"Addressing falsehoods and misconceptions of the past"

the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission reinterpreting Liberia's past

Master’s Thesis 30 HP
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Examination Date: 2014-09-08
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the moment when old myths and historical narratives about a country are no longer perceived as valid; when there is a need to establish new truths and integrate new perspectives into history as it is taught and told. This will be done by examining how a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), established after the traumatizing experience of conflict in Liberia, has approached the task of reinterpreting the history of the country. Since the early 1980s approximately forty TRCs have been created around the world. Their primary tasks have been to reveal the truth about violations committed and to redress the victims of violations, but several Commissions, including the Liberian, have moreover had very explicit mandates in terms of providing a historical context and explanations. By that considerable weight is given to the assumption that it is necessary to learn from history to avoid repetition.

In focus of my analysis are the different uses of history and the historical narratives established in the report of the Liberian TRC. Referring to existing research on use of history and historical narratives of TRCs as well as to current history books and literature on Liberia, the thesis identifies a number of main narratives in the report. It looks at the efforts of the TRC to re-interpret Liberian history and write the history of the conflicts 1989-2003. I come to the conclusion that the Liberian TRC contests old established truths about Liberian history, including the more glorious myths about how Liberia was founded by former slaves from the plantations in the South of the US. This is in line with most of the modern literature, but it is the first official effort to re-write Liberia’s history. It makes a clear effort to explain culture, social and political organisation in the area before the arrival of the Americo-Liberian settlers. The TRC largely finds the explanations for the conflicts 1989-2003 in Liberia’s past. They are the culmination of structural problems inherent in the very foundation of Liberia as a nation in 1847, not exceptional as events, but exceptional in their brutality. My conclusion is that the report manages better in creating a consistent historical framework about the early history of Liberia than in establishing a contemporary history of the conflict. It is simply more difficult to distil narratives and clear explanation models out of the presence and recent past, with the abundance of oral sources and the lack of written ones, than it is of the more distant past.

Key words: Liberia, Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, Historical Narrative, Use of History
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Acknowledgements
Two negative influences of Western culture impacted on the minds of some Liberian historians especially between 1847 and 1960 in their explanation of a number of historical issues or events. One belief was that black Africans were incapable of making history for they belonged to an inferior race with no past worthy of inclusion in the history of mankind. The other was that writing is the only reliable source of history. And since blacks did not widely apply their indigenous systems of writing prior to the coming of the Arabs and Europeans, they therefore had no history worth recording.

Joseph Saye Guannu “A Short History of the First Republic”, p. 1
1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Commissioning truth

There are certain determining moments in the writing of history of a nation. It may be the declaration of independence, the overthrow of an old regime or the end of a violent conflict. These are moments where a lot is at stake and a new balance of power is being brokered. Since a new regime may be at odds with the way history has been told and the myths cherished by a previous regime, a momentum suddenly exists for the country to slightly reinvent itself. This momentum is what I aim to explore in this thesis.

Societies coming out of armed conflict and periods of massive human rights violations, such as Liberia did at the beginning of this century, face multiple challenges. Often they struggle with the very idea about nationhood and citizenship. Understanding the scope of what happened, why killings and violations took place and how they could be avoided in the future are main concerns. Although it would be an overstatement to say that these issues are usually addressed in a systematic way, many post-conflict societies do identify the need for new narratives about their society, their nation and its history. New shared historical narratives – including voices and perspectives previously excluded - can ensure a common understanding about the past and offer prospects of a brighter future. “In war, truth is the first causality” Aeschylus wrote, and there are indeed abundant examples on how history and information in general has been distorted to serve political purposes; and how violations have been obscured and denied by warring parties. Once peace has been achieved, this situation of distortion and denial has nurtured the social demands to establish the truth about what happened and historical records to redress victims and to prevent future manipulations.

These demands for truth have been addressed differently; through memorial projects, museums, educational projects, revision of school curricula, opening of archives and through truth-seeking projects. An increasingly common response from post-conflict states in the last three decades has been to establish a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, hence called TRC. A TRC is a commission tasked with discovering and revealing past wrongdoing, by a government and sometimes by non-state actors. Its main objectives are to redress victims and facilitate reconciliation after conflict. It serves not only the end to find the truth about violations committed, but it is also often perceived as a convenient solution for states that cannot deal

1 Greek dramatist living 526-456 BC
2 www.ictj.org
judicially with all crimes committed in the past; for fear of repetition of conflict, for lacking resources or political will. The early instigators of TRCs regarded their main objectives to be “first, the healing of the psychic damage caused by repression, and second, the deterrence of similar repression in the future.” A TRC would facilitate a shared understanding of what had happened; the violations committed and how to overcome it.

Since the first Commission in Bolivia in 1982 (Comisión Nacional de Desaparecidos) and the one following in Argentina approximately forty TRCs have been established around the world in countries as diverse as Canada, East Germany, Guatemala, Morocco and Rwanda. The South African one, presided by Desmond Tutu, is the one which has received most international attention. The different TRCs have had different mandates and scopes of work, some entirely focused on documenting violations: how many dead, what type of violations, while others have had a broader mandate looking at the why; on the contextualization and explaining of why past violations and traumas could happen. The latter are more interesting to examine from a historiographical point-of-view, while the first category of reports, depending on the quality of data and analysis, may surely serve as important material for future historians conducting research on the period.

1.2 Commissioning truth in Liberia

Releasing its report in 2009, the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission is one of the most recent to have concluded its work. It was established through the Liberian Comprehensive Peace Accords signed in 2003 and its mandate was very explicit in terms of defining the need for a historical understanding of the factors from the past that contributed to the conflict in the country. The broad mandate of the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission included several articles of historiographical interest, including the task to explain the antecedents of the conflict and to conduct a review of Liberia’s history “with the view to establishing and giving recognition to historical truths, in order to address falsehoods and misconceptions of the past(…)”. The final report of the TRC takes this exercise seriously, and does constitute the first officially sanctioned effort to re-write the Liberian national history in light of the armed conflict.

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3 Grandin and Klubock 2007, p.2
4 Grandin and Klubock 2007, p.3
5 Grandin refers to the Bolivian Truth Commission as the first ever, but Hayner identifies one earlier: Commission of Inquiry into the Disappearances of People in Uganda, 1974, established by Idi Amin. The Commission presented a report and recommendations, but the report was never published and the recommendations not published.
6 Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission Volume II, p.49
The challenges of this task cannot be underestimated in any country, but the case of Liberia draws particular attention. The very premises upon which the Liberian nation was constructed are complex. Established first as a colony and then as a state to provide a home in Africa for freed Afro-American slaves, Liberia enjoyed a special status as the only free African republic for over a century. While the very foundation of the state, the first returning ships with free men (and a few women) became part of the national identity and national myths of the land of freed slaves, the very existence of the Liberian state based on exclusion of the majority population. It was a state ruled by and for the small Americo-Liberian population, while the native indigenous Liberians were largely left out of the spheres of influence.

Liberia went through two devastating internal armed conflicts during the period 1989-2003, killing between 150,000 and 250,000 Liberians,¹ and the country was during this period regarded as pariah within the international community. Since the peace in 2003, the country has gone through a large transformation, with the first elected female president in Africa, with Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

1.3 Purpose, research questions and delimitations

In focus of this paper are the historical narrative and the use of history of the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The aim is to shed light upon the official Liberian reading of the history of Liberia including the historical origins of the violent conflicts and violations.

My research questions are:

- What is the historical narrative about Liberia and the two civil wars presented in the report of the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission?
- How does the historical narrative of the report relate to other established narratives about the Liberian conflicts and history?
- How are the efforts to re-interpret and write a new history of Liberia manifested?
- What are the different types of uses of history the can be identified in the report?
- How are victims and the social agency of victims reflected in the historical narrative?

¹ www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/unmil/background.html. The total number of causalities during the Liberian war will not be known. The figures have been debated. The official figures mentioned range between 150,000 (UN) and 250,000 (ICTJ and TRC). Stephen Ellis claims the high figure might be flawed, and result of a misunderstanding. According to his estimates the number of direct deaths caused by the first war 1989-97 might add up to 60-80,000.

² While the term use of history is not as established in Anglo-Saxon research as is its equivalent historiebruk in Swedish research, I will for the sake of a coherent language stick to the English translation of the term.
How do my findings about the historical narrative and the use of history in the report relate to existing research findings on other Truth and Reconciliation Commissions?

I will discuss how the historical narrative of the Report relates to other established narratives about the Liberian conflicts. Since the focus is on the use of history and the production of a historical narrative, I will pay less attention to providing a chronological account or to establish any “truths” about the Liberian conflicts. I will not discuss the Liberian society’s response to the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Report in any detail, nor how the historical narrative of the TRC is interpreted into school curricula, matters of large interest, but most likely premature to discuss at this moment. It would have been interesting to make a comparative analysis with other TRC reports, but since I wanted to focus on the actual historical narration it is beyond the scope of this thesis. My comparative approach instead consists in relating to existing research on historical narratives of TRC-reports and current literature on Liberian recent history.

1.4 Critical discussion on primary sources and secondary literature

The report of the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission together with its annexes is the main research material for this thesis. It consists of approximately 750 pages of material in total, and the specific challenges in dealing with this type of research material will be discussed in chapter 5.

There was a need to digest secondary material more profoundly, particularly research on other TRCs and literature referring back to Liberian history as well as to the Liberian TRC. There is a considerable amount of research on TRCs, but historians have so far paid limited attention to them. There are a few researchers that have analyzed the historical narratives of individual Reports. It is worth noting that some of them have actually been part of TRC work. Limited comparative analyses have been conducted in the field; the ones I have come across are referred to in Chapter 2.2. Given that history is so central a topic in most TRC Reports, but with so little research on it, was something which obviously motivated me to want to explore the topic.

There was also a need digest other literature about Liberia, its conflicts and history since these are the topics that are at the core of the TRC Report. Liberia is currently ranked as one of the countries with lowest GDP/capita in the world. One needs to be aware about the clear limitations to historical research in Liberia, and the limited resources existing for Liberian scholars to conduct historical research. Although I know about the existence of older books

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about Liberian history, most of them are not accessible in Sweden nor digitally. This explains why most of the literature I have used is not written by Liberian authors. In the literature on Liberia I particularly focused on what has been written on the Liberian TRC so far. For obvious reason, that literature is even more scarce.

The literature within these two areas: historical narratives of TRCs and Liberia do together with the theoretical framework established in Chapter 2.1 create a broader framework towards which the historical narrative and use of history of the Liberian TRC Report is analyzed.
2. A THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Historical narratives and use of history as fields of research

2.1.1 The meaning of the past

Before discussing some key concepts used in this paper I will briefly reflect upon the meaning of the past for the present. Commissioning a new national historical narrative, as is done through the establishment of the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, is in itself an affirmation of the belief that the past matters for the present and the future. Jörn Rüsen claims that a better understanding of the past facilitates both an understanding of the present and what to expect from the future.10 Kenneth Nordegren describes history as “actualized interpretations that are used just as much to shed light on the present and the future as to understand the past.”11 The assumption thus is that history may be interesting in its own right, but it also helps us understand the present and give prospects for our future. Peter Aronsson states that “the past is visibilized and re-interpreted more actively in times with uncertain future compass.”12

Historical narrative, truth and use of history are concepts that I will discuss, and I will introduce a typology that helps me analyse the different uses of history in the narrative of the TRC-report. But to start off I will discuss historiography as a research field. While many refer to historiography as the writing of history by professional historians, I will not abide strictly to that narrow definition of historiography. It is a very limited understanding of how history and historical consciousness is created. When writing history (whether the pen is in the hand of a professional historian or not) there is always a political choice involved in choosing the subject-matter to study and write on. And particularly when it comes to writing the history of a nation, that is in itself a deeply political project. In this thesis I will examine how historical narratives are produced by mainly non-historians. It is thus an investigation in the way a national history is being established and how the interpretations of events from the past are changing.

2.1.2 Historical narrative and truth

When post-modernist theorists such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault gained influence within the discipline of history attention was increasingly directed towards language, the text and the narration about history. What could actually be said about the reality of past events and times was increasingly put into question, given that the filters through which we look upon the past are

10 Rüsen 2006, p.3
12 Aronsson 2004, p. 7: “det förflutna synliggörs och omtolkas särskilt aktivt i tider med osäker framtidskompas.”
so coloured by our reality and paradigms today, and by the limitations of language itself. A consequent turn for the discipline was to fix one’s eyes upon how history was written and how it was used as a political and existential means, as an instrument to build identities and nations; both within the traditional field of historians and within non-scientific arenas such as politics, interest organisations, news media and the arts.

While we are surrounded by historical narratives, and different history cultures in our daily lives – on the products we buy, about our family histories, at the museums we visit, the folklore associations we may be part of - and many of them by no means produced in a scientific way - they do shed some light at how our present interprets, relates and provides meaning to the past. Historians are regaining some of the confidence and are increasingly putting the attention on the relation between the represented (the reality of past times) and the representation (the historical narrative) - and on the relation between different representations and narratives in order to come closer to the past that is being represented.

What makes up a historical narrative? All historical writing is narrative in structure, so even the scholarly historical writing. A historical narrative is an account about events and occurrences in the past that puts these same into a framework and provides them with a meaning. Producing a historical narrative is just as much about leaving out as of including facts. Even the most detailed description of a past event, series of events will leave out important perspectives and dimensions, and might run the risk of giving us only a momentarily picture that is unable to help us to interpret the meaning of it. Producing a historical narrative is to visualize a certain interpretation of a series of events and facts. While this might be considered a construction, simplification or even untruth rather than about portraying how things really were, David Carr points out that “(t)he “real” events of “life” (…) are not a meaningless sequence of unrelated nows but rather the actions and sufferings of persons and groups of people.” According to Carr these can be chaotic and confused, “But this is only because we judge them – indeed, experience them – by standards of coherence that function as the rule in our daily lives.” Human actions don’t take place in an insulated present, but “derive their sense from their relation to past and future.”

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13 As Peter Aronsson would claim, see p. 17: “Historiekultur är de källor, artefakter, ritualer, sedvänjor och påståenden med referenser till det förflutna som erbjuder påtagliga möjligheter att binda samman relationen mellan dated, nutid och framtid.” ("History culture are the sources, artefacts, rituals, practices and acclamations with reference to the past that offer concrete possibilities to tie together the relationship between past, present and future.")
14 Ankersmith 2006, p. 109
16 Carr 2006, p. 125
This is a strong argument for why historical narratives matter. They can at best help us to understand not only the past but also the present.

The mandate of the Liberian TRC explicitly speaks about identifying the ‘root causes’ of conflict as part of establishing a historical narrative about Liberia. The concept ‘root causes’ indicates that certain weight is given to historical explanation models and causality; that certain conditions and actions will lead to certain consequences, provoke other actions and that these can be re-told.

Coming back to the quote on truth being the first causality in conflict, we need to tackle the concept of Truth in a paper that deals with a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Can there be a true narration about any historical event, and particularly on such a politically complex situation as a violent conflict? Many would question that a truth existed before the war, and accordingly also that there could be one about the war. Instead we may be confronted with a situation where the truths are as numerous as the number of victims, survivors, perpetrators and bystanders. Yet, that gives us less of a common framework to actually analyse the what and the why, that are so central in historical research. Georg G. Iggers argues for “a historiography that is fully conscious of the complexity of historical knowledge but still assumes that real people had real thoughts and feelings that led to real actions that, within limits, can be known and reconstructed.”

What a Truth and Reconciliation Commission can do is to make an effort to gain better knowledge and reconstruct the actions, thought and feelings of victims, survivors, perpetrators and bystanders. Aronsson refers to Truth Commissions as the manifestation of one form of history culture.

Klas-Göran Karlsson makes a distinction between history as fact, as interpretation and as consciousness. Even if death tolls or other facts relating to a conflict may be debated, and in the midst of war, impossible to confirm, there is yet even if unknown and even if we never will get to know the exact figure, a quite exact number of people dying from gun-fire, and there are specific persons that fired the guns and ordered the shooting. Here the Truth and Reconciliation Commission can hopefully help bring us closer to a truth, at least. And that is one of the main arguments for establishing a TRC; the firm belief that it is possible to establish some facts about what has happened.

But as Ankersmit states “(t)rust simply is not enough to orient us in reality.” There is a limitation to how much of an understanding that numbers and figures or documented accounts about events can tell us about a past. There is always the need to interpret the data or facts.

