

BETWEEN RELIGIONS. BAPTIST CONVERTS IN SIERRA LEONE AND THEIR ISLAMIC AND AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS PAST

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on Baptist converts in Sierra Leone and how they live between religions in an African multi-religious context. When converts look back on their lives, they reconstruct their memories to fit their present religious convictions. Baptist churches teach their members to leave traditional practices and Islam. Converts break with the past and leave their former religious community. Converts' experiences and memories of Islamic homes were often positive, but memories of African traditional religion (ATR) were more complex. However, Church members sometimes go to ATR herbalists and healers when they have severe health problems.

Baptist churches compete with ATR and teach that the power of the Christian God is real, and healing is often part of the Church services. After conversion Baptist converts are members of their Churches with different degree of commitment. Converts often had difficulties maintaining good relationships with their Muslim relatives. However, Christians and Muslims see that they have more in common with each other than they do with African Traditional Religion (ATR). Extended families and intermarriages help to build better relations between Muslims and Christians.

Keywords: Muslims, Baptist, Sierra Leone, African Traditional Religion, Conversion.

“I was a member. But when my life changed with Christ, I left everything. I live with Church activities. When the Poro calls go to secret bush I do not go anymore.”¹

INTRODUCTION

This article explores how Baptist converts in Sierra Leone cope with their religious background and how they live between religions. The informants in my study are members of the Baptist Convention of Sierra Leone (BCSL). The article is based on my interviews in Sierra Leone January-March 2013. I conducted theme interviews with 15 members of local Baptist Churches. I also interviewed three Muslims, a Chief Imam, a Lebanese businessman, and a

¹ All quotations from informants are given *verbatim* and have not been copy-edited. (The Editors)

young Fulani man. I traveled to different places in Sierra Leone to conduct these interviews: the capital city Freetown, up country to Makeni, Bo, Nonkoba, and the Lunsar area. The participants come from different tribal and ethnic background: Lebanese, Mende, Fulani, Temne, Loko, Creole, and Mandingo. In order to protect the identity of the participants, I will only mention a few details of their background.

Present convictions shape perceptions about the past. Conversion narratives are always socially constructed (Rambo 1993; Steigenga 2010). The following definition of conversion is useful: “Conversion means turning from and to new religious group” (Rambo 1993: 3). Adriaan S. van Klinken has studied born-again Christians transforming masculinity in Zambia (Klinken 2012) and how Pentecostals break with the past and build a new form of masculinity. Mats Utas (2009) explored African traditional trauma healing practices in Sierra Leone among followers of both Islam and Christianity showing there was interaction between religions. Utas noticed that “Christian churches also play important roles in healing survivors of sexual abuse. Born-again evangelical churches are instrumental in both mental and social healing of sexual abuse survivors”. Many young Muslims have also converted to Christianity (Utas 2009:51). Studies on conversion show that people can be members of the same religious community with different degrees of commitment (Rambo 1999; Snow & Machalek 1989; Steigenga 2010).

This article is a qualitative study exploring how Baptist converts look back on their life in an Islamic and African Traditional Religion (ATR) context. What are the demands of their present religious affiliation? How do converts deal with their past and what do they say of the conversion process and their relations to Islam and ATR? I will use content analysis as a method to explore how participants interpret their past (Krippendorff 1989: 21). First, we will look at the religious setting of Sierra Leone.

THE RELIGIOUS SETTING OF SIERRA LEONE

The African Traditional Religion (ATR) refers to indigenous practices, beliefs and customs in Sierra Leone. Historically, local priests acted as herbalists and treated people’s mind and body. People believed in life after death and looked forward to joining their family in the life hereafter. Secret societies served as an institution for learning. The most important societies were Poro for boys and Bondo for girls. Societies created unity among the members of family, clan, and tribe. Circumcision was the final stage in the process toward adulthood (Alie 1990: 22–25).

In spite of differences, there are similarities in the concept of a Supreme Being in African religious traditions. Mende people believe in a Creator God, *Ngewo*, who existed in the beginning, before the visible world and the invisible spirits. The Kono people speak of a God who is eternal and omnipresent. God will judge evil-doers and men can appeal to God for justice (Alie 1990: 22–23; Parrinder 1981: 31–32). Every tribe has different festivals and names for a Supreme Being, but there is a degree of African-ness in its pattern (Thomas 2005:17–26; Awolalu 1975; Mbiti 1969: 31). The maintenance of African culture and loyalty to the ancestors which accompany rituals is the main expression of ATR. Western theological categories are not adequate to express an African understanding of the Supreme Being. According to J. S. Mbiti (Mbiti 1969:1), “Africans are notoriously religious, so much so that religion permeates permanently into all departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it.”

