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PRAY THE DEVIL BACK TO HELL AND THE MAKING OF 2011 NOBEL LAUREATE LEYMAH GBOWEE

In 2009 I screened the film *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* in Monrovia, Liberia, with a group of Liberian women — young and old — and found myself buoyed by an unconventional story portraying unconventional women in very unconventional circumstances. Two years later, I am now revisiting the film after it catapulted onto the world stage the life and times of Leymah Gbowee, a 2011 Liberian Nobel Peace Prize laureate, who galvanized hundreds of Liberian women in 2003 to bring an end to the civil war. Some would argue that if not for the film, Gbowee and her fellow peace activists would not have been given the recognition they deserved.

During an interview I had with Gbowee in Oslo, Norway, a day after she received the Nobel Peace Prize on December 11, 2011, she praised *Pray* for providing her with an international platform: “had it not been for the film, our story would be a folklore...what was happening in Liberia was total erasure, erasure of our struggles, like many struggles of women all over the world.”

I was expecting more of the same from the film. I was also expecting Liberia to be portrayed as a place frozen in time, where tradition and modernity never intersect. I was expecting a film with a high-brow civilizing mission as its core ethos. I was expecting a film about death, destruction, and degradation. Yet, I was immediately struck by how *Pray* got it right. As a Liberian woman watching the film for the first time, there were painful moments to stomach, but the overarching theme is one of triumph and resilience.

Accompanied by haunting vocals from Beninois artist Angelique Kidjo, interspersed with moving images, the film is a montage of still paintings, narrative expositions, and flashbacks of realism. It does not project women as docile victims, but as agents of their own making. Neither does it project Liberians as waiting for the international community to come and save them. It projects a nation whose women used their agency to defy local, national, and international power structures.



Pray is narrated by five very different women, including Gbowee, who led The Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace in their signature white lappas and T-shirts. Rather than imposing a foreign voice to speak for the women, the filmmakers enable them to speak in their own voices. “I wanted people to meet the women the way that we met them. I didn’t want there to be any separation between the audience and the women,” said film director Gini Reticker in an interview with me in Oslo on the eve of the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony on December 9, 2011. Sitting to her left, Abigail Disney, the film’s producer, said that it was shocking how the story of the women’s movement remained lodged only in the Liberian imagination. “There was something so disrespectful in these women not being known, not being remembered,” said Disney.

Disney and Reticker admitted that while it was very easy to extract war images from Liberia, finding footage of the Mass Action for Peace was like searching for a needle in a haystack. “It’s much more seductive for the West to come in and film images of nine or 10-year-old boys with a gun. I found a lot of the footage that I did look at to be pornographic, in fact, because it’s prurient. It just reinforces certain stereotypes,” said Reticker during our interview. When they unearthed the footage, which had been buried in damp basements, dusty boxes, drawers, and personal film collections, Disney and Reticker admitted that the story began to unfold in an organic way. They argue that the film gave Gbowee a medium through which to speak her truth, and the truths of countless women who joined forces with her in solidarity.

Although I was disappointed by the need to project English subtitles (given that the women are already speaking in English in the film), I was more struck by the story itself. The five narrators present the viewer with a play-by-play of their experiences during those uncertain months in Liberia in 2003, when warlords roamed free and drug induced pre-pubescent boys equipped with AK-47s commanded respect on the streets of rural and urban Liberia. The film underscores the undertones of religious polarization in Liberia by juxtaposing the largely Muslim composition of the LURD, led by Sekou Damante Conneh, with the zealous Christian orthodoxy of Charles Taylor. In doing this, the ecumenical religious solidarity of the women is sharply contrasted with divisive religious posturing by the men. *Pray* teases out the inherent

contradictions in Liberia's modern history – a nation founded on Christian principles with a long history of intolerance, war-mongering, and structural violence.

Pray documents the story of Liberian women, dressed in white, fortified with nothing but their sheer determination to end a senseless war and “pray the devil back to hell.” While a U.S. naval ship hovered off the coast of Liberia and the international community watched in silence, rocket propelled grenades and indiscriminate shooting terrorized Liberians for months on end. The women of Liberia, in turn, strategized for peace.

They sat in the hot sun, and were exposed to the elements in an open field called the Fish Market in suburban Monrovia until the then President Charles Taylor granted them an audience. They petitioned that he and the rival rebel factions converge in Accra, Ghana, to begin a peace agreement. When peace talks halted because of an impasse in the negotiations for lucrative positions in the Interim Government, Taylor fled Ghana after having been indicted for war crimes in Sierra Leone. The women in white insisted that the remaining warring factions would not leave the negotiation rooms, locking arms in defiance and barring anyone from escaping.

The next scene is as riotous as it is symbolic. Gbowee begins to strip off her clothes after being threatened with arrest. She says in the film that the Ghanaian police officer, who accused her of “obstructing justice” had ignited a symbolic fire when he used that phrase – as if the women’s transgressions outweighed the transgressions of the men they insisted must make peace. The sight of Liberian women, in a human chain, physically shoving some of the most notorious Liberian warlords back into a room, and transgressing social norms by threatening to deliberately expose their bodies to embarrass the men who had brought their country to its knees, made me proud to be Liberian, and even prouder to be a Liberian woman.

The women also threaten a sex strike, which, according to Disney, tends to elicit ripples of laughter amongst international audiences, yet provokes a sobering intensity amongst Liberians. Whether the women’s sex strike contributed to the cessation of the conflict is often contested, but it did contribute to the bundle of unconventional peace tactics that the women implemented, which I believe had a lasting impact.

The film serves as a testament of what Liberians endured, but it's also a warning that we should never forget from whence we've come. In a prophetic clip at the end of the film, Gbowee says that the women will always return to that symbolic field in the Fish Market whenever the country reaches a boiling point. They did just that in October 2011 during the country's second post-war presidential and legislative elections, lying prostrate on the floor in their pristine white, praying that the country would survive the elections unscathed. It did, but now the real work begins.

Liberia has come a long way since 2003. It is in its eighth year of peace, and can speak of not one, but two Nobel Laureates. *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* successfully unearthed Leymah Gbowee to the world, though admittedly she was already fully formed.

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