ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust, and to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all."[2] The intended message was to leave the past behind. No clear provisions were stipulated to deal with the widespread human rights abuses that had occurred. Since the signing of the agreement, there have been some strategies to address the legacy of NI's difficult past, but they have not been State-driven or State-legitimized. External donors have provided most of the funding, and activities have been facilitated through civil society organizations. These efforts have tended to be piecemeal and lacking in the authority and cohesive approach that are necessary for justice and collective healing.

The lack of justice and focus on collective healing is important because violence during the Troubles was particularly intimate. NI is geographically small; it is less than 6 thousand square miles. Much of the violence also took place in a few highly concentrated neighborhoods, especially in North and West Belfast. During the 30-year period from 1968 to 1998, not only were there nearly 4,000 Troubles-related deaths, but there

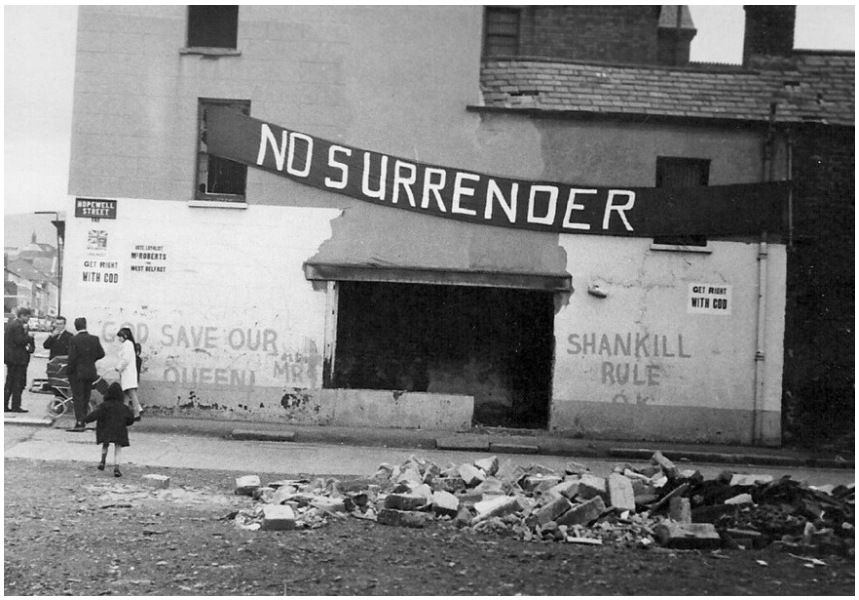

Photo: Fribbler via Wikimedia Commons

The Shankill road, Belfast during the troubles.

were also 48,000 physical injuries, 36,000 shootings, and 10,000 bomb explosions.[3] Pervasive everyday fear, and the closeness of violence, left a deep emotional imprint. For example, it is estimated that nearly 39.9% of NI's population personally experienced a Troubles-related traumatic event, and nearly 17% witnessed a death or serious injury.[4] 80% of the population knew someone who had been killed or injured because of the violence. Another study highlighted the elevated prevalence of mental health problems related to the Troubles, finding that NI had the highest rate of PTSD among the 30 countries surveyed.[5] Equally concerning are more current findings that show over three-quarters of people who had mental illness and reported a Troubles-related traumatic event did not seek help, suggesting substantial levels of unmet needs among the population.[6] These combined findings indicate the many ways mental, social, and spiritual health remain connected to a residual and unsettled past.

With such widespread loss and pain, there has been much to grieve over in NI. Beyond exposure to direct violence, in many cases there was loss of loved ones, loss of community relationships, loss of meaning, loss of a sense of safety, loss of belonging – perhaps even a loss of belief. Since 1998, however, persistent political stalemates have aggravated NI's ability to collectively move through what happened, to name, acknowledge, and grieve its past. Formal processes were not put into place to support and encourage social healing. This type of grief can be described as "disenfranchised" because it has not been openly acknowledged, supported, or publicly mourned.[7] In this way, disenfranchised grief has become an empathic failure because collective suffering has not been respected; people have been deprived of social comfort and support. The lack of a collective process has impeded their ability to come to terms with hurt, harm, and hardship, with social sorrow remaining isolated - constituting ethical failure. It is also a political failure because the whole of society is arguably still in need of a collective healing process. Perhaps intentionally, perhaps inadvertently, political elites circumscribed society's legitimate right to grieve.