Islam started to spread in the north of Sierra Leone in the early eighteenth century from when many Fulani and Mende people were converted to Islam. Some of the early agents of Islam used force in the expansion of religion because of political reasons. Conversion to Islam has normally been peaceful in the country. The people of Sierra Leone welcomed Muslims because of their wealth, trade, and the benefits they brought to local people (Alie 1990: 43–47). The importance of the Muslim influence for education and local culture has been often neglected in studies of Islam in West Africa (Soares 2014). Contacts to Egypt and Mecca strongly influenced the Islam in Sierra Leone during the pre-colonial and colonial periods. Muslim reformers challenged all Muslims to take up the serious practice of religion, especially in accordance with the Sunni Islamic ideal of creating an Islamic society, the Ummah (Hiskett 1987: 156–160).

In an African context, people are often involved with a multiplicity of traditional cults, but the conversion to Islam does not require a long period of learning. When people confess “There is one God and Mohammad is God’s Prophet” they are accepted into the Muslim community. A reform Islam has emerged from *jihads* which demanded right doctrine and conduct of believers. When people are literate and able to read the Quran and other Muslim texts they learn the difference between the African mixed environment and pure Islam. For new Muslim converts following reform Islam sometimes means deep commitment and a break with local traditions (Rambo 1993: 93–94).

The Portuguese, during their expeditions in the mid-fifteen century, were the first Christians to arrive in the country. They named it Sierra Leone (Serra Loya) because the shape of the mountains looked like a wild lion. Europeans saw an opportunity to trade African

products and slaves (Koroma 2007: 279–280). Though a Roman Catholic mission was active, only a few people converted to Christianity (Osagie 2000: 55). The Christian mission in Sierra Leone has been successful in urban areas where the traditional religious influence was weaker. Mission work was fruitful when missionaries built schools and hospitals (Groelsema 2006).

After Britain lost the American Revolutionary War (1775–1783), in the year 1787, slaves were released and sent by boat from London back to Sierra Leone. British anti-slavery groups had purchased land in Freetown as a residential area for former slaves. More people were brought to Sierra Leone from Jamaica and other parts of the British Empire. The new inhabitants, Black Englishmen who were mostly Evangelical Protestant Christians, were the descendants of slaves and had English manners and habits. They formed a new ethnic group called *Krios* (English Creole). Methodist and Anglican mission agencies began sending British missionaries to work in the country in the beginning of the nineteenth century (Wyse 1989: 1–4).

Today 77 percent of the population is Muslim and 21 percent Christian, while 2 percent practice indigenous animist traditional religions (US Gov. Report 2010). Christianity is expanding in Sierra Leone and gaining new converts. According to a recent study, Evangelicals are a growing minority among Christians. Throughout history most Muslims have lived in the northern areas of the country and the Christians – in the south. The situation changed during the civil war 1991–2002 and there has been a large movement of people between regions. (US Gov. Report 2007)

In my study, I am interested in Baptist converts. Baptists are one of the evangelical communities in Sierra Leone who have a long history. The first Church was founded in 1792 by David George (1743–1810), a freed slave who was one of the new settlers in Freetown (Dictionary of Canadian Biography 2013). The first Baptist missionaries were sent from Great Britain by the Baptist Missionary Society in 1795 (Brackney 2009: 524). For 200 years there was one Baptist Church in Freetown and mission stations up country, altogether about 200 members and most of them Creoles. Today in the Baptist Convention there are 124 churches with 20 000 followers, and new members come from up country from a different ethnic and religious background.

Baptists are modern Protestants and Churches emphasize a personal relationship with the Deity with strong missionary emphasis on mission and outreach to lost people. Salvation is achieved only by faith in Christ through the grace of God (Momen 1999). In Christian conversion the life history of new converts becomes part of the Baptist group story (Rambo 1993: 78–82). Momen describes the meaning of baptism in the life of Baptist Christians. The

process of conversion is sealed in the ritual of baptism. Baptism serves as a public testimony and the boundary between the old life and the beginning of a new life. It makes it less likely that a convert will return to his previous allegiance (Momen 1999: 156). When people join the Baptist Church they are supposed to leave the Mosque, ATR and secret societies. Next we will look at the converts' memories of religion at a Muslim home.