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17 Iggers 2005, p.119
18 Aronsson 2004, p. 18
19 Karlsson 1999, s. 34
20 Ankersmit 2006, p. 115
gathered. Establishing a historical narrative is a means of interpretation. What do these facts established mean? What was the context in which these isolated facts or actions took place? Why did they happen? There is an inherent contraction of the process of establishing a narrative/ an interpretation. While seeking a consistent explanation for a development or event we may divert further away from the truth of simple facts. Greg Grandin and Thomas Miller Klubock writes that a historian usually reach conclusions not about an individual event, as lawyers do, but about larger social, economic, or cultural patterns and phenomena. As the burden of proof widens from the individual to the social, historical conclusions are inevitably less verifiable than legal rulings and therefore more open to conflicting interpretations.\(^21\)

Establishing one interpretation is to simultaneously open up for other interpretations. As we have seen from Germany and elsewhere numbers of death and figures may be debated, but interpreting why the killings taking place or atrocities committed is an even more conflict-ridden process. With this in mind, we can assume that any TRC-findings will be debated, put into question, and that there will be conflicting views on its analysis and the truths that are being established.

Historical consciousness on the other hand is generally described as perceptions about how past, present and future links to each other.\(^22\) The primary focus of this paper will be to assess the historical narrative/s established in the Report of the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, assuming that they will contribute to and reflect the contemporary historiography about Liberia.

### 2.1.3 Use of history

While historical narratives have been in focus of Anglo-Saxon research, Nordic and German historians have established the term *use of history*. It is the research on how history is used, often for political purposes, by societal actors. “A meaningful use of history aims at something, is project- and action-oriented and therefore often integrates a more open reference at the direction of history in its narrative than is legitimate in scholarly history.”\(^23\) Klas-Göran Karlsson and Peter Aronsson are two influential scholars within this field of research. Karlsson has focused mainly on use of history in the Russian and Soviet context. To his help he has developed a typology of different types of uses of history. These are the scholarly, the existential, the moral, the

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\(^{21}\) Grandin and Klubock 2007, p. 3  
\(^{22}\) Aronsson 2004, p. 67-68  
\(^{23}\) Aronsson 2004, p. 18; my interpretation of ”att ett meningsfullt historiebruk vill något, är projekt- och handlingsinriktat, och därför gärna fojar in en mer öppen hänvisning till historiens riktning i sin berättelse än vad som är legitimit i vetenskaplig historia.”
ideological use and the non-use of history. The typology Karlsson introduces may be useful in the analysis of the functions and purposes of a specific historical narrative.

In his typology the scholarly use of history is the desire to “explain and understand the past on its on premises and on the basis of already established scholarly research and knowledge”. It is the interpretation of historical facts from an established tradition of knowledge.

The existential use of history has to do with people’s need of a context and orientation, with the need to remember, and is according to Karlsson common in countries with conflicts or who have experienced fast change.

The moral use of history is about rediscovering forgotten parts of history. It is about restoring the memories and stories from groups that have been marginalized. Often the moral use of history is motivated by the belief that revealing hidden historical facts is a purpose in its own rights.

The ideological use is the construction of a historical meaning in order to legitimize a political regime or implemented policies.

Finally, one can also speak about the non-use of history, which can be linked to the ideological use – the desire to break with the past and establish a society as anew. However, creating historical narratives will, as previously said always consist in omitting historical facts at the privilege of others. It will of course, be interesting to analyse what dimensions, perspectives are excluded when creating a narrative.

Aronsson looks more at the different functions that exist in all uses of history in certain proportions. Behind any use of history, whether it is “commercial, political, individual or scholarly” exists the aim to “provide meaning, legitimacy and to manage change of ourselves and reality.” This links directly back the previous discussion of the meaning of history. According to Aronsson meaning is created by placing singularities into a context. This can be done through the narrative mentioned earlier. Aronsson speaks about the responsibility of history-writers “to speak for the dead, make them present, to be their voice in our time” and about how myths and symbols are used by societies and reflect how the society and community legitimizes itself.

24 Karlsson 1999, p. 58
25 Karlsson’s Swedish terminology vetenskapligt, existentiellt, moraliskt, ideologiskt bruk och icke-bruk av historia as translated by the author.
26 Karlsson 1999, p. 60
27 Aronsson 2004, p. 57
28 Aronsson 2004, p. 57
29 Aronsson 2004, p. 58
30 Aronsson 2004, p. 63
identifies four main tropes of history-culture, all of which can exist simultaneously and provide history with a meaning. The first trope is *Nothing new under the sun* which assumes that everything happening will happen again, the other is *History does not repeat - the past is something else than now* which makes a clear distinction between past times and the present, the third is the *Golden Age*, which generally seems to indicate that the past was something positive, entailing positive values that are yet not in place and the fourth main trope is *The progress - from darkness we raise towards the light.* Aronsson enters into a discussion on the political use of history, while deemed as abuse when it has been used for totalitarian purposes it has generally been put less into question when the aim is to foster democratic citizens and give instruments for higher self-esteem and political potential to previously unvisibilized or powerless.

I will make use of Karlsson's typology, keeping in mind the limitations and simplifications it contains. The typology may help me to distinguish the purposes behind the different ways to make use of history and I will look at whether Aronsson's main tropes can be detected in the narrative of the Liberian TRC Report.

### 2.2 The historical narratives of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions

#### 2.2.1 Mission: Truth, Reconciliation and… a National History

Since the establishment of the first Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in Latin America in the early 1980s they have caught the attention of scholars from various different disciplines. While the main function of the commissions has been to document violations with the objective to redress victims from repression and prevent repetition many have also have been assigned with historiographical tasks. As the Chilean Commissioner Zalaquett expressed it, it was about creating a “consensus concerning events about which the community is deeply divided.” Abena Ampofoa Asare has highlighted the inherent problems of this task: “If objectivity and the search for balanced sources are central to the historian’s craft, government commissions that seek to manufacture “the truth” about the past stand at odds with the goals of academic history.”

A TRC report may be of interest to a historian from different angles. First, the account that the Report presents about the violations it was to reveal the truth about and what it tells about the people affected and the society in which the violations took place may be of interest to future historians interested in the conflict. Several TRC reports include illustrative cases that in

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31 Aronsson 2004, p. 77-79: translation to English by the author of “Intet nytt sker under solen”, “Historien upprepar sig inte – för helt annat än nu”, “Guldålder” and “Framsteget – från mörker stiga vi mot ljuset”
32 Aronsson 2004, p. 95
33 Grandin and Klubock 2007, p.3 quoting José Zalaquett, Commissioner in the Chilean TRC
34 Asare (forthcoming); p.1
themselves may be used as historical sources; since they, besides documenting patterns of violence, also provide pictures of the lives of the persons and communities affected. Secondly, many TRCs were also demanded to put violations/conflict into a historical perspective; thus to help establish a more substantial national historical narrative – and this narrative have already caught the interest of some historians. When taking on the task of introducing a historical perspective, it has often been undertaken in a precarious way by the TRCs, to not undermine the overarching object of reconciliation.35 According to Grandin and Klubock most TRCs have dealt with the violations they are documenting as exceptional events, “an inversion of a democratic society, a nightmarish alternative of what lies ahead if it does not abide by constitutional rules” instead of “presenting history as a conflict of interest and ideas within a context of unequal power.”36

I will now, by going through a few different scholars that have studied TRCs, highlight some thematic issues that arise in the literature on historical narratives of TRCs.

Priscilla B. Hayner’s comprehensive book on Truth and Reconciliation Commissions: *Unspeakable truths – Transitional Justice and the Challenge of Truth Commissions* does not focus on the historiographical part of the TRCs, but refers to the question raised by some historians of whether a TRC can provide with an “official truth” about a period. The historian Tristram Hunt has for example suggested that TRCs should rather than as historical sources be viewed as historical events. Her own response after having studied all of the forty TRCs established up to date is that while impossible to “fully detail the extent and effect of widespread abuses that took place over many years” it can actually “contribute to a much broader understanding of how people and the country as a whole were affected, and what factors contributed to the violence.”37

The Radical History Review has published a special issue on Truth Commissions.38 One of the co-editors Greg Grandin has written several articles about the historical narratives of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, particularly the Guatemalan one.39 He describes TRCs as contradictory bodies. While they often raise expectations on justice, he rather sees their value in how they serve as a “historic bridge” between a divided past and a hopefully more peaceful future.40 He discusses how different TRCs have approached the task of providing a historical interpretation of the events and violations committed. In the case of the Argentinian Comisión

35 Grandin and Klubock 2007, p. 3
36 Grandin and Klubock 2007, p. 3
37 Hayner 2011, p. 84
38 Radical History Review no 97, Winter 2007; Truth Commissions: State Terror, History and Memory
39 He was also part on the team of the Guatemalan Commission, Comisión de Esclarecimiento Historico
40 Grandin 2011, p. 33
Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, its final report Nunca Más does not provide a historical contextual understanding of the disappearances and violations reported into a historical contextual understanding despite that history had been a main concern for those involved in the work with it.\textsuperscript{41} For example, the report claimed that both extreme right and left were causing the terror in Argentina in the 1970s, while the military was identified as the main author of the violence documented in the report.\textsuperscript{42} Grandin also comments upon the then Argentinian Government’s refusal to enter into a historical debate, supposedly to avoid provoking new conflicts through a disagreement about the causes of the war.\textsuperscript{43}

As for the Guatemalan Truth and Reconciliation Commission, \textit{Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico, CEH}, it was questioned from the beginning for its weak mandate. The mandate of CEH was negotiated between the government and the insurgency movement during the peace negotiations, and was criticized because it did not allow the TRC to name names nor individualize responsibility for violations. In the end this limitation of the mandate turned out to work in favour of the Commission since it was forced to work more broadly with historical analysis and structural causes of conflict rather than to establish individual responsibility for violations committed.\textsuperscript{44} The Commission identified several structural causes of the conflict: structural injustice, social inequality, racism and the closing of political space after overthrow of democratically-elected reformist president Jacobo Arbenz in 1954.\textsuperscript{45} The CEH depicted the systematic Human Rights Violations against the indigenous population in the Guatemalan country-side in the early 1980s as genocide.\textsuperscript{46} The CEH concluded it was racism that allowed the army “to equate Indians with the insurgents and generated the belief that they were distinct, inferior, a little less human and removed from the moral universe of the perpetrators, making their elimination less problematic.”\textsuperscript{47} According to Grandin much of the legacy of the report of the CEH “resides in the confidence and lucidity of its historical conclusions.”\textsuperscript{48} One explanation for this vivid engagement of the Commission with historical analysis, was the diversity of staff involved.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{41} Grandin 2011, p. 44
\textsuperscript{42} Grandin 2011, p. 46-47
\textsuperscript{43} Grandin 2011, p. 47
\textsuperscript{44} Grandin 2011, p. 57. The Guatemalan TRC publishing its final report in 1999.
\textsuperscript{45} Oglesby 2007, p. 82
\textsuperscript{46} Grandin 2011, p.62 “It was the brutality of the terror of the Guatemalan military that made the CEH to conclude that the terror was genocidal, a collective crime requiring social and historical analysis.”
\textsuperscript{47} Grandin 2011, p. 66
\textsuperscript{48} Grandin 2011, p. 74
\textsuperscript{49} Grandin 2011, p. 58
While some have paid considerable attention to how Guatemala was affected by the Cold War and its logic, the CEH did document the role of the CIA in the 1954 Coup, but mainly focused on domestic politics. This is contrast with the Chilean TRC, that according to Grandin depicted “Chile as caught in the maelstrom of world politics” and the Allende coming to power, part of the same.

*Elisabet Oglesby*, who has also studied the Guatemalan case closely, observes a particular dilemma in relations to the historical narrative of the TRC report, which may be valid for others as well. The dilemma is what the reports tell about the lives of the victims of human rights violations. A too strong emphasis on their identity as innocent victims to human rights violations might actually obscure the various identities they had in their lifetime. The violations are described as individual acts rather than as practices that reflect and are cause of structural conditions and structural struggles and competitions between groups and ideas. Oglesby detects a discourse which “emphasizes that the war produces victims” but plays down that “these victims also had identities as social actors, as members of organizations (some revolutionary, some not) involved in projects of social change.” The report neglects to tell why people were targeted, many “because they were members of social organizations, such as peasant leagues, progressive church groups, unions, student groups, and so on.” Grandin/Klubock concludes that there is a reason for why victims’ identity as victims is emphasized by the TRCs: Picturing them as political or social activists might open up the door for justification of violations committed. What may become problematic with this narrow interpretation of historical memory is not only that it reduces the dead to merely being victims, but that it also may make a more comprehensive understanding of the society and context that allowed violations to take place more difficult.

*Onur Bakiner* has made a comparative analysis of the historical narratives of the Chilean and the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. He concludes that both the mandate of the Commission and who is appointed Commissioner will have considerable effect on how the Report embraces historical analysis. In Chile the mandate of the so called Rettig Commission was limited to documenting the truth only about human rights violations that had led to death, which certainly affected the narrative about the period in which the violations took place. In the Peruvian case the mandate was broader, which allowed a more comprehensive historical analysis.

50 Grandin 2011, p. 61  
51 Grandin 2011, p.54  
52 Oglesby 2007, p.80  
53 Grandin and Klubock 2007, p. 4  
54 Oglesby 2007, p. 79  
55 Bakiner 2012, p. 26
However, the composition of appointed commissioners in the Peruvian Truth Commission clearly mattered for that the Commission provided such a comprehensive contextualization and historical narrative. Among them were historians, social scientists and political activists with a commitment to change. The Chilean TRC Final Report on the other hand reflects a compromise between the positions of the two main Commissioners, one, a Human Rights Activist and the other, a right-wing historian. Lacking the legal instruments to make justice the Chilean TRC embraced historical analysis and explication models.  

Bakiner demonstrates that the narrative consists as much in what is included as what is excluded. The Chilean TRC concluded that the coup in 1973 was a rupture in Chile’s democratic history, in contrast to the view of other Chilean historians (particularly Marxist-inspired) “that while the dictatorship was particularly long, bloody and lawless, it was not an exception in Chile’s long history of repression against the labour movement and other form of social protest.” Thereby it neglected to consider eventual structural causes of the repression and the human rights violations. The report was also criticized for equalizing the Left and the Right and for ignoring the commitment of Allende to democracy.

The Peruvian TRC on the other hand, considering the need for a socio-cultural project to overcome the centuries-long legacy of racism, inequality and discrimination, produced one of the “the most comprehensive social histories” that exist about Peru, according to Bakiner. Its findings including the death tolls came to shock even for the commissioners themselves. It also contested some established perceptions, for example it demonstrated the police had not been involved in a massacre of 8 journalists in 1983. However, even the Peruvian TRC has been blamed for taking away the social agency of the peasantry in order to protect them, conveying a picture of the Shining Path, as an external element, and thus providing a simplified picture of the rural reality. The tendency of TRCs to “prioritize innocent victimhood at the expense of acknowledging the ideas and actions of those affected by violations” is prevalent even in this Report. Bakiner suggests TRCs would be considerably strengthened if “acknowledging shades
of grey, not only in various forms of complicity, but also in acts of protest, resistance, and refusal".  

According to Alejandro Castillejo-Cuellar, who has written on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, it tended to focus on certain individual acts of violence and a historical narrative aiming to produce reconciliation, and did thereby not discuss certain structural causes such as class. It was a clear intention in the mandate of the Commission to provide a historical context to the human rights abuses documented in the report. Early on in the report it is made clear that the mandated period of the TRC 1960-1994 would only allow the Commission to focus on a limited part of the human rights abuses that have been committed in South Africa.