Collective grieving in the aftermath of political violence becomes significant because it can be a catalyst for social healing and for a renewed sense of meaning. In contexts with similar faith traditions to NI, such as Colombia and East Timor, religion and religious institutions have played critical socio-political roles. Spiritual practices such as the Catholic Sacrament of Reconciliation, prayer, anointing, and blessings can be activated and respond to collective loss that has been left unacknowledged or dismissed. When post-conflict mourning has been disenfranchised, faith communities can sometimes draw from their rich traditions and adapt rituals that are already in place to support healing, memorialization, and burials. Members of churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples are familiar with these rites and ceremonies and may find comfort in them. Additionally, faith-leaders, as public figures, may be able to step into voids left by disabled or fragile political systems. In their roles, they often have access to elite leaders as well as local communities – so the stretch of their potential influence is broad. They may also face less political constraint when attempting to effect change. What follows is an illustration of how faith leaders bypassed a recent prolonged political deadlock in NI to generate an inter-faith and cross-institutional response to the need and necessity for public mourning and collective healing.

A Service of Lament

Lament (a definition): n. a passionate expression of sorrow or grief; a song, hymn, or poem of mourning v. to express sorrow, mourning, or regret aloud; to regret strongly.

The *Service of Lament* is an ecumenical service that symbolically takes place on June 21st, the longest day of the year in the Northern Hemisphere. It is held in the Church of Ireland's St. Anne's Cathedral, in Belfast city center, a beautiful and sacred place known for its welcome, inclusivity, and active engagement in the surrounding community. The service is based upon the biblical practice of lament and invites reflection on the conflict in and about NI, as well as its future. Through a thoughtfully written order of service, those who attend are given a public opportunity to acknowledge the deep hurt and pain they've been carrying, to reflect upon the impact of loss and harm, and to make a commitment to ensure such suffering and loss never happens again. The service is presided over by senior Protestant and Catholic clergy, signifying their own commitment to work across divides on behalf of the future of NI. Throughout the service, individuals who were directly and indirectly impacted by the conflict read scripture and poetry or share from their own personal experience. In this way, their private grief is made public and publicly shared. Music plays an important role in the service, moving people through discordant sounds of mourning and distress to joyful melodies of hope and vision. Reflective questions and long punctuated silences create poignant moments that amplify the loneliness of private pain and offer it permission to be situated inside a wider community. Tacking back and forth between the personal and the collective, the service coaxes grief out into the open, to be noticed, named, and shared.

Although the *Service of Lament* began in 2021 and is relatively new, Ireland and Scotland have a long and rich traditional form of vocal lamentation known as keening. This cultural practice has died out, but keening was a central part of funeral rituals for hundreds of years. It was essentially a structured personal, tribal, and communal response to death.[8] Family members could offer their own lament, or professional keeners would take on the role, wailing mournfully in the presence of the deceased. Their dirges, often beginning with a sharp cry, embodied the deep grief, love, sorrow, and bitterness of the family and surrounding community. These lamentations were considered musical poetry of eulogy and sorrow. Songs might plea to the spirit world or beseech God to look kindly on the deceased; others sought to bring honor, or to create a vivid memory for those left behind so that they would never forget the person. A form of public lament, keening was evocative, disturbing, deeply emotional, and cathartic. It became a socially ordered way for strong and distressing emotion to be expressed and expelled.[9]

Lament is also part of the Christian tradition, included within Biblical stories and religious rituals. As a genre of prayer, it can be found throughout scriptures, including lament for fallen warriors, illness, victims of suffering, and for the dead. There are also laments of anger, of protest, of repentance, and loss. Biblical characters such as Moses, Jeremiah, Hannah, and Jesus offered laments, modeling how to honestly speak to God, to enter the paradox of faith, and to connect with collective suffering. Lamentations were also used as vehicles to share the anger of confusion and loss. To lament, in the biblical context, was a crying out of the soul, one that created a pathway between what had already been done to what was yet to come. It gave emotions permission to be transient instead of fixed. Examples of this include Job's outpouring of grief and the alienation of Jesus on the cross. In both cases, lament served as a bridge between despair and a coming hope. For Christians, to lament acknowledges a painful reality as it also anticipates something new. It expresses agony and helps those who cry out to survive suffering.[10] Similar to the cultural practice of keening, Christian rituals of lament become a place for pain to breathe and for it to be absorbed through the presence of others.