MEMORIES OF THE ISLAMIC RELIGION

Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945) found out in his study on collective memory that we use our present mental images to reconstruct our past. His conclusion was that memory is always selective and people want to remember the past so that it fits into the image of the community to which they want to belong (Halbwachs 1992: 38, 53) Christian converts carry their previous religious experiences with them and build a new identity with the Baptist Church community.

A Temne man remembers his life back to childhood and practicing Islam at home. He recalls, "I was three to five years old when my grandmother took me to the mosque. She taught me how to pray. I was in school and my father taught me at home. I started memorizing the Quran" (2013:1). Another young Temne man was also an active member of the mosque, "I was six years old when I learned the Quran in school. I learned to read the Quran and was active in the mosque. I led prayer and public readings" (2013:2). The young Mende man recalled his life as an active observant Muslim, "I lived in Kenema with my parents. They said that I should leave and go to the Islamic Arabic School. I started Arabic school and learned Arabic" (2013:3). Practising Islam was an important part of the informants' ordinary life.

Historic academic scholarship has often described West African Islam as struggling to reconcile the influence of traditional beliefs with the task of correctly following the Quran and its teaching of Islam in West Africa, and the co-existence with ATR was often seen as mixed and corrupt Islam. British scholars stressed that people continued praying to spirits and making offerings to ancestors just as they had done prior to their conversion to Islam. John Azumah argues that Western scholars in their study used to favor and support Islamic jihadist orthodoxy. Educated Muslim leaders introduced reformed Islam and those who opposed it were referred to as corrupt Muslims. Contemporary Western research sides today with moderate Islam and sees extreme and radical reform Islam as a wrong interpretation of the Quran (Azumah 2014; 2010). Baptist converts often follow this negative attitude towards traditional beliefs.

A Creole man remembers how he grew up in Freetown, saying, "I was not a member of any secret society, but my sisters were initiated into the Bondo society". His mother was a

Creole and his father was a Temne Muslim who also practiced ATR (2013:5). Muslims in Sierra Leone often believe in possession-spirits, cults and witchcraft, and magic because of the ATR. Faith-healing is a common practice in Sierra Leone (Włodarczyk 2009; Utas 2009; Trimmingham1971). The memories of a Creole man of ATR influence at home were negative. He sees a tension between the influence of ATR and the teaching of Islam, as he recalled:

My father was a devout Muslim. He would strictly monitoring me to observe the five daily prayers. He was one of the religious leaders in the Mosque. So [I] was in one of these Quran schools... It is a mixture. Not only because of the Muslim background. But because what we having here [at home], people believe folk Islam, the blending ... I was eldest of my father was not comfortable. He was concentrated in me. I learned little. He consulted some cabbalist these traditional people, persons who charms (2013:5)

The Creole man was using the word *charm* that is related to magical charms when people are fighting against diseases. (Parrinder 1981: 22, 26) The Creole says he had in his childhood and youth an understanding of true Islam that was different from folk Islam, which was a blending of ATR and Islam. After conversion he sees a difference between Christianity and Islam, and on how people understand God. The informant's views of ATR are shaped with the demands of the Baptist community and the influence of the conservative Islamic demands as he wants to break with the past.

The Mandingo woman remembers that as a child she understood that “Islam is the best and is the only religion to study.” She was brought up in a Muslim home and her father was the Chief Imam of the village (2013:4). Today, three decades after her conversion to Christianity, she has positive memories of her childhood religion:

I came from Muslim background but sometimes when I look back it I think it was nice thing that happened to me. I learned lot of things from my father I do appreciate now. I first think, thought they were punishing me not nice. But I think it was nice discipline, respecting people of God and they will say have to be afraid of God. So those values I think that I appreciated very much. I look at some Christian families now that are not so keen on those things (2013:4).

The way Islam was practiced in her home had aspects that she did not find in the Christian Church. Her father was a conservative Muslim leader, a “local Imam and educated in Cairo”, which brought a special atmosphere to her home. The feast of Ramadan was a special time of

celebration in her family (2013:4). They were observant Muslims as the Mandingo woman recalls the feast:

We always look forward to have presents. My father would buy new dress to everybody, they would cook lot of food, eat and then after the prayers he would invite all the leaders from the Mosque to come and eat, then they would kill the sheep of course. That was nice, new clothes, new dress. We look forward to that so much (2013:4).