Summary

While the literature on how TRCs embrace historical analysis is by no means abundant, certain issues come through that are relevant to my study of the Liberian TRC. The first consideration is whether there is a conscious use of history at all in the Report. This is not the case in all TRC Reports, and it depends largely on its mandate. Since the Liberian had a clear mandate in this regard the question will not be whether it embraces historical analysis or not, but how it does that. The second related question is about the importance of the mandate and who are appointed as commissioners. The lesson from Guatemala was that the limitations of the mandate of the TRC to not individualize responsibility allowed the Commission to address the structural causes more comprehensively. In the Liberian case the mandate is broader, and the question will be whether it manages to discuss structural causes of conflict and violations at the same time as it discusses individual agency and actors. This directly links to the third issue I want to highlight; the tension between a primary emphasis on individual agency versus an emphasis on structural explanations: Are the violations or the repressions caused by the individual agency of ill-willed political leaders/actors and an awful exception in the national history of the country or are they just the latest manifestation of or reaction to the persistent structural conditions in the country? Facing horrendous atrocities, there may simplistically, be a tendency to opt for the first explanation model given that structural explanations give less clear responses on demands for accountability. And many TRCs have focused on documenting and analysing individual cases of violations, rather than investigating “the structural socioeconomic and ideological conflicts creating the conditions for political

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66 Bakiner 2012, p.28
67 Grandin and Klubock, p.7 on Castillejo-Cuellar’s analysis of the South African TRC
violence”. Grandin and Klubock hint at an unresolved challenge in analysing the relation between individual events and broader socio-economic and political processes.\(^6^8\)

The forth issue is the depiction of the victims and the perpetrators and how the society is portrayed through them. Often a polarity between victimizers and victims has been maintained in the TRC Reports, the South African possibly being an exception in that it covered the abuses committed also by the anti-apartheid movement. We can observe a certain tension between the notions of truth and justice, a fear that a fuller, more comprehensive picture of both victimizers and victims may run the risk to delegitimize claims for justice. Several TRC reports have been blamed to put a narrative for reconciliation before the objective to provide a truer, more nuanced historical narrative.\(^6^9\) How the victims and victimizers are portrayed will be a key question to assess in the Liberian TRC. It may reveal something about what narrative is established about the Liberia that suffered a violent conflict and which legacy is passed on about the conflict.

A fifth area of attention that surge is the influence of external factors and the tendency to adopt external explanations for the suffering of a country, during the second half of the 20\(^{th}\) Century it could be referred to as it the Cold War framework. Most scholars agree that it is key for understanding of how politics have evolved at national level, but also identify certain limitation in using it to generically; disregarding the responsibility and agency of national actors.\(^7^0\) I will investigate which relevance is given to this factor in the specific Liberian context of the Liberian TRC.

The Legacy of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions

Finally a few words on the legacy of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. While this question will not be in focus of my investigation, I do find it important to refer to the assessment that scholars have made so far on the impact and response to the TRCs in other countries, because it may give one indication on the impact and the resonance that the historical narratives introduced in them will have, at national level.

In general, the picture is quite sobering as to what impact the quite expensive and ambitious Truth and Reconciliation Commissions actually have on the larger political arena. The responses to the Reports have been divided in most countries. There have been tendencies both of Governments co-opting the narratives of the reports, for example in the case of Argentina, or examples where the Government, repudiates the findings and recommendations of the TRC, as

\(^{6^8}\) Grandin Klubock 2007, p. 6  
\(^{6^9}\) Grandin and Klubock 2007, p.4-5  
\(^{7^0}\) Grandin 2011, p. 80
in the case of Guatemala. In Guatemala, the President Arzu signed an ad in the press, condemning many of the recommendations. The Guatemalan civil society, on the other hand, welcomed the report and came to adopt its historical narrative as its own. In Peru, many of the key actors, such as the military, and actors from both political wings did not accept the “truth” of the TRC.  

In many societies the expectations on what the TRC would deliver might have been too high, something which has risked making their actual achievements invisible. Even in Peru the impact is considered as limited. In Guatemala, Oglesby suggests, the report has opened up the space for dialogue about the conflict and at the same time its thorough documentation of violations makes neglecting them impossible. These are perspectives that need to be kept in mind when analysing the Liberian TRC.

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71 Root 2012, p. 163  
72 Root 2012, p. 166  
73 Oglesby 2007, p. 78
3. Background and Literature on the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission

While most of the recent literature on the Liberian conflicts discusses the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the most thorough assessment of the Liberian TRC I have come across is a report by the International Center for Transitional Justice. I will provide a brief background on the Liberian TRC, as referring in the literature.

3.1 On the mandate

From the provision of the Liberian Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed in Accra on 18 August, 2003 for the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission it took another two years for the Act to pass through the Transitional Legislative Assembly to establish the TRC, and then a year before the structures and operations of the Commission were set. The broad mandate of the Liberian TRC which spanned from investigating gross human rights violations to conducting a critical review of Liberia’s historical past was by observers acknowledged as “comprehensive, though ambitious”. The mandate of the Commission was broad, and Steinberg explains this with that the main attention of those negotiating was not on the mandate, but on who would be appointed Commissioner.

The mandate of the TRC was negotiated between the warring parties during the Peace Talks in Accra. There was a general assumption among the parties that they would be guaranteed amnesty. It was so taken for granted that nobody even raised the issue orally because of the negative attention it might provoke from NGO observers. The establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission was understood as a guarantee for amnesty, while amnesty was actually never written into the mandate.

Among the actors in Liberia there were different views on when the Liberian crisis leading to the conflicts started. Americo-Liberians tended to regard the overthrow of president Tolbert in 1980, while indigenous Liberians saw the wars as a consequence of centuries of discrimination. At the end, the periodicity from 1979 was a compromise between these different interests.

74 Waugh 2011, p. 326
75 James-Allen, Weah, Goodfriend 2010, p.6
76 Steinberg 2010, p. 139
77 Steinberg 20010, p. 137; James-Allen, Weah, Goodfriend 2010, p.3
78 Gberie 2008
3.2 The Commission, the Commissioners and the process

Nine Commissioners, representing different parts of Liberian society, were appointed in October 2005 after a lengthy process. The Commission was led by a young lawyer, Jerome J. Verdier. Certain disrespect was demonstrated towards the Commissioners, none with a wide recognition, and claimed to be too young to have experienced the war fully. This could be illustrative of the divide between young and old in Liberia. Amnesty International in 2008 complained the Commission had no in-house legal team. Internal tensions within the Commission and in relation to external experts made the work of the Commission difficult throughout its lifespan.

Due to major difficulties in securing funding and a functioning Commission at the onset, it was only by mid-2007 it managed to take up its work fully. In 2008 it started its public hearing process, a process that would last for a year a take the TRC to all of Liberia’s all fifteen counties. There were initially large difficulties to convey perpetrators to testify. When they finally did come, they did so because the TRC had released a list of alleged perpetrators and in disaccord with its mandate, had promised immunity. And according to observers the perpetrators came mainly “to brag about their murderous misdeeds.” The hearings where the warlords testified were heavily criticized for not holding the warlords adequately responsible for atrocities committed. Victims were seen being more scrutinized than the victimizers. Some previous warlords were even said to have used the TRC as a platform to promote themselves.

Yet, with its limitations in mind the TRC was a rigorous process of extensive data collection and up until the publication of the final report of the Commission in July 2009, the Commission gather altogether 20 000 witness statements and 800 testimonies. It was considered innovative in the way it also collected witness statements with Liberia’s diaspora population, mainly in the US. The President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was one of those who testified. The TRC organized

79 James-Allen, Weah, Goodfriend 2010, p.7
80 Interview with Aaron Weah
81 Steinberg 2010, p.139
82 James-Allen, Weah, Goodfriend 2010, p.7-8
83 Waugh 2011, p. 326
84 Gherie 2008, p. 457
85 Interview with Aaron Weah 2014-05-13
86 James-Allen, Weah, Goodfriend 2010, p.7
87 Waugh 2011, p. 326
thematic hearing on issues assessed to have specific relevance, among those hearings on a historical review of Liberia and the contemporary history of the conflict.

While initially attentive to the process the President gradually withdrew her attention to the TRC, according to Steinberg. Some commissioners were criticized for not carrying out hearings in a professional way, giggling when atrocities were described, and the hearings came to focus extensively on the most perverted details of the war including cannibalism.\textsuperscript{88}

3.3 The response to the report

With the many obstacles surrounding the process, nobody had foreseen what was to come when the Commission published its final report.\textsuperscript{89} The report evoked an enormous turmoil when it was released; Steinberg describes how it dropped down as a “bombshell.”\textsuperscript{90} The controversy laid not so much in the descriptions of atrocities nor perpetrators, but in the fact that it listed ninety-eight persons for prosecution, and another forty-nine persons, including sitting President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, for banning from holding public office for thirty years. It was proposed that Sirleaf, because of her support to Charles Taylor at the beginning of the conflict, should be banned from public office for thirty years when her first Presidential term expired. Former warlords made a public declaration condemning the Report. The International Diplomatic Community and international NGOs responded with silence. The Commissioners were threatened and two had to go into hiding. While the official Government response to the report was fairly positive with a statement by the President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf saying that although not agreeing with all findings of the report, she considered that the report analysed the problems of the country and made meaningful recommendations for healing and reconciliation.\textsuperscript{91} Also on 26 July she made a public apology for having financially supported Charles Taylor with 10 000 USD at the beginning of the conflict.\textsuperscript{92}

Some of those that had high expectations on what the Report would deliver in terms of laying the ground for justice and reconciliation, were disappointed. They regretted that the report lacked a rigorous methodology; that many of the accusations would not pass a legal procedure, that it lacked data to support its many claims, and did not adequately refer to the primary sources it had used.\textsuperscript{93} Lacking linkages between inquiry, findings and recommendations were highlighted and

\textsuperscript{88} Gbere 2008, p. 459-463
\textsuperscript{89} Waugh 2011, Steinberg 2010
\textsuperscript{90} Waugh 2011, p. 328
\textsuperscript{91} James-Allen, Weah, Goodfriend 2010, p. 11
\textsuperscript{92} Waugh 2011, p. 329-330
also “a considerable weak link between the historical narrative of the report and many of its subsequent findings, determinations and recommendations.”

At the grass-root level the reception of the Report was a whole different story. In many churches and grass-root organization the report was generally welcomed and the prospect of implementation of the Report’s recommendations evoked quite some hope. “(F)or the most part ordinary Liberians did not seriously challenge the TRC’s findings.” The contrast of the reactions from the Liberian elites and from people at local level was striking. The TRC’s list of names evoked excitement and according to Steinberg it was at the time of the release of the Report hard to find anyone at street-level who did not believe that many of the recommendations ought to be implemented. While still fresh, Steinberg detected a canonization of the Report “as a sacred document in popular consciousness” and foresaw that it would be remembered by future generations because it named those who committed the worst atrocities in Liberia. The report, not only in its findings, but also in how it was received confirmed the division between the Liberian elite and “ordinary people”. That the Government has generally neglected the outcome of the process “the only serious attempt to date to deliver justice as well as promote reconciliation” was therefore deeply problematic according to Steinberg, who saw the TRC as a missed opportunity to discuss the role of ordinary men and women in the conflict, given the characteristics of the war as a “militarized crime wave, one in which countless people participated.”

### 3.4 Assessment of the impact of the TRC Report up to date

So what did the Commission actually deliver? It did deliver a rich background chapter, placing the conflict and the atrocities in a historical context. It is the only official version of the history of the conflict that exists as of yet. The list of persons recommended for prosecution and public sanction was what drew most attention to the Report, both by those who cheered it in the streets and by those who politically decided to disregard it, but it also delivered over 200 other recommendations on everything from establishing an extraordinary criminal court to establishing conflict resolution efforts such as a national “palava hut” program, a reparations trust fund,
establishing a Commission on Liberian History and other initiatives to strengthen the Governments’ and civil society efforts for reconciliation.¹⁰⁰

To date,¹⁰¹ very limited progress has been made to implement the recommendations of the report. Early on constitutional questions were raised, the entities responsible for follow-up of the TRC Report were not equipped to be able to ensure implementations¹⁰² and there seemed to be lacking political will to fully act upon the Recommendations. In 2012 a Reconciliation Roadmap was established¹⁰³, taking up some of the recommendations of the TRC. Where progress seemed most viable, according to ICTJ, was in the areas of remembering and memorializing the Past, the areas of particular interest to this paper. And there has now, 5 years later, been certain progress there. Recommendation 20.9 reads as follows:

The TRC recommends the establishment of a Commission on Liberian history comprising Liberian Historians, Historians on Liberia, Academics, Anthropologists, traditional leaders, and other professionals to write a concise and precise history of Liberia to reflect Liberia’s true culture, traditions, geography, national experiences, etc. into and encyclopaedia of Liberian Culture and History or “Liberiacana”.¹⁰⁴

In May 2013 the National History Project was officially launched in Monrovia. The purpose is to rewrite the Liberian history, in order to produce a more evidence-based national history and include the perspectives of the different ethnic groups. The project will in the end lead to a change in the History curricula of Liberian schools. The project involves Liberian historians, journalists, political scientists and anthropologists and has an expert panel tied to it. The purpose is to publish 5 volumes on Liberian history. Fund-raising for the project is still on-going.¹⁰⁵

According to Aaron Weah the TRC Report ended up reflecting both the divisions and the capacity gaps existing in Liberia today. The unwillingness of the Commissioners in taking in support by a professional editor of the Report at an early stage reflected a commitment to maintain national ownership over the process; the sense that this was a report that Liberians wanted to write themselves. Therefore it is important to not only dismiss the report for how it is written, but to go beyond it and see the context and the motivations behind the report.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹ June 2014, 5 years after the launch of the Report
¹⁰² James-Allen, Weah, Goodfriend 2010, p. 11
¹⁰³ Update on the status of implementation of the statement of mutual commitments on peacebuilding in Liberia (1 October 2012-31 July 2013) Second progress report, p.6
¹⁰⁵ Interview with Aaron Weah 2014-05-13, and second progress report "Update on the status of implementation of the statement of mutual commitments on peacebuilding in Liberia (1 October 2012-31 July 2013)", p. 6
¹⁰⁶ Interview with Aaron Weah 2014-05-13
4 Narratives about Liberian History

To provide a better understanding of in what way the historical narrative of the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report may actually contest established truths about Liberian history there is a need to briefly refer to other narratives on the history of Liberia. This can by no means be a comprehensive review of what earlier historians have to say about Liberia’s past or how the Liberian nation state was established, but it will refer to some scholars and, most importantly, to the history books that have been used in Liberian high schools since the early 1980s.  

4.1 Liberian symbols

One way to enter a discussion about traditional historical narratives about Liberia is to take a close look at the Liberian Coat of Arms that is still in use in 2014. It takes us directly back to the main narrative about Liberian History.

![Coat of Arms of the Republic of Liberia](image)

“The love of Liberty brought us here” says the text. In the sky there is a white dove, with a letter in its mouth. There is a ship off-shore, close to land. The palm demonstrates that we are in the tropical zone, the utensils on the ground send a message about work that has been or needs to be done, and the hot African sun sets in the sea, but sends promises about future sunny days. Us refers to the women and men - recently slaves or children of slaves in the plantations of United

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States – but now free, who travelled to Liberia over the Atlantic Ocean in search of liberty. Already here, in an emblem from 1847 that is still in use, the majority of the Liberian population is left outside. As Aronsson has pointed out “the character of common symbols tell us something about the type of community, togetherness or legitimacy one aims to create.”

The Liberian flag also provides a quite clear narrative in itself with its lone star against red stripes; it makes an explicit historic reference to the freed slaves that emigrated from the United States to make up the ruling class of the new country Liberia. It demonstrates this ruling class’ belonging and identification with the United States of America. And of course, the name of the country itself, Liberia, reflects how the country was regarded by its elite: a land of the free.

Flag of Liberia

There are currently discussions about creating a new Liberian coat of arms and a new flag. Within the Liberian Government’s Governance Commission there is an ongoing initiative to revise several of the national symbols that have clear and undesired historical connotations that the majority of Liberians don’t identify with.