Photo: Shona Bell

Belfast Cathedral

How the *Service of Lament* began was intuitive, a process that eventually developed into an empathic and ethical response to NI's social pain. The first service was held largely because of a public outcry that came because of the shocking killing of a young journalist named Lyra McKee. Her funeral, also held at St. Anne's Cathedral, was attended by hundreds of people. During the service, adversarial politicians, religious leaders, and citizens across all divides stood together in public outrage and a shared grief. The homily was a courageous lament, pointedly raising the question *why?* Why had it taken them so long to come together, why did it take the death of a young woman for them to

share and express collective grief? In a spontaneous and dramatic response to the priest's questions, everyone in attendance stood up and began applauding. A chord had been struck, one that resonated deeply within the greater community. This startling and unexpected reaction is what became the eventual impetus and call for a public lamentation.

Following the funeral, leaders from the Corrymeela Community – the island's oldest peace center - took the initiative in bringing together the religious leaders to discuss a collaborative response. Reflecting upon the need to publicly grieve, and the courage that it takes to do so, they decided to host their first *Service of Lament* on June 21st, 2021. Working with Healing to Remember – a cross community organization - and the WAVE Trauma Centre, their vision was to design a welcoming, yet explicitly Christian ritual that would 1) create a safe and cathartic experience for people to come together and share private pain, 2) invite reflection upon the impact of the Troubles, 3) encourage hope for the future, and 4) stir a vision within Catholic and Protestant churches to become more intentionally engaged in community healing. These leaders understood grief as an interior process, but one that is intrinsically social. They believed personal, familial, and historical pain were all linked, and that encouraging public lament would support public healing. Ultimately, it would mean standing together in solidarity with the wider contemporary community. To lament did not assume detachment or necessarily letting go of the past. But learning to live well together would require learning to live with loss differently. Their vision was for memory to be faced and held in constructive ways, and that it could be used to inform and guide NI toward a more hope-filled future.[11]

The service has continued to adapt, and attendance has doubled in size each year. A key strategy has been to create a network of churches to host local *Services of Lament* across NI and embed collective reflection into the imagination and rhythm of religious life. One of the challenges the leadership team has faced is that 'to lament' is perceived as sad and depressing; some people are not drawn to attend. Additionally, in Northern Ireland, there is a strong social norm not to talk about the past. Many people continue to avoid or isolate their personal suffering. Consideration is being given to whether the title of the service should be changed, and if there are other ways to balance the program with celebration, hope, and reconciliation. One of the changes that has already taken place is the use of time to represent a turn from dark to light, sadness to hope. The service now begins at 11:30am with the first ½ hour focused on reflection and lamentation. At noon, a shift takes place in the order of worship to focus on resilience and hope. They have also considered ways to connect the event with other spiritual practices that actively support the complicated struggle for meaning and healing.

Conclusion and key findings

Collective healing rituals in settings transitioning from conflict or sustained political violence can serve an important role in helping societies begin to re-integrate and address the legacy of unhealed wounds. In settings where religious institutions play a significant communal role and religious observance is common, spiritual practices can offer structured public outlets for the release and redirection of pain and suffering. Cross-community services and ceremonies can hold highly symbolic meaning and promote unity. Additionally, the embodied nature of rituals encourages individuals to move together through a reflective process in which suffering and hope are shared. History and harm are acknowledged as impacting the collective – not just an individual or group, but the whole of society. During these carefully structured rituals, it may become momentarily possible to transcend individualized loss and recognize the suffering of others, even those perceived as a former enemy – a critical step toward (re)building relationships and a shared future.

The Northern Ireland case study does offer some generalizable cautions or limitations in the use of religiously identified rituals. For example, in contexts where conflict narratives remain contested, there may be a perceived 'hierarchy of victimhood' or arguments about who are legitimate victims versus illegitimate victims. These on-going tensions may impede the public's willingness to participate in a ritual when cross-group pain and suffering are mutually acknowledged or validated.

Another caution is that for many individuals, trauma and loss can cause a questioning or even a rejection of previous beliefs and practices. They may feel betrayed by God or struggle to assimilate loss into their pre-existing spiritual belief systems. For them, finding ways to make sense of what they have survived may not be easy, if not impossible. While for some, the ambivalence of these inner conflicts might invite a deepening of belief structure, a redefinition of spirituality, and lead to a more resilient spirituality, for others, it might cause an

abandonment of faith.