Her memories of life at home were positive. The woman is longing after the life at a Muslim home and she recalls significant religious events from her past. Memories are culturally constructed when people have a meaningful relationship with their past (Halbwachs 1992: 38–40). In her childhood home there were familiar elements of faith, just as she found today in the Christian Church: believing in God, the community of believers, and the religious rituals people follow.

A young Mende man describes the difference between believing and serving God in Islam and in Christianity: “There is a vast difference. For example, the Muslims serve God they do not know.” The Mende understand now that the Muslims do not know God personally, “they can say one thing, forgiveness, but Muslims they never forgive, they preach it but not practice it”. Muslims practice polygamy which creates problems in family life, as the young Mende man remembers from his home: “Muslims live in outward holiness and there are so many Muslims who have concubines and legally married wives. They have concubines some of them have four wives as my father had five wives and concubines outside of marriage” (2013:3) The Church teaches monogamy, but polygamy remains still a challenge.

Converts’ memories of youth and childhood in the Mosque and in a Muslim home were often positive. Many of the converts were well educated in Arabic and Islamic schools, and devout Muslims participated in Friday prayers. When they look back at their lives in a Muslim context, they are happy with their education and families. They found similar elements when comparing the Church with the Mosque, such as believing in one God and the community of believers. Converts affiliated with the Baptist Church state that the Church shapes their perception of the past, and most converts see their membership in a Muslim community as problematic. In the next section, we will look at the conversion process.

CONVERSION

Present convictions shape the converts' memories of their past. They want to break with the past and be true members of their new religious group (Rambo 1993, Steigenga 2010). Baptist converts often describe their conversion process and their relations to their former religious community as complex. However, conversion to Christianity is not always easy. When converts join the Church, they are sometimes forced to leave their home. Fortunately, there is normally no physical violence against converts.

The Mandingo woman said that you cannot tell your family openly that you have become a Christian. "I never really stood out there saying I am Christian now. You cannot do that. They throw you out of the family." She remembers: "Only when I got married with a Christian man and then went away. So I couldn't do what I wanted." She acquired her knowledge of Christianity from the Baptist School (2013:4). She understands that in the Church people are serving another God than in Islam:

Not really the same I noticed...They were talking about the God who is so high up...Jesus is a friend of us. That was much better than that God who is so high...The Christian way is of course that is different, Jesus is God. For them [Muslims] this is a big sin if you say something like that. When I became a Christian I though it is not the same God actually. Because they don't believe Jesus is the Son of God how can it be the same God (2013:4).

Christian schools are influential and the Baptist Convention of Sierra Leone has 125 Churches in the country. Most of the small congregations provide a village grammar school, with the cooperation of the Sierra Leone government. Many Muslim children have their first experience of Christianity at school. A Temne man remembers:

I was taught Christian things when I was in Grammar school. Teacher was Muslim. In Kassiri I studied in Baptist school. There I met Dietmar Lutz (German missionary and a school teacher) who preached salvation. I was convicted they preached for me. When I was converted I started to study theology. I started in 1980's pastor's work (2013:5).

Baptist pastors are often school teachers who have a strong influence on the students. They become friends with the students. When people seek the meaning of life, encounters bring people together and introduce them to faith in Jesus Christ (Rambo 1993). After conversion, persecution is sometimes not avoidable, especially in the Northeast Fulani area where people practice reform Islam. A young Fulani man remembers his difficulties: "The Fula will say *haram*, it is an abomination from indigenous tribe to be Christian. Your father will disown you. Some parents even attempt slaughter." You can no longer live in your house. "They call

Christians *kaffir*, which means somebody no God is a gentile totally become *kaffir*: There is no need for me to stay in the same place, so father disowned me” (2013:7). Conversion means practically turning away from Islam and towards a new religion, and there is no room to live in-between religions. (Rambo 1993: 3). A young Fulani convert was not even allowed to go to his father’s burial. He asked his mother, but she refused to acknowledge him.

Only we. And I am only son of my mother. In Africa when somebody has one son we are very important in our culture. But in the case of my mother there is no love from her to show to me because you are gentile *kaffir*...If somebody, people asks her how many children you have? She only counts my sisters I am out of the counts... Usually I weep, why me? But I have one encouragement that Jesus Christ says if anyone will follow me should deny his mother, his father, his wife and be in spirit (2013:7).

A young Fulani Muslim describes the relationship between religions with no compromise: “Islam is a good religion. There is no confidence in Christian religion.” Muslims believe that Muslims and Christians serve the same God, but that they have differing views regarding Jesus Christ. “Muslims and Christian believe in the same God, but Jesus Christ was not God. We know that Allah is One” (2013:12). Fulani Muslims in the North are more conservative and sometimes even hostile towards Christian converts. It is not easy to leave the Muslim community and to maintain good relations with relatives.