4.2 Current scholars on Liberian History

Even if all countries have unique histories to tell, the nation-building and state-building processes of Liberia do stand out, not only in an African context. It is the story about a forest-covered and mineral-rich corner of West Africa inhabited by approximately sixteen different ethnic groups and integrated into the then global economy of trade of slaves and timber in the early 19th Century. It is the story about the abolitionist movement in America, the increasing impact of the idea that freed Afro-American slaves would be better off in Africa (or that America would be better off if free black men and women went back to Africa). It is the story of the American Colonization Society, established in 1816, raising funds to establish a colony in Africa. In 1820 the first boat left New York Harbour with freed black men. At first the new colony was governed by the mainly white American Colonization Society, but on July 26, 1847 Liberia declared independence from the United States.
Most narrators will tell the story of a group of people with a firm belonging in the Christian churches and Masonic Order with a commitment to maintain an American life style. As Johnson Sirleaf writes: “The settlers of modern-day Liberia decided they would plant their feet in Africa but keep their faces turned squarely toward the United States.”111 The settlers, from the beginning, dominated all spheres of the republic they had established and the result was an exclusionist and divided society and many conflicts along the way. The True Whig Party, the force which came to dominate the political landscape of Liberia for over hundred years, was established in 1869. The presidency of William Tubman 1944-71, “the land father” of Liberia - a period by many spoken of as the Golden Age of Liberia, where growth rates were high and foreign investments boomed, and Liberia “a beacon of hope for black people elsewhere”, will not go unmentioned.112 But it was also a country with increasingly autocratic rule and repression of political opponents and which at the end of the Tubman era looked “more like a corrupt and ramshackle neo-colony managed on behalf of the US government and the Firestone rubber company.”113

The failed efforts of his successor William Tolbert (1971-80) to reform the country in a direction that included indigenous groups is discussed, as is the turmoil preceding the coup and finally his – and many other prominent members of the elite’s- killing by Samuel Doe in 1980, which marked the end of the dominance by the True Whig Party and Americo-Liberian hegemony. Most narrators then agree that the reign of Samuel Doe was disastrous, both in keeping up previous regimes’ corruption, and in promoting ethnic division and tensions, and in an increasing repression of all political opponents. There were several attempts to end Does presidency by violent means, something which succeeded in September, 1990. By then violent conflict was already tearing Liberia apart, and with the exception for the period 1997-99, the first years’ of Charles Taylor’s presidency, continued to do so until the Peace Agreements were signed in Accra in 2003.114

The conflicts that raged Liberia were devastating. They took the lives of 250 000 Liberians115, in a country with just above 2 500 000 inhabitants, forced even more into refugee, it reverted development and destroyed social and economic infrastructure, it traumatized large segments of the population, not least its children and youth, many who had been forced into recruitment as

111 Johnson Sirleaf 2010, p.6
112 Ellis 2006, p. xxv, wikipedia.org
113 Ellis 2006, p. 50
114 Ellis 2006, p.43-65
115 This is the figure most commonly used by UN, ICTJ and the TRC Report, but a number being contested as too high by Stephen Ellis. I will not enter into a discussion its reliability, since none of my findings depend on its accuracy.
child soldiers. The Liberian wars appeared intriguing to external observers in the way warriors used religious rituals and symbols as protection in their fighting, whether wedding dresses, wigs, eating human flesh or fighting “butt-naked” as was also the nick-name of the general commanding a brigade with the same name. This was something which initially did draw some media attention and something which Stephen Ellis has analysed into detail in his book “The Mask of Anarchy”.

4.3 Liberian History – how it has been taught

There are, of course, many ways to tell the history of Liberia, and up until the 1980s the dominant historical narrative of Liberia was written from the perspective of the Americo-Liberians, taking its point of departure in the exactly same narrative that the Liberian Coat of Arms illustrates so well. An African- American educator and missionary, Doris Banks Henries, wrote most of the authoritative history books about Liberia in the middle of the 20th Century. It was the history viewed by the Americo-Liberian settlers about how Christianity and civilisation defeated barbarism and paganism. It conveyed the to Americo-Liberian historiography so important legend about a settler woman Matilda Newport who, was said to have turned a defeat into victory for the settlers. Since the 1970s, another three volumes of history books have been in use in secondary school, the first volume now in fourth edition. It is the three volumes by Joseph Saye Guannu.

The first book “Liberian History up to 1847” briefly refers to the arrival of different tribes in the land now known as Liberia, about traditional social institutions and practices, about religion and the first system of writing in the area. It provides a chronology over the abolition movement in the US, the arrival in West Africa of freed slaves and the establishment of colonies that in the end resulted in a free republic in 1847. Its focus is mainly on the chronology of events, and less on analysing them. It tells about the many misadventures in the first days of the colony, malaria killing many of the newly arrived, about the many conflicts between settlers and natives and how the land was governed up until it became the first African Republic in 1847. Very little is said in the book about traditional beliefs and practices.

The second book “A Short History of the First Republic” emphasizes mainly the political history of Liberia between 1847 and 1979, the history is told through an account about the 18 presidents that ruled from 1848 to 1979, the history of dominant True Whig Party, the territorial expansion and encroachment on Liberia, the economy and education system and a long chapter on

117 Liberian History up to 1847, A Short History of the First Liberian Republic and Liberian History Since 1980.
Liberia’s foreign relations. One chapter is dedicated the decline and fall of the First Liberian Republic. The final concluding chapter lingers into a discussion on the challenges in writing a history of Liberia. Scarcity of records is identified as one of the main challenges. “Liberian history was largely the story of the part which the settler community played in state building for it is in this area that more records were available and the society would accept.” According to Saye Guannu two negative western beliefs influenced Liberian historians:

that black Africans were incapable of making history for they belonged to an inferior race with no past worthy of inclusion in the history of mankind. The other was that writing is the only reliable source of history. And since blacks did not widely apply their indigenous system of writing prior to the coming of the Arabs and Europeans, they therefore had no history worth recording.

Saye Guannu gives examples on how certain names have been omitted from Liberian history books, Samuel W Seton, a Grepo who contributed to establish government in Nimba, the Liberian theologist William Wade Harris. “Liberian historians could have organized the oral history of the state and incorporated it into the general body of the country’s history.”

Distortions and misrepresentations of facts are also mentioned. The myth about a settler woman Matilda Newport and her role in the Battle of Fort Hill is particularly questioned.

Saye Guannu identifies what he calls “Unlearned lessons”; he suggests that Liberians need to take more pride in those Liberian writers that have existed and in the cultural practices of the country, the need for Liberia to establish its own philosophy of development, the lesson of equal political participation, to solve the issue of land tenure and the need for a common Liberian identity, and questions the national symbols that Liberia has that only represent a small group of the Liberian population.

The third book “Liberian History Since 1980” finally “is another beginning of the writing of the history of this momentous period in our national experience.” It tries to explain root causes of conflict. It blames the Civil War for the shortcomings of the book, since rebels damaged and destroyed databases, libraries and private collections, especially in Monrovia and its environs.” According to Guanny “it was only a question of time” before violent social change would once take place in Liberia, something which could have been foreseen for long. The book likewise focuses on political developments and political actors during the conflicts, more than on the social conditions under which the Liberians lived during the conflicts.

118 Saye Guannu, A Short History of the First Liberian Republic, p. 107
119 Saye Guannu, A Short History of the First Liberian Republic, p. 108-109
120 Saye Guannu, Liberian History since 1980, p. vii
More recent scholars, contesting the old historiography of settler supremacy have demonstrated the ever closer ties that were developed in the 20th Century between the Americo-Liberians and indigenous Liberians, particularly the traditional authorities. It was a way for Americo-Liberian politicians to gain power, and many even entered the secret societies, for example Poros, that existed in the interior of the country. Yet others will speak extensively about the role that the United States has played in Liberia.

Johnson Sirleaf mentions in her memoir, that it was first when she studied at Harvard that she got to know another, more complex, version of Liberian history. It was “no small irony that I had to cross the Atlantic to America to learn about my home.” she writes. That was also when the future president realised “….how critical it was that my own people know their true history.” This view of is also reflected in the TRC mandate, and thus a natural bridge to the remainder of this thesis.

121 Ellis 2006, p. xxxi
122 Johnson Sirleaf 2009, p. 58
123 Johnson Sirleaf 2009, p. 60
5 The research material and methodology

5.1 The report – introduction to the research material

The Report of the Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, made public on 30 June, 2009, consists of 3 volumes, where volume 1 is the preliminary findings, volume 2 is the Consolidated Final Report and volume 3 consists of 13 appendices of which some are of interest from a historiographical point of view, while others are not. With the mandate in mind, one can expect the report to dedicate considerable space to historical explanations and elaborations, something which it also does. The Consolidated final Report is 496 pages, out of which 80 pages are dedicated to a historical background and account of the conflict divided in three chapters; chapter 5: Background to the Conflict, chapter 6: Post World War II Liberia (1944-1979) and chapter 7: The Liberian Civil War (1990-2003). Throughout the document, including the introduction, historical references are abundant. From a historiographical point of view also chapter 8 Confronting the Bitter Past: Truth, Justice and Reconciliation, chapter 9 Impact of the Conflict and Violations on the People- Victims and chapter 10 Findings in which the root causes of the Conflict are interesting, since the historical argument and narratives are closed here.

Among the appendices the first five have specific relevance: I Women and the Conflict, II TRC Children’s Agenda, III Economic Crimes and the Conflict, Exploitation and Abuse, IV The Conflict, Religion and Tradition and V Mapping Potential Conflict, A Report on Sources of Looming Conflict. Only Titles I and II are over 100 pages each. Main focus for my analysis will be the Consolidated Final Report,(but I will also reflect upon the narrative of the appendices).

5.2 Methodological challenges

There are methodological challenges attached to the use of a report of this kind as research material. One might for example ask who’s voice is speaking - establishing the historical narrative – and who is claiming to be the owner of the Report. Is it the Liberian Government or Parliament because it is an officially commissioned and sanctioned report? Or is it the Liberian people because they have contributed with their testimonies and participated in the hearings of the Commission? Or is it mainly owned by its authors/editors, the Commissioners? It probably has to be seen as a mixture of those; the authors having a large influence over the outcome, but at the same time it is a manifestation of the historical narratives most influential in Liberia at that time, whether or not officially sanctioned by the Government. Since the layers of agency in a report of this kind are complex; the commissioning authority, the Commission and the witnesses/audience, the narrative will most likely also be complex in that it tries to integrate and
reflect perspectives and considerations from all groups. It may make the reading and assessment of the narrative more difficult, but not necessarily less interesting nor the narrative less significant. It can still reveal a lot about the popular as well as the official historical narratives. Yet, it may be difficult to judge who have influenced the historical narrative the most.

One needs to keep in mind that the lacking structure of the text, repetitions, anecdotal character mixed with very clear and consistent parts makes analysing the text quite difficult. The narrative is sometimes difficult to follow because of the many repetitions and retakes in the historical account. Yet, one has to bear in mind that the same weaknesses are part of its strength, that it is a report written by Liberians for Liberians; a report that seriously wants to break with a past of foreign and elite hegemony, and by doing so it reflects the consequences of exclusionary practices.124

At the centre of my attention are mainly the chapters of the Report that consciously brings history and historical explanation models to the forefront. I will start this empirical part of the thesis by summarizing the different historical narratives that surge. After that follows what is the more analytical section that links further to my research questions, with the aim to respond them.

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124 Interview with Aaron Weah 2014-05-13
6. Empirical analysis of the historical narrative of the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission

6.1 The mandate – the outline of a narrative

The Act to Establish the Truth and Reconciliation Commission from 12 May 2005, stipulates among other things that the Commission shall:

- investigate gross human rights and international humanitarian law violations and other gross abuses during the period January 1979 to 14 October 2003 “determining whether these were isolated incidents or part of a systematic pattern…”
- Address impunity and opportunity for both victims and perpetrators to share experience “to create a clear picture of the past to facilitate genuine healing and reconciliation.”
- Investigate the antecedent of the crisis which gave rise to and impacted on the violent conflict in Liberia
- Conduct a critical review of Liberia’s historical past, with the view to establishing and giving recognition to historical truths, in order to address falsehoods and misconceptions of the past, relating to the nation’s socio-economic and political development”
- Adopt specific mechanisms to address experiences of women, children and vulnerable groups

The mandate does deserve a thorough examination and historiographical assessment in itself. Revising or at least reinterpreting national history is clearly at the core of the tasks of the Commission. The TRC is attributed the confidence of being able to not only reveal possible root causes of conflict, but to carry out a broader critical review of the history of Liberia, which does not limit itself to give keys to understand of the conflict, although that is the main motivation.

If assessing the formulations thoroughly one can detect a structuralist approach to the conflict, a view that the conflict shall not be seen as an isolated period of brutality, but rather as one of the many manifestations in the Liberian history of underlying structural problems. Another underlying assumption is that the understanding of the past will lead to reconciliation and healing. Finally, the formulation drawing most attention, “with a view to establishing and giving

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125 Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p.48
recognition to historical truths, in order to address falsehoods and misconceptions of the past” is clearly politically conceived. Yet it leads us to the core of the historian’s dilemma, discussed earlier, about whether a true representation of past events or realities is even possible. And even more importantly, the wording of falsehoods and misconceptions of the past establishes a conflict between what is true and what has been known and taught about Liberia’s history before. The basic assumption, established in the mandate, is that Liberian history has been distorted to serve political purposes. The Commission is thus expected to present alternative interpretations of Liberian history. This has wide implications for how it can approach this task of conducting a critical review of Liberia’s past.

6.2 A Historical Narrative reading of the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report

In this section I will first distinguish a number of historical narratives that are established in the report. These are some of the “main stories” that come through in the text, but by no means is it a conclusive list; one could possibly find other stories behind these larger narratives, but I have assessed that these are the main stories and messages of historical explanatory character in the report. I detect two types of narratives: i) narratives about the history of Liberia, and ii) narratives about the conflict. The first type is more occupied with re-writing the history of Liberia while the second aims to establish a common understanding about the conflict; we could even call it the very first attempt to write the history about the conflict. Distinguishing between several different narratives reflects the multi-faceted character of a text such as the TRC-report, and illustrates that it is not possible nor desirable to boil down a text to one narrative, one understanding, and one historical explanation model.

i. Narratives about the History of Liberia

Culture and organisation before the settlement

The historical section of the Report\textsuperscript{126} takes a quote by an Oxford Professor Hugh Trevor-Roper from 1964 as the point of departure: “…Perhaps in the future there will be some African history to teach. But at the present there is none; there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness, and darkness is not the subject of history.” With this background the Report then paints a richer and more nuanced history of the West African region, how its cultures were

\textsuperscript{126} Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, Chapter 5
shaped by nature, migration, international trade, clan-state formations and socialization practices of the secret societies before the arrival of the ships with freed Afro-American slaves.\textsuperscript{127}

It refers to Pygmies, ‘jinna’, as the first inhabitants of Liberia according to local oral history, but “(t)here is no recorded history to prove their existence”. The Golas are stated to have been the first ethnic group to arrive in West Africa, around 600 BC, later defeated by the empire of King Kamba. At this time people lived mainly from agriculture “but also developed arts such as pottery, weaving, and basket making. Their blacksmiths were able to make spears, arrow-heads, hoes, knives, rings and iron rods. These iron rods were used as a medium of exchange.”\textsuperscript{128} In the 16\textsuperscript{th} Century, new groups arrived by sea, the Grebo and Krus who “traded with Europeans along the coast and later became slave traders.”\textsuperscript{129} Distinction was made between those arriving by sea, and those arriving the safer way, by land: “Those who braved the dangerous waves still feel superior to these so-called ‘bush’- Grebos because of earlier exposure to western civilization and education.” The Vai, part of the Mandingo-group, arriving around the same time, was the “first tribe to embrace Islam unlike other tribes which were animist. It was one of the few tribes of Black Africa who invented their own script in the 1830s.” From the 15\textsuperscript{th} Century the region was visited by Europeans traders and explorers; Portuguese, English, Dutch, French and Swedish, and was increasingly integrated in international trade, which signified considerable interaction between the indigenous groups and the Europeans. There were also many contacts between the coast and the interior of the country; alliances, defence pacts and intermarriages, but also conflicts and invasions. The region was also integrated in the transatlantic slave trade. Early on it was mainly prisoners of war that were traded, but with growing demand local leaders started to also sell neighbours and clan members. Although this part of the sub region, due to the rough and rocky coast, was not as involved as other parts in the slave trade, a slave factory did exist near Monrovia, run by a man named John S. Mills, “an interpreter whose mother was a local African women and English father.”\textsuperscript{130}

The clan-states existing in the region during this period were based on ethnicity. There was a multitude of different government systems; “from practical democracy to monarchy and classic dictatorship” with different sources of authority. Two major political systems – both patriarchal - co-existed; a lineage-based and less hierarchical system in the southern/south-eastern regions and a more hierarchic, federal system in the central, northern/north-western regions of the country. Women were important for spiritual leadership and within family, culture and education matters.

\textsuperscript{127} Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p.94
\textsuperscript{128} Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p. 94-95
\textsuperscript{129} Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p.95
\textsuperscript{130} Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p.98-99
but played “minimum or no public role (.) in the governance of these states.”131 Slavery was practice.

The “bush schools”, the Poro society for men, and the Sande for women, initiating young people into society – and still in practice today - were an important part of the Liberian governance structure.

The children are taken away for between one to four years to be educated into the laws, customs, traditions and ways of their people; loyalty, respect and care for the elderly, the extended family system, and other values and skills were taught to prepare them for their role and place in society as responsible adults.