Because religious institutions and leaders play ambiguous roles in society, trust in them may diminish during conflict. Although some leaders actively engage in non-violent peace protests and peace-making processes, others from the same faith tradition may take an active role in perpetrating inter-group harm. For this reason, places of worship and spiritual leaders may not be (or be perceived as) safe resources for social healing. Additionally, religious leaders may not be willing to work together in cross-faith or ecumenical ways. And even when there is motivation to activate collaborative movements, these activities can take an enormous amount of time and resources. They may be perceived by congregants as too political, making it difficult for leaders to cross institutional boundaries. Additionally, in post-religious contexts, the influence of these institutions may have become negligible.

At the same time, through public religious rituals, collective mourning can be formally enfranchised and respond to losses that have been avoided, ignored, or dismissed through political processes. People who grieve pain and loss often rely on their faith to help make sense of the past; most religions provide a unique and reliable framework for making sense of challenging life events. These rituals and spiritual practices can be activated and adapted in meaningful ways.

Additionally, clergy and spiritual communities can play a critical role in helping people learn how to move through loss and anger, and to integrate painful experiences. Lamentations recognize anger, confusion, and despondency toward God as normal reactions. These processes can release fixed or feared emotions and offer opportunities for them to be expressed and transformed in safe and supported ways.

Notes

1. John Darby, "Northern Ireland: The Background to the Peace Process," CAIN Archive, 2003, https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/events/peace/darby03.htm.

2. "Good Friday Agreement: The Agreement Reached in the Multi-Party Negotiation" (Belfast, 1998), 2.

3. Police Service of Northern Ireland, "Persons Injured as a Result of the Security Situation in Northern Ireland 1969-2003," CAIN Archive, 2003, https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/ni/security.htm#06

4. Brendan P. Bunting, Finola R. Ferry, Samuel D. Murphy, Siobhan M. O'Neill, and David Bolton, "Trauma associated with civil conflict and posttraumatic stress disorder: Evidence from the Northern Ireland study of health and stress," *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, vol. 26 no. 1 (2013): 134-141.

5. Ronald C. Kessler and T. Bedirhan Üstün. *The WHO World Mental Health Surveys: Global Perspectives on the Epidemiology of Mental Health Disorders* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

6. Finola Ferry, David Bolton, Brendan Bunting, Siobhan O'Neill, Samuel Murphy, and Barney Devine, "Economic Impact of Post Traumatic Stress in Northern Ireland" (report, Toronto, 2012).

7. Kenneth Doka, "How Could God?," in *Loss of the Assumptive World*, ed. Jeffrey Kauffman (New York: Routledge, 2002);
Thomas Attig, "Disenfranchised Grief Revisited: Discounting Hope and Love," *OMEGA*, vol. 49 iss. 3 (2004): 197-215.

8. Patricia Lysaght, "'Caoineadh os Cionn Coirp': The Lament for the Dead in Ireland," *Folklore*, vol. 108 (1997): 65-82.

9. Lysaght, 65-82.

10. Aubrey Sampson, *The Louder Song: Listening for Hope in the Midst of Lament* (Colorado Springs: Nav-Press, 2019).

11. Corrymeela Programme Manager, personal interview by S. Bell, January 15, 2024.

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Conclusion

Insights and recommendations from each of the case studies

Conclusion

This volume explores how rituals have facilitated healing, reintegration, and reconciliation in communities affected by violence. These rituals are deeply rooted in the communities' histories, cosmologies, and traditions, making them culturally relevant, contextually meaningful, and accessible.

Peacebuilding is fundamentally relational, and the rituals highlighted here fostered a sense of reconnection and belonging. Ritual acts themselves became the embodiment of social healing. Through these practices, community members were able to confront one another, express their feelings, acknowledge each other's humanity, repair past harms, and embark on a shared journey toward a more hopeful future.

While we have noted cautions and limitations regarding the use of rituals, we believe they hold significant promise for rebuilding relationships between groups divided by conflict. In conclusion, we have summarized key insights from each case study and offer recommendations for practitioners and policymakers interested in incorporating rituals into future peace initiatives.