An old Temne man remembered the struggle when he was converted to Christianity: “I was first rejected, but later accepted. Some of them became angry at me. Later when they saw difference in my life” (2013:8) For a young Loko man there were no problems when he became a Christian: “My parents, who are both Muslims, they never mind about my Christianity. I was given the liberty to go to Church” (2013:9). There are new Muslim leaders who want to focus on reconciliation between religions.

A Chief Imam told of his open attitude regarding interfaith relations: “We do not see any difficulties in accepting the fact that Muslims and Christians came from one particular source, from one origin, from the Creator, Allah, God and that God or Allah created this universe” (2013:10) The Muslims understand Christians as the People of the Book and Jesus as one of Islam’s prophets in the Quran. The Islamic understanding is that religion is a continuation of the Abrahamic faith that was first given to Jews and Christians and later to Muslims (Goddard 2000: 24–25). Sierra Leone has been an exception compared to many West-African countries since there is little religious tension, and there are warm interfaith relations. An old Creole pastor described the difference between religions:

We believe in same God. The Muslims believe Him as Creator and Christians see Him as Savior through Jesus Christ the Son of God.” and “we eat together and invite Muslims neighbors and family members to visit each other during the religious feasts and we have Muslims and Christian belonging in to same extended family (2013:11).

A middle-aged man and a convert with ATR background says: “Muslims and Christians have more in common together than with African traditional religions. There are also many people living in polygamy who attend regularly to Church services” (2013:6). The Creole man told of problems between ATR and the Church, e.g. when once a Church was preaching against traditional practices and local people tore the Church building down:

In Calaba Town one Charismatic Church was destroyed. Church was teaching against witchcraft. They [people who destroyed the Church] were native, indigenous offspring of traditionalist ... The Church was not part of community and they were attacking.... it was threat to some of their activities on witchcraft and they attack against of these activities. And they used children to attack the Church. It was charismatic Church not part of Muslim-Christian problems but traditional religions (2013:5).

The informants had differing attitudes toward Christian-Muslim dialogue and cooperation between the two faiths. However, almost all Churches and Mosques in Sierra Leone are part of the interfaith network Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone (IRCSL). The IRCSL supports interfaith dialogue and cooperation between faiths and solves dispute on local level. A Temne man describes the tradition of friendship between faiths: “I send food to Muslims during Ramadan. We share bread together with Imams when there is a conflict” (2013:1) Sharing bread is also a Christian testimony of friendship to Muslims. “Now I have many Christian relatives because I shared my testimony” (2013:1).

The man with an ATR background describes the interfaith work that has continued after the war: “Inter-Religious Council has worked to repair all local cracks. Evangelist was preaching next to the Mosque on Friday: ‘You will go to hell if you do not repent!’ The Inter-Religious Council sent one Muslim and one Christian to discuss why the evangelist was preaching on Friday because that is a holy day of Muslims. He should choose another day” (2013:6). Christian converts from Islam work together with Muslim leaders in order to solve local conflicts. Christian families also give Muslim names to their children. The Creole man said:

It is not wrong for intermarriage no matter whether this person is a Muslim or a Christian. So, we have a lot of intermarriages between Muslims and Christians. And even with naming

ceremony. I can be a Christian and my son and daughter. And I will name my child after my Muslim friend. Even the name is not Christian. I can give to child (2013:5).

A peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Christians was important during the civil war of Sierra Leone (1991-2002), and people in Mosques and Churches worked together and helped in building peace (Penfold 2005: 556–557). Extended families help to build good relations between religions. The Creole man had Muslim relatives on his father's side who had connections with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. He describes the Muslim Brotherhood in Sierra Leone saying that the Muslims “are just nominal they do daily prayer and if they have opportunity to know, cite Quran” (2013:5).

Islam and Christianity are both Abrahamic religions and have common roots; especially the belief in one God. The difference between the religions is in the understanding of the essence of God. Muslims teach that Jesus Christ is a Muslim Prophet, whilst to the Christians he is Son of God (Goddard 2000). The African extended families form a platform between religions. During the feast, it is a common tradition that Muslims send food to their Christian friends and neighbors, and Christians do the same during their feasts. The next chapter describes converts' relations to ATR.

