

Sierra Leone: No thirst for revenge

Revenge was John Bangura's deepest desire.

His Sierra Leone village had been burned down. There had been a massacre, with nine family members killed, and to this day he does not know what happened to his sister or to his closest friends. "I was fuelled with a lot of hate," he says. "I was willing to do whatever I could to seek revenge, not so much on the rebels, for I could have been one of them. I was angry at the leaders who laid the foundations of the war, and had the money and the means to get out of the country. In my thirst for revenge my intention was to join other Sierra Leoneans in the Diaspora with a similar state of mind to work out a master plan for this mission."

Sadly, Bangura's traumatic experiences have been shared by thousands in Sierra Leone, a West African country made up of 60% Muslims, 30% Christians and 10% people of indigenous beliefs, as they suffered a ten-year civil war.

In 1991 the Sierra Leone Revolutionary United Front (RUF) launched a bush war against what they felt was the corrupt and inefficient government in the capital, Freetown. The following year there was a military coup. Bangura, a businessman who felt that any kind of military government would be a disaster, joined in opposing the new regime. It was then that his village was destroyed and family members killed. He managed to get his wife and children to safety and finally he had to escape to Europe. He was not to return home for nine years.

He had the necessary visas and expected to be able to join relatives in the United States. But, as he discovered, appeals for political asylum have to be made in the first foreign country reached, in this case Denmark. For 23 months under immigration control he was well looked after, staying in a Red Cross refugee camp as his case was investigated. A local clergyman, Torben Juul Christensen, befriended him.

Despite this man's friendship, dark thoughts kept welling up against those he believed were traitors to their country. Some had escaped abroad, others had remained and joined the military government. "I contacted a friend who introduced me to a member of 'Hell's Angels' in Denmark. One day I was invited to his home. I was impressed by what I heard and thought I could use some of their expertise to track down certain people and eliminate them." He began to plan a secret operation, modeled on techniques used in another West African country, using kidnapping and murder.

At the same time as this tension between the "good" and "bad" influences, he studied, gained management skills, attending the National Transport School and learning Danish, which speeded the immigration process. Granted political asylum in 1994, he became a driver for a bus company. He was joined by his wife, Aminata, and two young daughters whom he had not seen for five years.

The following year, encouraged by Christensen, he attended an Initiatives of Change (IofC) conference in Caux, Switzerland. He thought he had left the past behind, but there, as he met others who had suffered, it all came back. In quiet moments in the morning he felt a voice telling him that he was driven by hatred and needed to search his conscience. "I was able to revisit what was deep down and arrived at the thought that the resources I was planning to use to take revenge would be better spent to bring healing to my nation, to help my country."

Bangura also felt that when he got home he should apologize to his wife, Aminata, for not treating her right in the past years. "What I had been doing was not

in harmony with family life,” he says and recalls how he knelt down before her and admitted to doing things he shouldn’t have been doing in the years they had been apart. A year later, a further change came as he attended a conference in Tanzania. He remembers vividly the scene as he sat under a tree with storm clouds darkening around him and heard a voice saying, “John, your country is on fire; your people are dying. I’m asking you to go back home to take the message of peace and reconciliation. I will bless that mission, your people, your family.”

The first steps would have to be taken from Denmark as it was still too dangerous to return. The challenge was to find trustworthy people whom he could build on. Aminata and he decided they should begin with her uncle. Bangura phoned him in Sierra Leone and asked three questions: “Are you ready to work for your country without being paid? Are you ready to pack your bags and go on a journey of healing, sometimes even risking your life? Would you be able to do so without pointing fingers or blaming anyone?” The uncle answered “yes” to all three. Somehow an awareness of Bangura’s sense of vision and calling had gotten through. “I want you to get together ten people of credit, men and women, and hold your first meeting,” he told his uncle. “I will call you again in a week.”

The uncle duly gathered the people and Bangura called, asking the group to consider two points. First, what had gone wrong in Sierra Leone, “Do not point fingers. Do not argue among yourselves.” If they ran into difficulties they should pause and observe a quiet time: “God will speak to one of you.” Second, “Find allies you think you can work with.” He said he would send \$100 so they could fax reports after each meeting.

Out of what might seem an unusual and inauspicious beginning, with expensive long distance phone calls from Copenhagen, was born in 2001 an NGO, “Hope-Sierra Leone” (H-SL) “We got together a group of people,” says Bangura, “who put country before selves.”

Within the country the United Nations had deployed some 17,000 peacekeepers to disarm 70,000 former combatants, nearly 7,000 of them children who had been conscripted into the fighting forces. Most were restored to their families. And by 2001 it was safe for Bangura to return to the country which now faced the task of reconstruction and rehabilitation. He spent six weeks there, meeting people on all sides. H-SL teamed up with other civil society groups who built a foundation of trust among rebels, clearing the way for UN peacekeepers to return to the North where some had been taken prisoner. He risked his life going to the area where the rebels who had killed his family lived and was reconciled with them. “One way to convince the rebel groups,” he says, “was my own personal change.” It was the first of 14 visits to Sierra Leone over the next six years.