More specifically, the women in the Sande were trained for initiation into adulthood, morality and proper sexual comportment; marriage and domestic chores were also subjects. Education about farming, medicine, dancing, child rearing and domestic as well as specialized skills like dying, making cloth, preserving food, etc. were part of the training program.132

These are the main features of the pre-colonial Liberia, according to the Report. It is a region with cultures, with language, social organisation and trade and international relations. There is cooperation and there is conflict, there is education and there is exploitation and repression. It is clearly a region that has a history before the arrival of the America-Liberians, and where social and cultural practices have been established that will survive their arrival. The intention is clearly to provide a nuanced picture of what Liberia was before the first colonizers arrived and it particularly wants to give a richer picture of West-African culture than was demonstrated in the initial quote.

**The birth of Liberia as an idea and a nation**

The Foundation of Liberia is discussed both in terms of its intellectual creation and the inherent ideological conflict that shaped it and through the actual real migratory initiatives and political actions that made it happen. First, the intellectual creation of Liberia: There were a variety of ideological motives behind the establishment of the *American Colonization Society* in 1816 and the emerging idea of repatriating freed slaves to Africa: the fear of slave rebellions following the declaration of independence of Haiti, the fear of social unrest that freed frustrated blacks might cause to the American society was another, the threat they may be to slavery as an institution, the risk of racial mix and integration yet one and finally the need to Christianize and Civilize the African continent another argument. There were mixed feelings among the Afro-American population about the back to Africa-plan; some saw it as a possibility, soon intertwined with the idea that Afro-Americans had a role in Christianizing and Civilizing Africa.

131 Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p.96
Once having completed its first mission of establishing a colony in West Africa the views on the
mission of the ACS and on what were to be the settler community’s approach vis-à-vis the
existing ethnic groups and clan-states were divided.

One option was a Euro-American orientation with the idea of a civilizing and Christianizing mission at its
core. The other option was to attempt to build an African nationality that blended Western and African
values (….). The choice of the former is at the root of Liberia’s yet unresolved historical problem of
political identity and legitimacy. The choice, in time, alienated, marginalized, degraded not only the
majority of the inhabitants of the Liberia area, but implicitly the very westernized black leaders who
bought into and adopted the views derived from American colonialist sentiments.133

The struggle between these two ideologies among the settlers, those who wanted to “build a
small America in West Africa” and those who wanted to build an “African nation modified by
Western thought” is emphasized134 – a struggle that in itself had enormous consequences for the
relations between the settlers and the indigenous population. The “mulatto overthrow” of the
“first wholly black President E.J. Roye ‘ in 1871, demonstrated the dominance of the “building a
small America”-paradigm, according to the TRC. Roye had entered presidency with promises
about including the indigenous Liberians into the spheres of influence. His inaugural speech is
quoted: “The aborigines are our brethren, and should be entwined with our affections, and form
as soon as possible an active part of our nationality. In fact, we cannot have a permanent and
efficient nationality without them.”135 The enormous influence that the American Colonization
Society (ACS) played for how the new Liberian nation took shape is emphasized. The choice of
establishing a new United States in Africa, is mainly attributed the ACS, while the TRC explains
there were other views among the settlers as well.

Secondly, the TRC also tells about the arrival of the ship Elizabeth in 1817, the starting point for
the resettlement of approximately 13 000 Afro-Americans up until 1867 and about how land was
acquired from the native kings, often by “gun point”. Following was the establishment of
different colonization societies in the coastal areas, later integrating into the commonwealth of
Liberia governed by the American Colonization Society. The declaration of independence in 1847
and the Constitution written by a Harvard Professor are quoted quite extensively. The many
conflicts between settlers and natives are mentioned, as well as examples when local chiefs did
side with the settlers in front of the threat from British and French colonizers. The brutal way by
which the interior of the country was colonized by Liberia in the beginning of the 20th Century is
discussed, and so are the financial difficulties accompanying Liberia from the start. Finally, the

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stigmatization of Liberia in the late 1920s, when the extensive use of contract labour, by many perceived as slavery became known to the world.136

**Liberia’s troubled past at the root of the conflicts**

The TRC discusses what are to be seen as historic as well as more recent root causes of conflict. It goes back to the foundation of the Liberian state, a Euro-American style settlement with a “civilizing and Christianizing mission”, something which “is at the root of Liberia’s yet unresolved historical problem of political identity and legitimacy.”137 According to the TRC, Liberia still struggles with the dichotomy between a civilising mission and the building of an African nationality.138 An increasing suspicion from the settlers vis-à-vis the native population is described.139 Other concrete historic root causes discussed are the ruthlessness in the acquisition of land; the colonialist ambitions of the settlers, the authoritarian rule of ACS and the settlers’ obedience to ACS rather than taking into account local, traditional authorities; and numerous atrocities committed along the path to creating the Liberia that now exists. The expansion of the Liberian state into the interior is highlighted as particularly problematic:

> The other problematic feature of the native policy was the licence it gave to some unscrupulous interior officials and their traditional cronies which led to unspeakable atrocities across Liberia’s interior region. Talking about “roots of conflict” the memory of these atrocities survives in documents, and there are Liberians who continue to hand down to a younger generation the facts of this ugly past in which respectable chiefs and fatherly heads were publicly humiliated, children and women often abused, forced labor and cruelty in collecting the “hut tax” impositions were common.140

The inconsistencies in the very Declaration of Independence are emphasized. It established that the people of the Republic of Liberia were originally inhabitants of the United States of America.141

Beyond the causes related to the establishment of Liberia as a nation, several more recent factors and actions that have contributed to nurture conflict are discussed. Particularly discussed as a breeding-factor to conflict is the presidency of William Tubman (1944-1971); his legacy of land father of Liberia, the maintenance of privileges and policies implemented only beneficial for the elite. Tubman’s constitutional amendment to remove the presidential term limit was according to the Report an “incongruous act of constitutional manipulation” that “created precedents that

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138 Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p 300
139 Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p. 301
140 Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p. 115
haunted Liberia throughout the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{142} His authoritarian rule, political culture of repression and election manipulation is also indicated to have set some precedence in the Liberian history, including nurturing conflict. When it comes to his successor William Tolbert (1971-1980) he is mainly blamed for “too little, too late” and for not being able to detect the growing militant opposition. With regard to Samuel Doe (1980-1990), both his corruption and repression are stated as causes of conflict, and not least his ethnification of Liberian politics, building alliances with certain ethnic groups against others.\textsuperscript{143}

The violations committed during the Liberian civil wars are in this section fitted into the larger narrative of Liberian history. The conflict is according to the TRC dating back to the founding of the Liberian state.\textsuperscript{144} The history hearings that were organized as part of the TRC’s work on historical review and contemporary history among other things, no doubt contributed to the considerations that are reflected in the TRC report.\textsuperscript{145}

A problem identified in a conflict mapping carried out as part of the TRC process was that the formation of the Liberian state, based on a constitutional dualism providing different rights to settlers and natives “preceded any meaningful development of a Liberian nation, or sense of nationhood.”\textsuperscript{146} The culture of distrust and lack of confidence in Liberian institutions is blamed on the many years of exclusion.\textsuperscript{147} The TRC argues that “a historical review by the TRC of Liberia’s conflict and statebuilding past revealed a legacy of violence and deadly conflicts over issues of land tenure and ownership, trade, independence and interdependence, voice, participation and inclusion”\textsuperscript{148} and that “all Governments of the Republic of Liberia from 1847 especially from 1979 to 2003 are responsible for the commission of those human rights violations.”\textsuperscript{149} Along this argument about continuity of violence and authoritarianism in Liberia the TRC catalogues deadly conflicts before 1915, fifteen in total\textsuperscript{150} and a vast number of human rights violations since 1847, followed by the list of violation during the period of 1979-2005.\textsuperscript{151}

\textsuperscript{142} Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p. 119
\textsuperscript{143} Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, Chapter 6
\textsuperscript{144} Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p.338
\textsuperscript{145} Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p. 191
\textsuperscript{146} Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p. 212
\textsuperscript{147} Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p. 204
\textsuperscript{148} Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p. 213
\textsuperscript{149} Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p. 237
\textsuperscript{150} Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, on p.213-214 these are listed; from the Dei-British/Settler “Water Battle” in 1822 to the Kru-Confederacy- Government War in 1915.
\textsuperscript{151} Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p.214-216 A list including the violation discrimination, marginalization and violation of fundamental human rights of natives and women, and various constitutional violations committed by Tubman, Tolbert, Doe and the Armed Forces.
Despite “the prevailing historical narrative of Liberia (…) from a distinctively Christian perspective that has failed to recognise and accommodate the full breadth of Liberia’s diverse religious and Traditional communities and their significant influences on the distinctive history and formation of a Liberian identity” religion was not identified to be among the root causes of conflict in Liberia, according to the TRC.

In Appendix 3 on Economic Crimes and the Conflict, Exploitation and Abuse the TRC discusses how economic interests and funding from other countries, economic crimes and exploitation of Liberia’s natural resources contributed to nurturing the conflict: Seventeen logging companies, that in their operations supported the different militias in Liberia are named and so the fact that the Diamond Industry along with other industries had their own security forces.

While determining “that the root causes of conflict in Liberia are attributed to complex historical, social, cultural, political and economic phenomena” which “cannot solely be attributed to theories of black colonialism or settler-native conflict” the report concludes that the more immediate causes of conflict were the rice riots taking place in 1979, the dominance of the executive over legislative and judiciary, mass illiteracy and poverty, corruption and greed, economic disparities, exclusion, HR violations, ethnic rivalry, disunity, land tenure and over-centralization.

The main point message coming through is how inter-linked the conflict and the crimes committed during the conflict are with past actions and events in Liberian history. While the way the Liberian state was founded is given large part of the blame, the report also claims other factors and more recent evolvements played in.

**A legacy of mismanagement, corruption and repression**

When discussing the 20th Century the Report concentrates largely on giving us the history of the three presidents Tubman, Tolbert and Doe. The lives and reality of the majority of Liberians are only occasionally coming through. The assessment of Tolbert’s legacy is slightly more apologetic and understanding, while the TRC condemns much of the legacies of Tubman and Doe. However, the Report makes a real effort to not give a too one-dimensional view but to explain

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152 Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p.279
155 Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p.332
156 Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p. 303
157 Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, Chapter 8-11
why Tubman is still regarded as the land father of Liberia by some, and the popularity of Doe when assumed the presidency.

Tubman and Tolbert, the last two Presidents of the True Whig Party, both entered presidency with the rhetoric of change - to redress the injustices and social and economic inequality at the disadvantage of the indigenous population, but the increasingly authoritarian rule of Tubman soon demonstrated that no real change would take place. Tolbert seemed more committed and made some real efforts to change the system of inequality, but his rule also demonstrated the limited possibilities and resistance to gradual progressive change in Liberia. While the hopes rose at the beginning of his rule, the frustrations also rose when promises were not delivered upon. And some of his policies did mainly benefit his own elite. Thus his overthrow – and the large expectations on Samuel K. Doe (1980-90), the first native Liberian to assume power; a symbol that a real break had been made with the old order.158

It is overall the history of three presidents that is being narrated, all assessed to have determining roles for what was to come. The anecdotes about Tubman are many; there seem to be so many stories to tell about him that it gets mythical.

A controversial figure, he was admired and hated by others; sincere and very oppressive; a patriot but yet accused of selling out to foreigners; chauvinistic promoter of Americo-Liberian interest but yet an advocate of national unification. Tubman was the law and his personality became a cult figure in Liberia for which he is still revered even 38 years after his demise in 1971.159

To exemplify his rhetorical skills his inaugural speech is quoted: “Spirit of this Administration shall be: No Reprisals; No Paybacks; No get-Even; but let the dead past bury the dead.”160 While the narrative focuses mainly on the deeds and short-comings of Tubman, Tolbert and Doe; opposition leaders are mentioned by name, but much less is said about the living conditions of Liberians other than in more general terms.

What is told is the story of a society in urgent need of change, a society that in its fundaments has been established on unequal terms and a government governed by the elite that verbally commits to an agenda of change, but that does not carry out policies that will make change possible. It is also a narrative about continuity; an elite that through the increasing investments to Liberia continues to enrich itself and by using arenas such as the traditional societies of Poro and Sande

158 Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, Chapter 6
159 Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p. 127
160 Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p.120
to maintain its political dominance. For example, both Tubman, and later Charles Taylor played prominent roles both within their Christian churches and the traditional societies.\footnote{Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p.280}

There is also a visible continuity in that all three presidents have identified a need for redress, for the country to do something about the large social and economic injustices, although Doe represents the non-reformist approach to these matters. And at the same time the incapability to create a more inclusive and democratic society, Tubman because his will is questioned, Tolbert because the circumstances did not allow him, and Doe because there is a question about what his agenda was other than enrichment. And continuity is also seen in the way corruption and repression continues to flourish through the three presidencies but accelerating during the rules of Tubman and Doe.

While it is a narrative of continuity it is also about the building up of factors, practices, injustices that will eventually lead to conflict; repression, accelerating social tensions not only between the elite and the majority population, but also between indigenous ethnic groups (enforced during Doe) and military overreactions to social unrest.

It is also clear that the Report sides more with Tolbert, at least trying to explain most of his deeds, the challenges he was facing in his reforms, while no such comprehension is expressed towards Tubman nor Doe (nor later towards Charles Taylor).

\textit{And from the beginning there were women as well}

The TRC strives to provide a more nuanced picture and richer understanding of the role of women in Liberian History and during the conflicts.\footnote{The findings of the Gender Committee of the TRC are presented in the Volume III, Appendix, title I "Women and the Conflict" and briefly summarized in Volume II.} A political system of exclusion of women is painted, where Americo-Liberian women had to wait until 1947 before they could vote, and indigenous women up until the 1950s. The report states quite bluntly that “There is no mention anywhere in the historical accounts of women participating in the political life of the colony, prior to 1947, except for their participation in the making of the Liberian flag at independence.”\footnote{Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p.272}

While most of the indigenous cultures existing in Liberia before the settlement as well as the ideology brought by the Americo-Liberians are described as patriarchal, the TRC claims that “the
sexual division of labor in indigenous agricultural settings afforded women a measure of power, if not formal authority”.  

Indigenous constructions of gender emphasized the breadwinner or productive role for women and the warrior role for men. Indigenous political structures had a “dual-sex” organization, that is parallel systems of offices for women and men. Among the northwestern peoples, this took the form of the dual organization of (...)Poro and Sande secret societies. In the south and east, female councils of elders used a series of checks and balances on official male power.  

The arrival of the settlers implied an increased marginalization for indigenous women, according to the TRC. The hinterland laws, implemented from 1905, that regulated the interior of the country opened up for further oppression of women by denying women right to own property, to participate in decision making and hold discussions with men. While the TRC mentions that Liberia had Africa’s first female head of state, it emphasizes the persistence of the patriarchal structures that prevail today. It furthermore analyses how women were specifically victimized during the conflict, through rape, sexual slavery and through forced displacement.  

Women’s involvement in the peace process is mentioned. “Despite afflictions of the war, reduced earning potential, single parenting etc., women had public marches, petitions, prayer crusade, and attended and participated in peace conferences as part of their agenda for peace.” The TRC continues the violence and atrocities meted out to women and girls did not arise solely out of the conflict, but are also firmly linked to the status of women in Liberian society in peacetime. This means that addressing the impact and consequences of the war means addressing the root causes as well, if lasting and sustainable peace is to be achieved. Therefore, in the midst of the devastation, the conflict has opened up opportunities for historical gender inequalities to be transformed.  

A special relationship with bitter aftertaste  

The influence of the United States is dealt with at several places in the report. The relationship between the two countries is described as very complex, from the outset to the end of the 20th
Century. That it took the US 15 years to recognize Liberia as an independent state is not yet forgotten. After that a closer relationship began to grow between the two countries: US warships assisted the Liberian Government to calm attacks from indigenous armies in 1910. The relationship between the countries were manifested in the 1938 agreement on Friendship, Commerce and Navigation and the two defence pacts signed in 1942 and 1959 allowing the US to use Liberian ground as point-of-departure for various activities across Africa and the economic boost it implied for Liberia. Another source of American influence was the favourable leasing agreements of American Companies such as the Firestone Rubber Plantation.171 The commercial interests drove the US into this relationship, according to the TRC, and the relationship was maintained throughout the war, not least the trade of rubber. The Roberts Airport was built as a transportation hub for Firestone Rubber Company. The importance US attributed the Rubber trade also made the US prevent the UN Security Council from imposing sanctions on Liberian rubber in 2001.