ATR IN THE BUSH

In Sierra Leone the indigenous African religion is widespread, and it is strongest in rural areas where the influence of Islam and Christianity is not dominant. The secret societies can be found throughout West Africa's coastal rainforest, but all the traditionalists living in this area do not belong to the societies. The purpose of the esoteric societies is to engage the spirit world. Performing rituals in the sacred forests groves where the traditional leaders are buried gives access to the power of ancestral spirits (Groelsema 2006).

The primary concern of ATR is to realise an ideal life, for in ATR healing and cleansing was meant to restore all kinds of broken relationships whether between the individual and the community or with the world of the spirits of which God is supreme (Munyika 2004: 246)

Europeans missionaries who arrived in Africa were mystified by indigenous habits and called their practices barbaric. In medieval Europe, practitioners of herbal medicine were often persecuted by the state and named magicians and witches. This same negative connotation was used to describe the ATR belief system. (Włodarczyk 2009: 15; Parrinder 1981: 14–17, 145)

The bush is a special place in the mind of the interviewees. It is a place for initiation rites, circumcision, and healing. The female convert recalls her negative experience in a Baptist Church: “One reverend said to me one time he knows somebody, a traditional healer who can make me have children, I say what?” She was amazed to hear that the reverend would advise her to go to the bush for help. “He said me same happened to me and my wife. Five years ago we did not have children somebody told us and these people also went there they had children. So I want you to join me to go there. I said Reverend pray me I don’t believe in that” (2013:4) The Mandingo woman said she knew what really was happening in the bush:

Yes she would go to the bush then find a medicine and under way back if she meets up with man you will have a baby boy, and woman to be a baby girl. But then you have to go and stay there for one week [in the bush] and do something kill chickens put them in of whole all kind of ceremonies. Pastor I do not want to do that. I would have a devils child or what? And I still have to sleep with my husband? These people make love. I do not believe this whole story (2013:4).

The Mandingo woman had a negative attitude towards African traditional beliefs, as many Baptist converts do. The Creole convert said that new Baptist Church members, with secret society backgrounds, must be different. “They have to sign, some kind make commitment not longer be an active members of the secret society.” If the member of the Poro society dies, “the corpse belongs to secret society” (2013:5). A Temne man worries about the same problem in the up country: “When a Church member dies people were afraid of witchcraft and the ceremonies. They take body out of grave and cut pieces” (2013:1). Affiliation to Baptist Churches is strict as it teaches their members to cut all the ties with ATR.

The secret societies play an important role in the lives of the people in Sierra Leone. The initiation ceremony prepares men and women for marriage and for their standing in society (Fanthorpe 2007:1–2; Buah 1986: 81–82.) The Poro and Sande associations, commonly referred to as secret societies, initiate males into adulthood, resolve community disputes, and judge members who have not followed established social norms. The leaders of the society are believed to have magical powers. The most important decisions in the villages are taken in the secret Poro bush. (Alie 1990: 22–25). A Fulani young Muslim man remembered his participation in a secret society initiation rite that had elements of cannibalism:

I attended in Fula Muslims initiation becoming a man. There was a boy’s competition in different sports. Circumcision was part of the rituals. Islam is teaching circumcision and

word is found from Quran. The ritual is secret. All the village Muslim men are together old and young. In the end of day they eat together baked foreskins and rice (2013:12).

In Sierra Leone traditional beliefs exist alongside the Abrahamic religions. Villagers can be found in the Mosque on Friday and in Church on Sunday, but they also visit local healers and the medicine man (Włodarczyk 2009:15–15). Christians and Muslims often follow ATR healing practices and trauma healing practices. Conversion to another religion may have taken place in some cases, but people often seem to be able to go back and forth between the two religions. A Christian may put a sick girl into the Bondo society and turn to a herbalist using traditional medicine for help (Utas 2009: 32–34). The convert woman remembered how her Muslim relatives looked for help from ATR healers when her Muslim father was in trouble:

You go to them most of the time...I remember before he [father] died he had this diabetes he went in to coma so my step-mother thought it was demon something. So they have to take him to traditional healer. He [father] was very angry. He was helpless and could not react much and they had to force these terrible medicine in his throat and all kind of. He really did not like it. He said to my step mother: God will judge you and your children (2013:4).