Colombia

Insights from the use of indigenous rituals for collective reintegration:

1. **Cultural Reconnection and Identity Restoration:** Indigenous rituals offered ex-combatants a pathway to reclaim their cultural knowledge, identity, and ties to their community. The process of reharmonization helped them regain a sense of belonging and reinforced their spiritual connection to the nation and territory. Purification rituals served as rites of passage back into the community, playing a vital role in the psychological and spiritual healing of ex-combatants. These slow and intentional processes fostered communal acceptance.
2. **Collective Approach to Reintegration:** The Nasa perspective views the recruitment of minors into armed conflict as a violation of collective rights, rather than just an individual trauma. The severance of their bond with the land and community is seen as a violation against families, society, nature, and the universe. This collective emphasis highlights the interconnectedness of individual and communal identities, framing the reintegration process as a shared experience and mutual responsibility.
3. **Integration with Transitional and Restorative Justice:** Rituals associated with the reintegration of ex-combatants incorporated elements of transitional justice, such as truth-telling and accountability for past actions. This approach was essential, ensuring that reintegration involved not only acceptance but also acknowledgment of past harm and a commitment to reconciliation. By emphasizing justice and accountability, these rituals enhanced their effectiveness in fostering genuine healing and societal cohesion.

Recommendations

- **Acknowledge and Embed Indigenous Rituals in Formal Reintegration Programs:** Collaborate closely with community leaders to identify culturally appropriate rituals and indigenous mechanisms of transitional and restorative justice. Consider incorporating practices such as purification ceremonies, community welcoming events, and rituals for forgiveness to facilitate the reintegration of combatants.

- **Create Hybrid Programs:** While rituals are valuable, they may not fully address the complex challenges faced by returning combatants. Provide extended psychosocial and spiritual counseling, educational opportunities, and vocational training throughout the reintegration process. Specifically address the unique challenges faced by women and girl ex-combatants through targeted programs that focus on their vulnerabilities, ensuring they receive appropriate support and protection against stigmatization.

East Timor

Insights from the use of rituals for repatriation and grassroots reconciliation.

1. **Community-Centric Processes:** Grassroots rituals, such as the *nahe biti* ceremony, foster community involvement and ownership in the repatriation and reconciliation process. By drawing on familiar traditions, these rituals create a safe space for dialogue among former adversaries, facilitate trust-building, and encourage acknowledgment of past grievances. Participatory approaches are especially important in small villages where relationships are closely intertwined, enabling collective healing that formal political frameworks often overlook.
2. **Customary Law as a Tool for Immediate Repatriation:** In contexts where formal justice systems are weak or slow, customary law and rituals offer immediate and accessible means for addressing conflict and reintegrating individuals. Traditional leaders play a crucial role in assessing the eligibility of returnees, managing community dynamics, and facilitating local customs that reflect the community's shared values. However, it is essential to balance these practices with respect for human rights to ensure they do not perpetuate harm.
3. **Transformative Potential of Rituals:** Grassroots reconciliation rituals can broaden and transform perspectives, helping individuals more fully understand the impact of conflict, recognize the harms committed, and identify ways to repair those harms. The challenging work of confession, dialogue, and accountability can foster a sense of shared humanity, promoting humility, empathy, and understanding among community members.

Recommendations

- **Invest in Community-Led Initiatives:** Allocate resources to support grassroots reconciliation projects that empower local leaders to facilitate dispute resolution, dialogue, and healing through customary processes. This includes funding for community rituals and events that foster understanding and cooperation among former adversaries.
- **Co-create Guidance Frameworks:** Collaborate with state, local, and grassroots leaders to integrate legal mechanisms and customary practices into formal reconciliation processes. Ensure these processes are evaluated against traditional norms and human rights standards. This should involve bi-directional training for state officials, local leaders, and mediators to enhance understanding and promote complementary practices.

Kurdistan

Insights from the use of rituals to offer healing, reduce stigma, and foster acceptance.

1. **Restoration of Identity:** Rituals like rebaptism serve as powerful means to restore a sense of identity and purity for women who have experienced severe trauma. By undergoing this sacred rite, Yezidi survivors symbolically washed away the stigma and shame associated with their experiences, allowing them to reclaim their spiritual and social status within their communities. This transformation was essential for rebuilding their lives and fostering a sense of belonging.
2. **Destigmatization and Community Acceptance:** The proactive involvement of religious leaders in the rebaptism process is critical for changing societal attitudes toward survivors. By framing the ritual as a pathway to healing and reintegration, these leaders can help combat fears of contamination and promote acceptance within the wider community. This shift benefits individual survivors and strengthens community bonds, challenging harmful stigmas and fostering an environment of compassion and inclusion.
3. **Addressing Broader Vulnerabilities:** While rebaptism represents a significant step for the reintegration of female survivors, ongoing challenges remain, particularly regarding the social acceptance of their children born from wartime violence. The lack of comprehensive legal and social frameworks to support these children highlights the need for a broader approach that incorporates ethical and theological considerations.