Up until the early 1970s the relationship between the two countries remained strong, but

By the mid 70s the close relationship between Liberia and the US had begun to deteriorate as social and economic conditions in the country worsened. (...) Tolbert sought to renegotiate Liberia’s contract with Firestone, obviously not favourable to the US, and requested credit from several American banks. In 1979 Tolbert refused to allow the bunkering of the US Rapid Deployment Force at Roberts International Airport. This refusal embarrassed both the CIA and the Pentagon who were now prospecting for leadership change in Liberia (…)172

According to a memorandum in preparation of a visit of President Carter in 1978 President Tolbert regarded the benefits from the relationship as less than adequate “one would think that a country 130 years old with a friend having means such as the United States should be far more advanced than she is today.”173 That the US-Liberian relations improved instantly after Doe’s takeover, and American development aid to Liberia boomed in the mid-1980s demonstrates the changing loyalties of the US vis-à-vis Liberian actors. 174

A rather dual and short-sighted role of the US in Liberia during the 1980s and 1990s is described. First, the US supported Doe by sending military advisers in the first counterinsurgency attacks against Taylor; then took their hands off Doe, then supported the idea that Doe should leave to be replaced by Taylor, making deals with Taylor on Firestone rubber exports. The US were silent when Taylor was elected president, but were claimed to have supported the establishment of new

172 Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p.142
174 Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, Chapter 6
rebel groups confronting Taylor, and finally after Taylor had resigned entered with large marines and troops. The Report claims that several armed-faction leaders were US-trained.

The tone is bitter when mentioning how the White House dismissed any special relationship with Liberia, in the words of National Security Advisor Robert Gates “we treat Liberia just like any other country, and we have no real interest there.”\(^\text{175}\) The Report claims that the reason US did not act more strongly to facilitate Doe’s departure was that it would create expectations that the US would take care of Liberia thereafter. The report describes how Liberians desperately asked for a US intervention in the midst of the war, and speculates in that if the US had demanded the warring parties to lay down weapons, it might have happened, given the respect the US enjoyed amongst most parties in Liberia. The outcome is according to the TRC, that many Liberians feel betrayed by the US.

The TRC concludes that the US has “alternately supported, exploited, welcomed and abandoned Liberia and Liberians” something which has led to disastrous outcomes.\(^\text{176}\) The report culminates in an accusation act against the US with a list of misdeeds towards Liberia including the long-time support for the authoritarian rule of ACS and settler hegemony; the support and turning blind eye to Tubman’s 27 year virtual police state; the undermining of Tolbert because of his non-alignment policy; the support for the Doe junta with massive development aid despite his repression and rigging elections; then supporting Taylor; for acting mainly to foster its economic, commercial and political interests in Liberia; and for denying the previously special relationship with Liberia – and the responsibilities connected to it - during the war.\(^\text{177}\)

As for the rest of the international community it is mostly the ECOWAS and the neighbouring countries that are discussed. According to the TRC it was first at the very end of the last peace negotiations that there seems to be strong will behind the actions and decisions of the international community.\(^\text{178}\) Three countries are particularly mentioned to have contributed to the conflict through their support to Charles Taylor; Cote d’Ivoire, Burkina Faso and Libya.\(^\text{179}\)

\(^{175}\) Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p. 306
\(^{176}\) Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p.303
\(^{177}\) Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p. 308
\(^{178}\) Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, Chapter 7
\(^{179}\) Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, Chapter 8-11
ii. Establishing a common narrative about the conflict

*The worst of wars*

The Report quotes Stephen Ellis when describing the conflict/s: “the Liberian conflict topped and surpassed all other wars in form and character, in intensity, in depravity, in savagery, in barbarism and in horror.” The brutality exercised by all warring parties is described; the use of decapitation and disembowelment. It does not tribute any armed group with a better reputation; while INFPL of Prince Johnson is said to have been more disciplined than Taylor’s troops, it highlights that Prince Johnson excelled in disciplined brutality. The report states:

The Liberian civil war would best be remembered for a long time to come, not simply for the several thousands of lives it claimed –which will surely remain one of the sordid points of the country’s checkered history – but for the carnage and the sheer brutality that characterized the war.

There are several lists documenting human rights violations (over 250) and recorded massacres (22) and giving certain details on the violations. The most violent years were, according to the Report, 1990 followed by 2003 and 1994. The report does quite explicitly mention the names of many of the responsible military commanders, as well as in certain instances also the name of the victims, but in general, names and incidents are referred to quite haphazardly. This makes it difficult to get the picture of the extent and impact of the war that the report aspires to. It also provides a list of all the 17 peace agreements signed from Banju Communique in 1990 to the Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement.

It is the recent modern Liberian history of conflict that the TRC intends to tell. Being so recent the authors have difficult to find written sources to illustrate its findings, such that have been used for previous periods. In some parts of this text the naming of names seems to be the most important, making reading difficult for anyone not extremely familiar with all the actors in Liberia. In other parts it is the emphasis on how brutal the Liberian conflicts were is what most shines through.

While large emphasis is put on Charles Taylor’s brutishness and the horrendous deeds of his militias, and later armed forces, the report at the same time conveys the message that all warring factions shared that brutality, it being very difficult to take out one actor, behaving better. Only

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182 Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p. 216-247. Most of the human rights violations catalogued involves killing. There are lists of violations in different parts of the text.
183 Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, P. 257
the armed faction MODEL is mentioned as slightly less brutish. Thus, the message is that all warring factions shared a strong responsibility for the chaos and the atrocities that the country went through. The Report refers to other authors, for example Ellis, to underline how horrendous in character the war in Liberia was, seemingly borrowing authority from elsewhere. It refers to Monrovia being called a butcher house. It provides with eye witness accounts demonstrating the brutality: “In Buchanan and Monrovia, dogs were eating the dead bodies of human beings....” and tells about a woman who was forced to sell the human flesh of her family members to the local population, that was forced to buy it and about the massacre of Maher Bridge where hundreds, suspected of being supporters of the LURD militia, were dumped in the river.\textsuperscript{185}

It calls the Liberian conflict unique in the indiscriminate character of the violence, the atrocities committed including cannibalism and ritual and \textit{juju} practice\textsuperscript{186}, a cruelty that might find parallels in history but demonstrates a “barbarity in modern times which by all standards are repugnant to the human conscience” and the TRC determines that the character of the crimes committed “take the meaning of war crime/crime against humanity to another level and stretches the tolerance of mankind of war atrocities.”\textsuperscript{187} One of the most harmful parts of the Liberian conflict was, according to the report the recruitment and use of child soldiers, particularly by Taylor’s forces but also by other factions, children that under the influence of drugs committed some of the worst atrocities.\textsuperscript{188}

The use by combatants of women apparels, wigs, religious and traditional and pseudo-names, some very inventive, to hide the identities and names of the perpetrators, surrounded the Liberian civil war with an aura of mysticism of a horror movie-kind, when cabled out through international media.\textsuperscript{189} The practice of eating of human organs such as the heart of enemy-combatants as a way to embolden and empower combatants is described as “perverted derivations of traditional rituals of secretive origin.” “During the conflict” continues the TRC “these Traditional ritualistic practices became openly visible and commonly practiced by military as well as political leaders seeking supernatural powers in the prosecution of armed conflict.”\textsuperscript{190}

\textsuperscript{185} Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, Chapter 7
\textsuperscript{186} \textit{Juju} is the word used by Europeans to describe traditional West African religions
\textsuperscript{187} Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p. 254
\textsuperscript{188} Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p. 261
\textsuperscript{189} Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p. 256
\textsuperscript{190} Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p.280
While having given little room to the peculiarities of the Liberian warfare in other sections of the report, the TRC speaks about the staging of the war. It does in no way play down this dimension in the report.

**The suffering**

There is one chapter (9) that deals with the suffering of the civilian population in Liberia in the consolidated report, but more details and quotes from testimonies are provided in the appendices on Women and the Conflict, Children, the conflict and the TRC Children Agenda. How different groups were affected by the conflict is highlighted; the extent of sufferings they were exposed to and also about the historic stigmatization of certain groups, not least women. The quotes are mainly used to describe the violations that children and women were subjected to and generally give less of an illustration of the wider contexts they lived in. Still it is the appendices to the report that provide most information about living conditions for regular Liberians before and during the war, thus saying something about the lives of people during these periods. But, as a whole the lives of civilians are not described in more detail than that they were suffering, unemployed, displaced, separated from their families, exposed to insecurity, forcibly recruited. The TRC is clear on that the statistics on the violations committed during the conflict does not reflect the full extent of the suffering of Liberians during the conflict. For example it does not take into account the “sickness, fatigue, hunger, mental stress etc.” that children and the rest of the population were exposed to. The grievances that women were exposed to during the conflict are mentioned in a specific section, both how they by necessity had to become bread-winners of their families and at the same time were exposed to other vulnerabilities than the men; being taken as bush wives, raped etc. Yet, the Report identifies men as a larger proportion of the identified victims of the violations accounted for. Men as victims were over-represented among those that were exposed to “killing, assault, torture, forced labour and forced recruitment.” That “explains why, women, despite being ready targets of sexual violence found themselves foraging for food for their families while men dared not venture out for fear of being killed.”

Forced displacement was a violation where women were more affected, according to the Report. It affected children severely as well. Children were also particularly impacted by forced

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191 Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, Chapter 8-11  
recruitment. The report provides contradicting estimations of how many of the Combatants that were child soldiers, between 10% and 70%.195

“All of the warring groups without exception recruited children, often by force, into the ranks of their fighting forces. Children (predominantly males) age 15-19 were the main targets, although children as young as 6 years were recruited into the Small Boys Unit…”196

One boy from Lofa County is quoted: “What I really experienced was that we, the children of Liberia, were used as killing machines to kill our own brothers, sisters and other family members.”197

Among the many violations children are described to have suffered from, cannibalism and forced ingestion of human flesh was one of the most cruel, according to the TRC.

An NPFL General called Zigzag Marzah was reported to have been notorious for his habitual eating of human hearts. Civilians and captured rebels were his main victims. He would slaughter the victim and extract the human heart which he prepared with soup and drank it. Soldiers fighting for him including child soldiers were often instructed to arrest passing civilians, whom he generally would detain and slaughter one at a time and drink soup made of their hearts. Some of his fighters were also made to consume the human soup. One child soldier complained that he developed a skin rash from ingesting human meat.198

Religious dimensions of the conflict are discussed. Although religion is not identified as a main driver of conflict, there were attacks that specifically targeted religious and ethnic groups. In the Lofa Region, the majority of the victims were Muslim. Wide violations against religious and traditional institutions as such were also recorded for, making these perceived safe spots less safe. One clear example is the attack on the St.Peter’s Lutheran Church in Monrovia 1990 in which 600 people taking refuge in the Church were killed.199

Traditional communities are also said to have suffered through attacks of sacred sites; “although due to the secretive nature of traditional societies, little or no documentation can be obtained to detail the breadth and scope of this violence.”200

Liberians in diaspora are furthermore discussed, particularly the large group in the US:

The Liberian Diaspora prior to 1980 was composed mostly of students and individuals with diplomatic and business connections in the international community. The Liberian conflict fundamentally altered the

195 Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p. 275; ”It has been estimated that 70% of all combatants in the Liberian conflict were children.” Volume III, Title II, p. 96: “Children constituted approximately 10 to 20 percent of members of armed groups.”
197 Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume III Title II 2009: p.36
198 Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume III Title II 2009, p.44
nature of the Liberian Diaspora, however, both by increasing the Diaspora’s size and changing its composition to reflect the political, economic, and social divides in Liberia during the conflict.  

The desperation with which Liberians abroad searched for news about family members in Liberia, and how many lost touch with their families for years is described. And for refugees of the conflict a triple-trauma is described, the traumatic experiences that caused them to flee, the traumas they were exposed to while fleeing within Liberia and finally the trauma of being a refugee.  

Those Liberians who chose to flee by land describe walking for weeks and sometimes months, often wounded, or guiding children and others who were unable to travel alone. Food, water, medical care, and safety were virtually impossible to find. Many died from starvation and common ailments en route. Others were abducted or killed during encounters with fighting factions along the few open escape routes.  

The sections on people with disabilities and elderly provide some details to the picture of Liberia that is painted, for example how people with disabilities and physical deformities were suspected of being witches in the traditional and rural communities, a stigmatization that continued during the war. The situation of elderly is neither described in a positive way. It tells about one old Folks home in Liberia prior to the war, funded on the initiative of President Tubman’s wife.  

In terms of what identities the victims had in life before becoming victims this is succinctly reflected regarding some, but not most of the victims. One can read about a journalist and a business woman detained in 1987, about the killing of “prominent Liberians” in 1990, an Ambassador killed, five nuns slain and around 300 orphans taken away from an orphanage, supposedly forced to fight for NPFL, for example. That is more or less the detail level and information one gets about the victims.  

**6.3 Assessing the historical narrative and use of history of the Report**

i. **What historical narrative(s) about Liberia and the two civil wars is/are presented in the report of the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission?**

What comes through as one of the main messages in the historical narratives is the dualism created with the very birth of the Liberian state and nation; the establishment of a settler
hegemony, with a perceived “civilizing” mission vis-à-vis the natives, something which in reality materialized in the exclusion, invisibilizing, exploitation of and recurrent violent confrontation with the native population. This dichotomy runs as the red line throughout the text as an explanation for Liberia’s troubles in modern times. All other events and explanations, referred to, are framed with this background. It is also the account of a striking historical continuity, observing historical repetitions and parallels along the history. The TRC makes a clear effort to once and for all make away with the glorious myths about the establishment of the Liberian state, the nation established by freed Afro-American slaves, with Civilizing/Christianizing/Americanizing of Africa at the core of its mission; it has been a myth that has been nurtured in Liberia and elsewhere for so long. Re-interpreting the motives behind the foundation of Liberia and the way it was carried out in the early 19th Century is something that for the TRC overshadows all other historiographical needs identified in the post-conflict Liberia struggling with addressing root causes of conflict. It is also a history that has been waiting to be told for long, the breakdown of the Americo-Liberian hegemony in the end of the 1970s made telling that history suddenly became possible. In that it attributes today’s maladies mostly to historical factors and actors long gone rather than to actors today, this new narrative has limited potential to provoke controversy among Liberians today.

In the same way, the narrative focusing on seeking explanations and responsibility outside Liberia, mainly on the US, the Cold War, international companies and to neighbouring countries may be the easiest to digest in Liberia, since it does not demand responsibility of the grievances on the Liberians that live today. While certain TRC-reports give Cold War dynamics more weight, this report focuses more on the bilateral relations between Liberia and the US. But one needs to notice that although certain inconsistencies in the Report’s assessment of the influence of external actors have been identified by ICTJ208 and the report delivers an upfront accusation act against the US, it does not take away agency from ruthless political leaders such as Tubman, Taylor or Doe. When assessing the consistency of the narratives in the Report one needs to analyse whose history that is told. In that respect the report is somewhat contradictory in its aim to emphasize the perspectives of the oppressed and excluded part of the Liberian population, while at the same time, falling into the trap of focusing very much on a traditional way of telling the history of a country; narrating the history of the settlers, presidents and warlords. While referring briefly to the native kings of the pre-settlement and settlement periods it is mainly the presidents of the 20th Century, and some from the 19th Century that are discussed. The realities, practices, views, and activities of ordinary Liberians are summarized in certain sections, but not

208 James-Allen, Weah, Goodfriend 2010, p. 15
analysed in such detail. To a large extent, it does get stuck in a traditional understanding of national history-writing. Where it does expand the understanding of past realities is in the Appendices and sections on Women and the conflict, putting the situation of women into a larger historical, and on Children and the Conflict as well as in the context and in the short descriptions that do exist about traditional organization in Liberia pre-settlement, through the Poro and the Sande, for example.

Being fairly consistent in the analysis that the TRC does of the 19th and early 20th Century, aspiring to fulfil with its mandate to “conduct a critical review of Liberia’s historical past” it does have more difficulty in providing a consistent narrative of the second half of the 20th Century. From the section starting 1944 with the take-over by Tubman the account becomes even more anecdotal and repetitious in its efforts to explain political developments, taking clear political stands in relation to the three presidents Tubman, Tolbert and Doe, clearly to the benefit of Tolbert. In that way it makes explicit political judgements. And when the narrative of the armed conflicts starts, the text takes yet a new turn; now to a large extent only presenting the chronology of war, leaving most analysis out.