The Mandingo woman learned at her Muslim home that the ATR influence was negative. Her father was a Muslim who did not want to go to traditional healers. The informants' mindset followed the pattern that Islam and Christianity are higher religions than ATR. They looked down on local customs. They looked at ATR from their own religious perspective. A Lebanese old Muslim man described how people in West Africa and Sierra Leone live between religions:

Muslims converts to Christianity and Christian to be Muslims. This is common in Guinea, Sierra Leone and Senegal. African people trust in their religion power not medicine. Africans do not buy medicine but go to witch doctors (2013:13).

Healing is a common practice in Baptist Churches. When Muslims are sick they sometimes go to Church. The convert woman told about one of her relatives: "She was very strong Muslim. Then later she took child to Church and they prayed for the child and child was healed" (2013:4) A Mende man had a personal experience of God's healing power during a Baptist Church service: "I got sick, seriously sick, and I was in bed for about three years. ..I was most deaf ...they prayed for me. They laid his hands on me. I started to hear whispering everywhere and those meeting. ...So from that day I got my own deliverance and healing" (2013:6)

Healing and miracles play an important part in Church services. Churches actively include supernatural elements in their services: exorcism, driving demons out, speaking in

tongues, and other spiritual gifts. The Creole man sees the new phenomenon as an unfortunate change in Church life. When families have crises “they will turn to African Traditions Religions” and “most Churches some of them are going to extent of you know seeking supernatural power to heal people like these traditional healers” (2013:5).

In Africa, there is a strong religious movement that divides Christendom. Some of the new Churches permit polygamy and ATR practices which they see as not clearly prohibited in the Bible. They often oppose medicine and rely on faith, holy water, and impose ritual taboos (Groelsema 2006; Parrinder 1981). Established churches are struggling how to deal with this phenomenon. Some of the informants believed that the supernatural powers are real. A young convert remembered one frightening experience of evil spirits: “You should not sleep next to the outside wall in the room. If you do so, you will wake up in the garden the other side of wall in the morning” (2013:3) A Temne man said: “Miraculous healing is also experience of people in Churches: The distinction between faith healing and tradition healers by demons force is money. Church freely give freely receive” (2013:1). Baptist Churches compete with ATR. The converts acknowledge the ATR influence in the church life, but they want to experience the power of the Christian God manifested in Church services.

Baptist Churches are against secret societies membership. The Creole convert man is happy that some Muslim leaders are also openly against all secret societies. “We have some fine Muslim organizations now coming up...some of guys are also against of these secret societies saying it is not part of Islam” (2013:5) The old Temne man said that he was a member of the Poro society: “I was a member. But when my life changed with Christ I left everything. I live with Church activities. When the Poro calls go to secret bush I do not go anymore” (2013:8). At puberty, the majority of girls in Sierra Leone are initiated into the Bondo, a secret society of women that uses circumcision to initiate new members. The Mandingo woman told of her experience:

Into Bondo society my father really did not want us to go even. That was one they take very seriously: the female circumcision. It was like conditional they can do it, but we should be at home not in the bush. They normally had to be in the bush three months and they had many ceremonies but he think “that God don’t want all of those things”. It is not necessary (2013:4).

She also remembered how elderly women were pressing and persuading girls into circumcision. “Old woman teach you smell and men will not like you if you do not go to bush. The old women make research to know if you are virgin” (2013:4). Anthropologist Chris

Coulter made a research of the girl's initiation ceremony in Northern Sierra Leone. She observed that the girl's initiation, *dimusu biriye*, has become a social event. It is a ceremony in the making of women, but also an important event for building social relations in war-torn Sierra Leone (Coulter 2005: 431) She described what she saw when girls came out of the bush:

I come back to village for celebration of the "coming out" of girls from the bush. To my and everyone else's relief, not a single of the 101 girls had died or hemorrhage during "the operation," and although I try to find any trace of subdued pain visible on their faces, all I can see is proud young girls showing their new clothes and their new status of women.

From the Western perspective female genital mutilation (FGM) in the Bundo bush is wrong and harmful (see Utas 2009). One of the converts, an activist in interfaith work, says that today Muslims and Christians leaders want to stop practising women's circumcision. In Mosques, they used to teach that the "The Prophet ordered it," but "they are refusing now." Muslims used to initiate girls during the holidays and they put them on *Sunnah*. Muslim leaders teach today that "the Bundo has nothing to do with Islam and Islam has nothing to do with Bundo" (2013:14). The Muslim community wants to distance itself from the practice of women's circumcision and secret societies. A Chief Imam said that "secret societies are opposite by thesis of Islam" (2013:10). Secret societies are a problem to the Chief Imam:

They are traditional societies. They are traditional beliefs they have no Islamic belief they are training camps to for instance reducing immorality so Islam is very must against such societies, they were practiced in back pre-Islamic days. Such societies are in areas that Islam has come to reform (2013:10).