“My strategy has always been top-down and bottom-up, running parallel,” says Bangura. For instance he realized that the war had “stolen” young people from their communities. In order to “kick start” development it was vital to help the ex combatants to get back to work. He started with village programs with themes like “honest conversations” and “healing through forgiveness and reconciliation.” He approached the paramount chief of the region who provided 1,000 acres of land for “integrated farming” projects and engaged more than 500 of these young people in this work. Get them work and education, Bangura believes, and they won’t go for guns. He was able to help young people be welcomed back in areas where they may have killed the locals. One villager said, “Some killed my children. But now we are here. I’ll not get my children back, but I would like to forgive them because they do not know what they were doing.”

H-SL soon had a high profile in the country and Bangura found himself appearing on television. He met leaders of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF); former officers from the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) that had briefly taken power in 1997; and the pro-Government's Civil Defence Force (CDF). All said they would work for peace – and did so. Taking courage from his own victory over revenge he invited former junta leader Johnny Paul Koroma (AFRC) and Koroma's bitter enemy, the Deputy Minister of Defence (former head of the CDF), to the IofC conference in Caux. There they were challenged by Rajmohan Gandhi, a grandson of the Mahatma, to find a non-violent way to resolve their differences. The two men said they would go back and sign the peace process and they did. The formal ending of the war came on January 18, 2002.

Following the war's end, Bangura made two trips to Sierra Leone, running workshops where questions would be asked like: "Identify some God-given resources in you which if given the opportunity you would like to make the most use of. If you had the opportunity would you like to be a light in your community or family?" At the end of one workshop in the key town of Makeni in Northern Province a Peace and Reconciliation Tree was planted: "These guys stood there with shovels and hoes in their hands saying 'Today is the best peace agreement we are signing. Nobody has paid us for it.. We are signing the peace with our blood and our sweat. And from today we will never take up weapons against our own people.'"

As the UN peace-keepers began withdrawing Bangura saw that Sierra Leone's police and military forces needed to be prepared as "custodians of peace and become part of healing the country." He invited the Deputy Inspector-General of the Sierra Leone Police to Caux in 2003 and he returned the following year with the Joint Forces Commander of the Armed Forces. At Caux they began to find an answer to deep distrust towards those they felt had hurt them. The policeman said, "I also experienced some terrible things. I'm still their boss. I thought it was my time to take revenge and punish them. But being here at Caux I see that is not right. I am going back home to forgive them."

These senior officers asked for training for their people and so, with the backing of the government, Moral Foundations for Democracy (MFD), a course for reconciliation and change, was set up. They enlisted members of an international NGO with experience in facilitated training particular in Eastern Europe. In 2005 two six-day pilot courses were held, followed by training which qualified 23 Sierra Leoneans to deliver the course over the next five years. Australian Journalist Mike Brown wroteⁱ, "Scanning the testimonies of participants gives an impression of battle-hardened men and women gaining new confidence in personal integrity and professional disciplines: abandoning schemes of personal revenge, facing family violence and alcohol abuse, ending the 'envelope' system of collecting bribes and distributing them to their officers, senior policemen together assessing their mistakes in silence and sharing their vision as a regular part of operations."

In 2002 in the run-up to the UN-supervised elections, H-SL was accredited as one of 16 monitoring organizations to provide voter education, observe the elections and supervise the counting. In November 2006 Bangura was publicly thanked by the Minister of Internal Affairs, Pascal Egbenda, for "a remarkable initiative." Speaking at the official launching of its "mutual farming for peace and reconciliation project" at the Makeni Town Hall Egbenda said that Hope-Sierra Leone had "helped to reshape the minds of people living in these communities through its various projects." In his speech, reported in the newspaper *Awoko*ⁱⁱ, he said that government had done a lot in

achieving food security but this should not be left to government alone, it needed the concerted effort of all to achieve it.

In October 2006 the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission recommended war-ravaged Sierra Leone for support from a newly-established fund to assist countries emerging from conflicts to rebuild and prevent them from falling back into bloodshed. John Bangura and Hope-Sierra Leone are among those working to avoid such a relapse. Bangura says that whether talking with ex-combatants or with cabinet ministers or with farm workers his most effective “weapon” has always been the sharing of his own experience of how his life was transformed and how he talked with his wife. “I then invite them to join me in the vision I have for my country.”

In August 2007 a team from H-SL were among official observers at the country’s presidential and parliamentary elections and afterwards developed a campaign to stem a wave of violence that threatened to engulf the country after the presidential results were inconclusive.

Bangura could have settled down in his new country and left the horrible memories behind him but decided instead to give his best to Sierra Leone. He still earns his living driving a bus in Denmark where he is chairman of the Denmark-Sierra Leone Friendship Association. Looking back at the disaster that Foday Sankoh, former leader of the RUF, another hate-driven exile thirsting for revenge, inflicted on Sierra Leone, he says one that could easily conclude, “Hate that is not healed, and revenge that is not spiritually transformed into love and care as it happened in my situation, could be disastrous for a whole nation and people.”

A testimony to his work in a nomination for the prestigious Tannenbaum Peacemakers in Action Award states, “His reputation for integrity and selfless concern for the well-being of fellow citizens has won the respect of leaders from many sections both in rural communities and among the national leadership. John has no doubt that he owes everything to the God who saved him from bitterness and revenge. It is his faith that sustains his efforts and enables him to keep going, no matter the cost.”

ⁱ For A Change
ⁱⁱ November 28, 2006