It may be one thing to establish a viable narrative of a country’s 200-year history and a few clear explanation models, but it is definitely another thing to establish (a) comprehensive narrative/s about a recent period of upheaval, violence and conflict. Yet, at the same time it is one of the main tasks that any Truth Commission struggles with; to tell what happened and how it happened for the historical record, for future generations and future historians. It is partly in this endeavour that the Liberian TRC has been criticised, for not providing evidence in a way that hold proof to build up legal cases. Thus, the TRC faces dilemmas and difficulties in establishing the solid historical record for this period, the truth discussed in the Theory-chapter, which leads to further difficulties in developing an historical interpretation of the events. This is increasingly problematic the closer we get into the contemporary period.

Recognizing the weaknesses of the Liberian TRC-report in this aspect, one shall not underestimate the challenge of providing a narrative or even a clear picture of such a recent trauma in a country’s history. The TRC was not authorized to grant any amnesties, and therefore in its account about the conflict had to mention names, lots of names, because the actors and the perpetrators are so many. This mentioning of lots of names, and omitting others, does prevent the TRC from being able to make a clearly structured analysis. Also, the actual narration about violations becomes problematic. While the different forms of violence and violations that have been registered are accounted for, what comes out most strongly are the witness accounts of
atrocities committed and the imperative expressed throughout the text about how unusually brutal the Liberian civil war was with the vast use of child soldiers and the perversion of traditional rituals of eating human flesh and organs. Worth noting is that while the last practice during the war is clearly described, the TRC does not clearly analyse the traditional rituals that they were perverting, and to what extent they were to be seen as a continuity; an exploitation of an established practice from the past. Little is actually said about the influence of the Poro and Sande and other secret societies during the conflict. One can thus see a certain discrepancy between the strong focus of the violations committed by the Americo-Liberians before the war, and how the violations were en-staged during the war. There is certainly a risk that the account of the conflict becomes a “horror story”, despite all the intentions to link it with the past. It is here that an even broader use of the more than 20 000 oral witness accounts in the report could have served to illustrate generalized experiences of the conflicts. It could have contributed to a more profound understanding of the experience of conflict.

Another striking thing throughout the historical narrative, is the many different labels of both the native populations of Liberia, and the settlers. The native population is sometimes called tribal, sometimes native, indigenous, original inhabitants and blacks –there seem to exist an inconsistency in how to name them; merging of all of them into one faceless group gives them less agency than the more limited grouping of the Americo-Liberians. The Americo-Liberians also have many names: repatriate Africans, settlers, “Kongos” or mulattos. However, they come through more as a group with agency than the indigenous population does. The neglect to establish one name for any of the groups; at occasions this may create confusions when reading the text.

Having pointed at inconsistencies in the report, it is nevertheless much more consistent in its analysis, particularly of the history of early Liberia, than it first appears to be and it could possibly constitute useful material for discussion, discussions started in the hearings of the TRC. It could open up for a dialogue on how different groups have experienced and lived through the different periods in Liberia’s recent history, and how the opportunities for social agency have shifted. For example the annex about Women and the conflict, contributes to that. Unfortunately the weak editing of the report (and the official rejection of some of the TRC’s recommendations) may effectively prevent it from being just that.
ii. How does the historical narrative of the TRC report relate to other established narratives about the Liberian conflicts and Liberian history?

The historical narratives of the TRC report, reflects largely the narratives of recent literature on Liberia\(^{209}\), a consequence of the paradigmatic shift that started in the 1960-70s, when the hegemony of the Americo-Liberian settlers was increasingly put into question, not least by the part of the Liberian educated elite that did not originate from settlers. It was not only the hegemonic system that was criticized; it was also the glorious history that this hegemony had created for itself. The glory manifested already in the Liberian Coat of Arms, in the first Constitution, in the myths about the brave first settlers reproduced for each new generation of descendants, the myths about the civilizing power of the settlers and about battles against the tribal kings that were won. It was also the glory nurtured with the rituals and traditions of Christian Churches and the Free Mason Order, the glory around the land father Tubman and the glory manifested through Americanized, stylish night clubs in Monrovia – all contributing to the image of Liberia as a unique country with a unique history.

And yet, it is not the unique experience of Liberia that the new historical narratives about Liberia put into question. It is mainly the marginalisation and the neglect of the culture and history of the majority of Liberians that these new narratives question. The prologue of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf’s biography “This Child will be great”, for example, largely coincides with the historical narrative of the TRC.

Comparing to Stephen Ellis, whom the TRC quotes directly, the historical account is similar when it comes to discussing the settlement, Tubman’s or Tolbert’s rule, but the TRC is less explicit than Ellis in discussing the links between ritualistic practices of the secret societies and the violations during the conflict.

Referring back to the history books written by Joseph Saye Guannu, the TRC shares Guannu’s understanding that there is a need to revisit and revise the history of Liberia. As mentioned, Guannu has a specific section in the second book discussing short-comings of current Liberian history-writing. He speaks specifically of distortions in previous history-writing about Liberia, for example the fact established in early history books that the freed slaves met only “savages” when arriving to the land now called Liberia and the myth established about a woman named Matilda Newport, and her role in the battle of Fort Hill. This specific incident is also discussed and questioned in the TRC Report. Another problem that Saye Guannu identifies is that “historical

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studies on Liberia (…) are largely incomplete for their limited inclusions of the contributions by many other Liberians thus omitting important actors for example the Grebo leader Samuel W Seton, or the theologian William Wade Harris or authors such as Roland Tombekai Dempster or Bai Tamia Moore in Liberian history. Yet, with this reflection established Saye Guannu is stuck with a focus on mainly the political history, rather than the social and cultural history of Liberia. In that sense the TRC comes further in approaching something which could be labelled a social history of Liberia in that it does speak about the reality of Liberian women, about children, religious institutions, economic actors and about the victims of the conflicts. The TRC also makes a larger effort to tell pre-settlement history than Guannu does. The TRC speaks considerably more about the migration of different ethnic groups and about the way the societies were organized before the settlers came.

On the point of exclusion of ethnic Liberians the assessment of Saye Guannu and the TRC largely coincides. Saye Guannu writes “ethnic Liberians as a group were excluded from membership of the Liberian political community throughout the nineteenth century because (…) they were not Christians and civilized.” Along the same lines the TRC writes:

The settlers out rightly rejected the traditional religions and Islamic practices of the natives and made it their mission to (…) “Christianize” and impose “Christian influence and operation upon the surrounding heathens”. Conflicts could have been avoided if the settlers had recognized the authority of the natives instead of the ACS which repatriated them to Africa.

When trying to pin down the historical narratives of the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission establishes, it is also of interest to analyse the stories that are not told. One dimension of the conflict that is not discussed clearly is how many Liberians became both victims and victimizers in the conflict. It is an issue discussed in relation to the forced recruitment of child soldiers, but the dilemmas in how to address this matter are not fully explored in the report. Another issue that would have deserved more attention is what the motives and ideologies behind the warring factions; and the link between customary practices and the conflict. The brutal perversion of practices is discussed, but not their meaning and origin, most likely because of the secretive culture around the traditional societies and practices in Liberia.

210 Saye Guannu A Short History of the First Liberian Republic, p. 109
211 Saye Guannu A Short History of the First Liberian Republic, p.108-113
212 Saye Guannu A Short History of the First Liberian Republic, p.9
iii. How are the efforts to re-interpret and write a new history of Liberia manifested?

It is particularly the early history of Liberia that the TRC reinterprets. There are so many myths surrounding the very establishment of the Republic of Liberia, and the very values that were immediately attached to the Liberian state by its founders. Still today, these myths that take their basis in the harsh reality of the oppression of slaves in the United States, but with a strong component of resurrection and redress of the same ex-slaves entail an enormous attractiveness to the Americo-Liberian elite as well as to anyone with a sense of justice and has thus been replicated over and over again. And yet, the TRC manages to capture that very conflict between the Liberia that in a global perspective got to symbolize the anti-thesis to slavery and oppression of Africans, but which simultaneously developed to a very oppressive and exclusionary state. It does manage to nuance the picture of Liberian early history, without fully killing the sense of uniqueness that surrounds Liberian history.

The TRC makes a real effort at taking into account different perspectives into historical narrative, and thus aims at a more nuanced heterogeneous view of Liberian history. It does discuss native indigenous practices in relation to land-owning; it discusses the different view among the settlers on the Colonizing mission and on the foundation of the Liberian Republic; it does mention how certain local chiefs took sides with the colonizers, not least when facing the threat from European colonizers. It speaks about the openings that did exist for the natives to get positions in the Liberian societies. It mentions that women were not part in writing the Constitution, but that they made the first Liberian flag.

The openings that did exist for natives to approach the settlers in terms of being viewed as citizens are discussed, for example the assimilation policies that regulated how the settlers would approach the natives; including with established apprentice systems, civilization education and with contract labour schemes. Natives that adopted the culture and practice of the settlers had certain possibility to assimilate. The True Whig Party, which substituted the Republican Party in Government in 1880, is said to have had an initially more progressive agenda in its approach to natives, but as it became a “hegemonic” political institution increasingly became similar to its predecessors. It discusses the problematic legacy of President Tubman.

As mentioned above the will to nuance the understanding of Liberian 19th and early 20th Century history is clear. And to a certain extent it does. When one systematizes the analysis and the
points made what emerges is a clearer picture of Liberia and its foundational challenges and problems, the very creation of the state being a root cause of conflict.\footnote{Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, Chapter 5}

However, when approaching the time periods of the conflicts there is less of an established history to re-interpret. On the other hand, there is a national history about the conflicts that needs to be written, and it is the very task of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to make a first effort in this regard, to establish a common truth about the conflicts and what actually happened. The TRC is a first effort, but it is by no means a History Commission. As already mentioned, the TRC did recommend that a National History Commission would be created, and the real task of producing a new history for Liberia is referred to it.

The TRC attributes historical explanations large if not all of the weight when discussing the conflicts and root causes of the conflicts. In several passages it links the very way the Liberian state was created in the first half of the 19th Century with the conflicts that broke out 140+ years later. All along the road from 1817 and onwards the TRC finds root causes to conflict. Not least does it point at the many conflicts along the way before the civil war broke out in 1990.

It speaks about building-up factors, but also recognizes the efforts - while too few and too late - of the elite to include the native population. The way it speaks about previous conflicts in Liberia, particularly between the Americo-Liberian population and the native population it establishes structural patterns of the violence. It is a national history where history plays a huge role that the TRC establishes, and just as Saye Guannu, the TRC attributes a moral perspective to that history. It claims that the Liberian future will be brighter if only Liberian citizens know their history better, and learn from it.

\textbf{iv. What are the uses of history that can be identified in the TRC report?}

While the typology of different uses of history established by Karlsson may be useful to shed light on that using history or establishing a historical narrative serves certain purposes within different contexts, there are also clear shortcomings to it when assessing material such as that coming out of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Using a too fix typology for this analysis may be in vain. One has to bear in mind that the report is the result of a complex societal, partly quite participatory process, with one objective to take into account as many voices as possible. One would thus be surprised if the report was very consistent in its use of history.
Already in the mandate of the Liberian TRC one can observe indications of several different uses of history. The Transitional Assembly approving the TRC Act does demand the TRC to do adopt traditional historian’s scholarly approach to its tasks, for example when determining “the systematic pattern” of violations and investigating “the antecedents of the crisis” and yet promote an existential approach to history; to facilitate “for both victims and perpetrators to share experience to create a clear picture of the past to facilitate genuine healing and reconciliation” and finally also a moral approach to history “conduct a critical review of Liberia’s historical past, with the view to establishing and giving recognition to historical truths, in order to address falsehoods and misconceptions of the past.”

The historical narrative coming through in this report does also reflect many different uses of history. Below I will highlight different examples of when the different uses are manifested throughout the narrative.

When speaking about a scholarly use Karlsson refers to the aim to “explain and understand the past on its own premises and on the basis of already established scholarly research and knowledge.” On an off throughout the historical chapters of the TRC-report one can detect this desire to let the history speak for itself, by going back to the historical sources that a historian would usually use, the protocols from meetings, letters, speeches from presidents and the Constitution. The authors have investigated historic documents and literature on Liberian history, and do share quotes that serve to illustrate the historical narrative that it aims to present. These excerpts from historic texts do make the text richer and are mostly interesting reading, but are sometimes introduced in a random way, and with the purpose to confirm points already made. As useful and illustrative as they can be, they can also be used very selectively and create a distorted or at least a simplified picture. The way quotes and excerpts are used in this narrative, they risk blurring the analysis. One example is the three and a half page long excerpt from the discussions of cabinet members on report of the Brownwell Commission, which was to look into the root causes of civil disturbance during the rice riots in 1979. While the Commission was important and so the Tolbert Government’s response to it, few analytical conclusions are made.

(…..) Minister of State E. Reginald Townsend: Referring to imbalance in the Report, he declared that the “entire Report is set up against Government. It is an attempt to attack the reputation of the Government of the Republic of Liberia.” He added: “The Report is out of its terms of reference…What was the whole objective behind the Report? Was it to ridicule or reconstruct? (…..)

It may be a curiosity to know different standpoints, but it does not necessarily facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the political developments during that period. Another example, the Declaration of Independence may be worth analysing, but it is not necessarily best done through a 2-page excerpt of the Declaration. Sometimes the sources used are expected to be self-explicatory and the reader is given no guidance on how to interpret them.

One can also detect an inconsistency in using traditional historical sources; extracts from letters, speeches and protocols are abundant in the text about President Tubman, making the narrative more vivid while fewer direct quotes are used when describing the reigns of Tolbert and Doe, hardly any from the Presidents themselves. The question is if this difference is explained by that different authors have written different sections, or if it reflects the rhetorical skills of the different presidents. It is hard to say.

The existential use of history has to do with people’s need of a context and orientation, with the need to remember and it is one that is reflected throughout the historical narrative of the TRC report. The continuous repetitions about the dualism that was created at the very foundation of the Liberian state is a way to once and for all establish a deeper understanding among Liberians of a more problematic past of the state than has formerly been acknowledged.

Another thesis of the TRC that comes back throughout the report, as something where the TRC really wants to provide a common context and understanding of Liberian history is the description of the Liberian conflicts as among the worst that have existed in modern times.

The TRC establishes several powerful historical parallels, which contribute to symbolical meaning of events. The use of parallels and repetitions in TRC’s account of Liberian history is also a way to create clarity in the historical narrative, for Liberians to have a common framework from which to see historic events. Some examples are the parallels established between the two presidents E.J. Roye and William R. Tolbert, 100 years apart, both advocating progressive change and redress vis-à-vis the indigenous population and in Tolbert’s case the opposition. That both were then ousted through coup d’états in which they were killed is highlighted. 217 Another one is the parallel drawn between the manipulated elections of 1955 and 1985 with killings of main opposition leaders as its culmination, 218 and between Tubman’s brutality against opposition leader Coleman, and Doe, excelling in practices of the corruption and repression of political opponents:

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217 Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p.102 : “A striking comparison between Presidents E.J.Roye and William R. Tolbert should be of historical interest in this context”
218 Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, Chapter 6
The bodies of the Coleman’s were put on display at the Barclay Training Center in Monrovia in the same manner the bodies of fallen “enemies” were displayed 25 years later in 1980 and five years thereafter in 1985 in the case of General Thomas Quitwonkpa.\textsuperscript{219}

This use of parallels is a way to structure the historical narrative, to provide with references and frames in a deeply turbulent and chaotic history. Are the similarities between the events in the accounts so clear? One could probably find a multitude of arguments speaking against as well, but for a didactic purpose they may be useful.

The importance of \textit{symbols} is raised at certain places, Tubman as the land father, his use of traditional attire and joining of Sande and Poro, Tolbert change of clothes to the Safari costume. The entrance of established Americo-Liberian politicians into the traditional religious societies in the 20\textsuperscript{th} Century was a way for them to seek broader political bases and legitimacy by acknowledging the traditions and history of the native population. And while Americo-Liberian presidents sought legitimacy by using traditional attire and symbols, so did Doe’s government, but now with the purpose to identify themselves as the “indigenous underdogs toppling an entrenched repatriate elite establishment.”\textsuperscript{220} The TRC in that way hints that the Presidents made use of history themselves. Another way symbols are analysed is in the way warfare was carried out, the use of traditional rituals, often perverted to the extreme. While the TRC does not spell it out clearly, it does indicate the way powerful historical symbols were broadly used throughout the conflict.

The fairly limited space that is given to the analysis of the Poro and Sande and linking the practices within these societies with practices carried out during the war, is most likely result of a desire to not differentiate between Liberians, to avoid using moral lenses when looking at the practices of parts of the population, something that could in itself create dividers, rather than the common orientation aspired for.