However, the secret societies have played an import role in the history of Sierra Leone. The resistance against British rule was organized through the Poro society. ATR has a holistic view of relationships (see Mangany & Buitendag 2013) that includes nature, extended family, rituals and a Supreme God. The social standing of women in society is still derived from membership in these societies. Today, in the post-colonial era, the influence of the societies is strong and they still have an active role in political life (Fanthorpe 2007: 6, 23). The Muslim and Christian leaders of IRC SL, together with traditional leaders, helped for the integration of former child soldiers back into society. A Baptist convert and activist of interfaith work described the process of integration after the war. The child soldiers went to the bush for traditional rituals:

Then we also did ceremonial cleansing for the boys. Because the boys also took to bush and give bath and do some counseling and do the all night dance and morning or afternoon bring

them to town square with nice names given and they would have forgiven them. Because it was not their fault it was a mistake they did (2013:14).

The convert woman saw the cruelty of war and explains, “My cousin girl went to rebels during the war she wanted to be rebel leaders bush wife. She was very beautiful. She was abused by the rebel soldiers but she stayed with the rebel leader. After war she was sick and died in AIDS” (2013:4). The Bondo secret society practices, such as ceremonial cleansing, were used, as a Christian leader of interfaith work remembers:

We did what we called ceremonial cleansing that these girls voluntary want to be cleansed... we are putting them in Bondo bush in the Bondo society then and for two to three days in they will do some traditional counseling, talk to them and then they will bring them out. ..Put on their new dresses and bring them in to the village square and say these are the new girls we have. Then they would accept that they have removed the stigma from them. The stigma of calling them bush wives and these rebel wives, now they call them by their proper names. ... The stigma is removed, the stigma of discrimination, the stigma of name calling, finger pointing has been removed. They are now seen like good girls (2013:14).

The ceremonies in the bush can be a socially positive force for people who have been abused. “It appears that in some villages the entire community is involved in social cleansing rituals for the reunified male and female child ex-combatants and returning “bush” wives” (Utas 2009: 51–52). ATR practices are influential to people’s lives, and rituals can be used as a tool of community building.

CONCLUSION

The religions in Sierra Leone are composed of many elements: monotheist religions overlapping with local African beliefs. When the Baptist converts looked back on their lives, they reconstruct their memories to fit their new religious convictions. The memories of the converts were selective. After conversion to Christianity, they left the Islamic community and secret societies and wanted to break with the past. However, people still go to ATR herbalist or faith healers when they have severe health problems, and after conversion the converts are members of their new religious community with different degrees of commitment.

The informants often said that they see a difference between folk Islam, which they see as blended with ATR, and true Islam, which worships one God. They have learned from the teaching of reform Islam to make a distinction between corrupt folk Islam and true Islam. It

seems that there is often a positive connection and understanding between Islam and Christianity, since they both have a monotheist belief in God. Baptist converts usually had fond memories of their childhood at home, and of their life in a Muslim context. Converts recalled that Ramadan, prayer, and believing in God were important part of their religious life and practice at home. After conversion, believing in God has a new Christian concept. The difference between Islam and Christianity in the converts' lives culminated in a personal experience of conversion to Christianity.

Islam is the only religion people practice in many areas of the country where informants lived prior to conversion. Converts often have problems with their family members and are faced even with persecution, so they desire good relations with their Muslim relatives and actively work for peace and reconciliation between faiths. Extended families, friendships and intermarriages help to build good relations between Muslims and Christians. There are elements in the initiation rites that Muslim and Christian leaders used to integrate girls and boys back into society following the Sierra Leone civil war. Indigenous practices, beliefs and customs together with Muslim and Christian practices were a channel for peace-building for people at the grassroots level.

Interviews

- 2013:1 Middle aged Temne man.
- 2013:2 Young Temne man.
- 2013:3 Young Mende man.
- 2013:4 Middle aged Mandingo woman.
- 2013:5 Middle aged Creole man.
- 2013:6 Middle aged Mende man.
- 2013:7 Young Fulani man.
- 2013:8 Old Temne man.
- 2013:9 Young Loko man.
- 2013:10 Chief Imam.
- 2013:11 Old Creole man.
- 2013:12 Young Fulani Muslim man.
- 2013:13 Old Lebanese Muslim man.
- 2013:14 Christian leader in interfaith work.

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