Recommendations

- **Engage Religious and Spiritual Leaders**: Recognized as moral and spiritual guides, religious leaders carry a significant responsibility for the welfare of their communities. Encourage them to explore how faith-based and spiritual rituals can be adapted or reimagined to promote healing, reintegration, and community acceptance.
- **Promote Education and Awareness**: Alongside faith-based rituals, implement educational campaigns to raise awareness about stigma and harmful social norms. These initiatives are crucial for shifting societal attitudes and fostering acceptance for survivors and their children.

Nepal

Insights from the use of rituals to facilitate the reintegration of child soldiers and address broader community fears.

1. **Navigating Complex Identities:** Rituals like *bhaakal* and *man baadhne* serve as essential rites of passage for former child soldiers. These ceremonies help them navigate their complex identities as both victims and perpetrators, addressing the psychological and spiritual burdens they may carry. By reaffirming their roles within the community, these rituals enable former soldiers to transition back into accepted members of society.
2. **Community Healing and Acceptance:** Culturally rooted rituals play a crucial role in shifting community attitudes toward former child soldiers. In the aftermath of civil war, fear and suspicion can lead to perceptions of returning soldiers as threats. Rebuilding trust takes time, but the rhythm and predictability of collectively expressed rituals can help community members feel safer and gradually detach from anger and resentment.
3. **Gender Sensitivity:** While traditional rituals provide many benefits, they can also perpetuate harmful gender norms and social stigmas, especially for female soldiers. Some rituals may not adequately address the specific challenges faced by girls, such as the threat of forced marriage or social marginalization. It is vital to approach these rituals with sensitivity, ensuring they are inclusive and do not reinforce patriarchal or exclusionary practices.

Recommendations

- **Facilitate Dialogue:** Prior to return, organize community discussions that encourage open conversation about the past, publicly allowing families and community members to express their feelings and collectively process any concerns or fears about the reintegration process.

- **Develop Context-Sensitive Ritual Frameworks:** Involve local and spiritual leaders, families, and former child soldiers in identifying appropriate rituals to activate. Especially in settings where the residue of violence continues and is deeply felt, this participatory approach can ensure that rituals reflect community readiness, address existing tensions, and foster acceptance.

Northern Ireland

Insights from the use of rituals to promote shared narratives, individual healing, and community resilience.

1. **Collective Grieving:** Rituals provide structured opportunities for communities to engage in collective grieving, transforming disenfranchised grief into a shared experience. By publicly acknowledging loss and pain, these rituals help restore social bonds and validate the experiences of individuals affected by conflict. Collective mourning enables communities to confront their shared history, creating a foundation for healing and moving forward together.
2. **Bridging Divides Through Interfaith Practices:** In divided societies, interfaith and cross-community rituals serve as powerful tools for reconciliation. By uniting diverse groups to honor collective losses, these rituals promote unity and challenge existing hierarchies of victimhood. They create spaces for participants to empathize with each other's suffering, fostering a sense of shared humanity that is

essential for rebuilding trust and relationships across divides.

3. **Addressing Spiritual Crises:** Trauma can lead to crises of faith for many individuals, making traditional rituals feel inadequate or alienating. It is important to recognize that while some find comfort in religious practices, others may experience feelings of betrayal or abandonment. Rituals should be adaptive, accommodating varying spiritual beliefs and experiences, to ensure they support all individuals in their healing journeys, regardless of their relationship with faith or organized religion.

Recommendations

- **Foster Inclusive Dialogue on Victimhood:** Addressing perceived hierarchies of victimhood is crucial, as these dynamics can hinder collective mourning and healing efforts. Ensure equitable representation of victimized groups in public rituals, so that no one feels marginalized or invalidated. In addition to shared religious rituals and services, develop platforms for inclusive dialogue that acknowledge the pain and loss experienced by all affected by violence.
- **Support Collaborative Interfaith/Spiritual Initiatives:** Acknowledge the complex roles of religious institutions and the potential for division within and between faith communities. Provide grants or resources to religious leaders and organizations willing to engage in cross-faith initiatives, and encourage interfaith collaborations focused on healing and reconciliation. Recognize the potential of both intra-faith and interfaith dynamics as sources of conflict and peace.