The \textit{moral use} of history is the rediscovery of forgotten dimensions of history. A clear example of moral use is the discussion of gender dimensions of women’s role in peacebuilding as an example in this excerpt:

But the contribution of women in Africa, from Somalia to South Africa, have gone largely unnoticed. Dismissed by governments and rebel movements who consider making war and peace to be men’s work – and often relegated to the role of “victim” by well-intended diplomats and aid agencies – women have had to fight their own battles for a seat at the peace table. \textsuperscript{221}

\textsuperscript{219} Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p. 125
\textsuperscript{220} Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p.140
\textsuperscript{221} Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume III Title I 2009, p.8
Other examples of the will to rediscover forgotten dimensions of history are the first chapters discussing the arrival of the different ethnic groups to the land of Liberia, the political systems of these pre-settlement societies, how the local kings viewed the negotiation on land with the settlers, and the considerable attention that is paid to the more progressive thinkers among the settlers such as Edward Wilmot Blyden, who advocated for the creation of “an African nationality that blended Western and African values” rather than a new America in Africa.222

The ideological use is being described as the construction of a historical meaning in order to legitimize a political regime or implemented policies and seems to refer more to the use of history by political leaders, and less relevant for an entity of this kind, a Commission, with a quite open mandate to formulate own assessments. However, there are several places in the text where history is used more to confirm the thesis of the TRC than to actually reflect the past. What one could ask is if the incomplete list over the responsible for war crimes and violations is intentional, or if it is result of a weak capacity of the Commission, and if the mentioning of certain acts over others is an ideological choice or not. Where the text is clearly ideological is in the descriptions of the qualities and difficulties that the TRC had in carrying out its work. One example is how the TRC speaks for the entire Liberian population in the Final Statement from the Commission, and here particularly mentions those that made the TRC’s work hard:

The few of us who commanded the forces of arms, financed, resourced and provided political and ideological guidance to several warring factions, we fear alienation, prosecutions and other forms of public sanctions which may undermine our current socio-economic and political stature acquired during the conflict period.

Though this latter group of us equally desire national healing and reconciliation, it should be accomplished without any cost to our current standing and prestige. Bygones must be bygones. Having no regard for the rule of law, we ignored the TRC Process and when we opted to cooperate and appear before the Commission, we deliberately lied and failed to speak truthfully about the scale of our participation and deeds as a show of remorse and contrition which acknowledges the pains and sufferings of victims and triggers the national healing and reconciliation we profess to desire.223

That the non-use of history – the desire to break with the past and establish a society as anew – should have a prominent role in this report seems unlikely considering its mandate. But, as discussed in the theoretical chapter, writing a historical narrative is as much about omitting things as about what is actually written. Certain perspectives are left out to the benefit of others. In that sense, yes, one could point at numerous ways of non-use, if keeping silent about experiences and stories from the past is considered a none-use. What one might consider an omission of the Report is its failure to provide a fuller understanding of how so many ordinary Liberians became

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perpetrators of the most horrendous crimes during the armed conflict. Also there is a striking absence of the descriptions of other endurances during the history of Liberia, than those that were cause of the settlement policies. By contesting Americo-Liberian supremacy the TRC report largely gets stuck in telling the history about Americo-Liberian supremacy.

The TRC seemingly struggles between assessing a Liberian history of *continuity and structural patterns* (in authoritarianism, corruption, exclusion, conflicts, injustice, unclear relations with the US etc.) and a history of *unique events and conditions* (the way Liberia was established, the unique position of Tubman, the unusual brutality of the internal conflict). To describe the brutality of the conflict the Report uses very strong wording, as have been mentioned.

One passage where continuity is described is when discussing the rule of Charles Taylor, after being democratically elected as President.

> Taylor’s rule signalized the continuation of authoritarian rule in Liberia leaving behind a legacy of poor governance, administrative malfeasance, corruption, intimidation and intolerance of opposition, threats, torture, terroristic acts against the population and summary executions reminiscence of his predecessor, President Samuel K Doe.²²¹

The weight that the TRC attributes to historical causes and explanations is also manifested in the recommendations of the Report. Among the recommendations that have to do with the historic memory of Liberia are the proposal to establish a specific Palawa Hut Program as a way to deal with perpetrators that want to ask for forgiveness appealing to the traditional forms of justice within the Poro, Sande and Bodilo institutions, the proposal to determine a Memorial day and finally the proposal to establish a Commission on Liberia history with the task to “write a concise and precise history of Liberia to reflect Liberia’s true culture, traditions, geography, national experiences etc. into an encyclopedia of Liberian Culture and History or “Liberiacana””²²²

Linking back to the history-cultural main tropes of Peter Aronsson, several of them co-exist in the text, particularly the ones labelled as *Nothing new under the sun* and *Progress: from darkness we rise towards light*. Examples on the first one is the explicit reference to the repeated exclusion and discrimination in the Liberian society and the references back to earlier wars in the 19ᵈ and 20ᵈ Century, seemingly saying that conflict is nothing new to Liberia. Also the account of Doe’s continuation of corrupt practices, and the long and unequal relation to the US seem to hint towards this trope. When it comes to the trope *History does not repeat* the entire report breaths a hope, that History shall not repeat, that if Liberians learn from History, atrocities will not happen again. There is a hope that even if history did repeat before, now it will not, once peace and

reconciliation has been achieved. As for the *Golden Age* trope, despite everything that is said about exclusion of the native population there is a sense of pride also in this report for the special history of Liberia with the arrival of ships on its shores. For the fourth trope Aronsson establishes there is considerable hope in the Report that Liberia will now rise towards the light. With the knowledge of the violations committed and a deeper understanding amongst Liberians about the reasons for why conflict happened, Liberia will be a more prosperous country.

v. **How are victims and the social agency of victims reflected in the historical narrative?**

Oglesby pointed at the risk that Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in its application of a strict human rights perspective on the account of the war helps permanent the victims in their identities solely as victims, and their historic legacy to be just victims, while they in real life had many different identities; involvement in social organizations, in religious institutions, had professional identities – were social agents in their own right. Solely focusing on how they died will thus prevent us from understanding more about their realities, the period and context in which they lived, and sometimes also prevent us from understanding why they were killed.

To a large part the Liberian TRC does confirm this picture of civilian victims – a “civilian population which lived constantly under fear, threatened, brutalized and killed,” trapped in a situation when they were desolate, physically waned, hungry and ill,” where families were separated and women raped or taken as bush wives by armed factions and large amounts of people displaced.

However, if one continues to read the report one will find other stories about civilians in there other capacities, not just as victims. For example the roles of women shifted during the conflict when they became the principal bread-winners of their families, a not sought for, but yet, form of positive female empowerment. That the peace talks actually reached a result is attributed to the push that came from civil society including the massive protests from Liberian women and their storming of the Peace Conference in Accra. The large demonstrations outside the American Embassy at the end of the war, explained by people’s anger over that the US never intervened in Liberia also demonstrates a picture of civilians, women and men that were far from passive lethargic civilians.

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227 Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p.155
When one looks closely at the catalogue of human rights violations in chapter 8 one will also find more information about those that were affected by the violation. In the individual cases the profession of the victim; journalist, business woman, student, sergeant, ECOMOG soldier is often given, and sometimes also the background to the violation: the Human Rights activist attacked after the launch of a Human Rights campaign, the journalist arrested after questioning police methods, for example.  

However, in the enumeration of massacres the descriptions of victims are more brief. They are described only by their ethnic affiliation or as displaced. At one place it is described that the massacre was committed during a football match, something that at least gives some idea about who the victims were more than just victims. 

That men constituted a larger part of the victims than women is also concluded, but that women on the other hand were exposed to other forms of violations such as gender-based-violence to a much larger degree.

In the two appendices I Women and the Conflict and II Children and the Conflict one is presented a somewhat more complex picture of the realities of women and children in Liberia, both before and during the war, and the emphasis is not limited to their roles as victims in the traditional hierarchies of the Liberian society or the conflict. That women played an active role both as peacemakers and as combatants is mentioned. In Liberia women constituted approximately 22% of the combatants, and there were even specific women's brigades. The report discusses the various reasons for why women joined the armed groups: to protect themselves, economic motives, to gain status and respect. The resistance civilians made to the conflict is discussed briefly. It tells about that the two main religious groups and institutions; Christians and Muslims, had to work together for peace, and the Inter-Faith Mediation Committee was formed. Its successor the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia assisted implementation of disarmament initiatives and assisted mediation between the Government and the rebel factions.

Regarding children, both their roles as victims and perpetrators are discussed. As previously highlighted the information given about the number of child soldiers is contradictory, between

231 Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, p. 244
232 Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume III Title I 2009, p.44-49
233 Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume II 2009, Chapter 7
10-20 and 70% of the Combatants.” The report discusses why children were attractive recruits to all the armed factions:

The reason why armed groups relied heavily on children is obvious. Children are pliable and respond more easily to discipline and punishment. Statements given to the TRC also reflected a general sense that children had no fear and were “braver” than adults. One child, at the TRC Children Hearing in Bong County in July 2008 suggested that, “The reason why they can give children the gun is because they feel the children fight more than the big people and they can even kill their own parents and they can’t know what they are doing.”

While most children were forced to recruit, the TRC also discusses that some children had motives - even political ones - to join the armed factions.

With the above references, I would conclude that while the assessment that Oglesby and Grandin is true for some part in that many of the victims are portrayed only as victims in the narrative of the report, there is also partly another story told, particularly in the two appendices, about the living conditions, motivations and drivers of both civilian and armed Liberians, particularly the women and children, that may be of interest for anyone who wants to know more about the reality of these individuals during the conflict.

vi. How do my findings about the historical narrative and use of history in the report relate to existing research findings on other Truth and Reconciliation Commissions?

Along with several other TRC-reports, the Liberian does provide with an extensive historical analysis, focusing on root causes of conflict. My analysis has confirmed how important the mandate and the selection of Commissioners are for the outcome of the TRC-process. In the case of the Liberian TRC, the mandate may have been broader than several other TRCs, particularly in relation to what is expected to be said about the past’s importance for the present state the country encounters itself in. It might have been to the Liberian TRC’s disadvantage that it was expected to give a full account in naming all the responsible of the violations, making its analysis less stringent, compared to what was earlier described about the Peruvian or Guatemalan historical narratives. Compared to the two mentioned reports the selection of commissioners also seem to have had a negative consequence for the Liberian TRC, in that none of them was a historian or had advanced legal expertise, thus allowing more questioning of the methodology and the trustworthiness of the findings and recommendations of it.

236 Republic of Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volume III Title II 2009, p. 60
The Liberian TRC, like the Guatemalan, but in contrast to for example the Chilean TRC, does emphasize the structural causes of violence and does view the violations during the conflict however atrocious they were as a matter of historic continuity, rather than as isolated individual events.

Just as many other TRC-reports the Liberian attributes certain weight and co-responsibility for the disastrous development in the country on the Cold War factor, and particularly the ambiguous role of the United States.

However, one needs to remember that it was not the historical narrative of the Liberian report that was debated or contested; thus it may still have potential to have an effect for the new historical narratives that are shaped in Liberia post-conflict. It is still the official narrative about the conflicts, and about the historical factors that contributed to the conflict.
7. CONCLUSIONS

After a thorough dissemination of the historical narrative of the Liberian TRC I would argue that the narrative in itself is mainly quite consistent in its emphasis on how the very establishment of the Liberian State contributed to a dualistic society with inherent tensions and root triggers that cause dispute, and in its view of the Liberian conflicts 1989-2003 as being particularly atrocious, while at the same time a manifestation of continuity or culmination of an order, with references to the conflicts that have prevailed for two centuries. The historical narrative of the TRC also largely reflects the shift that started in the 1970s, when the Americo-Liberian dominance was contested.

The severe difficulties in establishing facts (other than the most rudimentary dates and names) and thus solid truths about the recent past that is the violent conflict are obvious and problematic. What follows is a difficulty in providing solid analytical interpretations of these events, a clear historical narrative of the conflict. This dilemma is not of the same magnitude for the early history of Liberia, where the TRC seems to have less difficulty in prioritizing between which facts to present.

My thesis has thus demonstrated how much more difficult it is to settle a historical narrative on a recent past than about earlier periods, particularly when that recent past includes so much trauma and brutality that words risk mystifying and create conflict rather than clarifying. Thus, while the narrative the TRC presents about 19th and early 20th Century Liberian history actually has some potential of survival, the account about the war will still have to be retold, reinterpreted and possibly also reinvented, as those generations directly involved disappear.

I have hinted that the source material I have used has entailed inherent challenges in terms of consistency and format. Yet, the narratives in the report are more consistent and nuanced than they appears at first. One lesson learned is that one cannot dismiss an entire report or reject a text, a document, or historical source material only because of the weaknesses of editing, or for certain inconsistencies or tendentiousness of the narrative and historical record it produces. It would be to do the report and the process injustice, because whatever weakness it may have had, it bases on a unique source material, the testimonies of over 20 000 Liberians. And it may yet say quite a lot about its time, and the periods it aims to tell about.

As Abena Ampofoa Asare writes about the Ghanaian TRC:

If the past is another country (…) TRC testimonies are an alternative pathway by which we should visit there. These narratives deepen our understanding of Africa’s national past by highlighting the emotions, experiences, voices, and logic of individuals who are not usually the authors of national political history.
In so doing, they challenge the contours of state-centric and elitist nationalist historiography and create sites where Africa’s twentieth century history is re-presented and debated by the least of these, the self-described victims of human rights abuses.\[^{237}\]

However, the identified weaknesses are a problem for the TRC, because they give the Report less credibility also in the areas that are not so controversial. Given these weaknesses and Ampofoa Asare’s convincing argument above, future historians may be more interested in the (unpublished) transcripts of the testimonies and hearings from the TRC process, rather than in the final report of the TRC. This is also in line with what Oglesby argued about the Guatemalan TRC-process.

There is a range of different ways history is used in the Report, both in the mandate that established the Liberian TRC and in the report. The considerable attribution that the Report pays to historical factors is largely reflecting the weight given to it in the mandate. It is striking that so many historical documents are directly quoted in the text, sometimes useful for the understanding, but sometime it risks distorting the understanding of the main theses of the Report. Karlsson’s typology and Aronsson’s tropes for uses of history have limitations, but they did help us to see how the use of history, historical facts, historical explanations, anecdotes, symbols meets a variety of different political, ideological, moral and existential purposes.

The narrative presented in the TRC largely coincide with other contemporary interpretations of Liberia’s history, while it fiercely contests the old way that Liberian history was taught by the Americo-Liberian elite. Compared to the history books used in Liberian high schools from the late 1970s and onwards the TRC makes a larger effort to tell the pre-settlement history of Liberia and to bring in women and children into the history.

I have discussed how my findings fit into the other recent research on the historical narratives of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. The Liberian TRC does to a certain extent run the same risk as other TRCs to confirm the view of victims only as victims. The majority of victims remain without faces, occupations and names; they are only described with their ethnic belonging. However, to a certain degree the report also sheds light on another history; the history of social agency, of activity and resistance.

Analysing the historical narratives and explanation models in a Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report has been intriguing, given the rich material upon which the report is based. We have observed how the very the pre-conditions for the TRC; the identified need for societal healing and reconciliation sets a framework that affects the narrative considerably. I hope my

\[^{237}\] Asare (forthcoming), p.1
thesis has contributed at least some in revealing the delicate process of a society in transformation that is about to reinvent its past.

Finally, one cannot help but reflecting upon that having ‘a written national history’ largely depends on the availability of resources for historical research. Societies that cannot afford the most basic things might have even less possibility to establish a framework for their members to better understand the conditions under which their ancestors lived and the motives behind their actions, and what could eventually be learnt from their experiences. Thus, unequal access to resources results in an unequal access to the past.

As I write these final words, a new chapter is sadly writing itself in the historical narrative about Liberia. It is the history of the Ebola epidemic; the consequences of which for Liberian society are yet impossible to predict. What seems easier to determine, is that it will have consequences for the possibilities of implementing the recommendations of the TRC including for the timeline of the project to rewrite the Liberian history.
8. LITERATURE/ SOURCES

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-Volume II Consolidated Final Report, June 30, 2009
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My deepest gratitude to Charles Lawrence who helped me with both contacts, context and literature; to my supervisor Erik Lindberg, who encouraged me to take up work with this thesis; to Aaron Weah who on short notice set off time to explain the context of the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission and to Ulrik Holmberg, Henrik Möberg and Onur Bakiner who helped me with literature.

My sincere thoughts are with the Liberian society at this moment, now with the struggle against Ebola on the top of all its other struggles, some – but far from all – of them discussed in this thesis.