

CONVERTS TO HUMAN RIGHTS? POPULAR DEBATE ABOUT WAR AND JUSTICE IN RURAL CENTRAL SIERRA LEONE

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I

Introduction

Debate about conversion to world religion has long been a topic in Africanist anthropology (Horton, 1971; Peel, 1995). Under what circumstances of commerce or colonial conquest people situated themselves within broader cosmological frameworks once divided the Marxists and proponents of a so-called 'intellectualist' position (Ifeka-Moller, 1974; Horton and Peel, 1974). Murray Last (2002) has recently added the important idea that 'conversion' is as much a search for justice as the embrace of true belief. Uthman b. Fudi—founder of the Sokoto Caliphate 200 years ago—remarked that 'a kingdom may last with unbelief [*kufir*]; it cannot last with injustice [*zulm*]' (quoted in Last, 2002). To convert to a 'world religion' was not only to gain a broader faith but also to appeal to a better law. Last notes how the common people in Hausa land—especially the young—flocked to Islam under the Fulani jihad to escape slavery, and saw in British colonialism, and again, today, in democratic transition in Nigeria, chances to reassert Shari'a justice against the instincts of effete and corrupt rulers. Even Christian traders, he notes, revert to Shari'a courts because of their reputation for speedy and effective justice.

In the aftermath of the Cold War—and a spate of 'new' African civil wars—human rights has been proffered as a global framework within which peace and justice might be sought. Northern governments and international non-governmental agencies have quickly embraced the idea. But sceptics have been equally quick to voice concerns. Duffield (2001) senses that seeking to 'mobilise the groups and networks that support [*inter alia* humanitarianism and human rights] against the proponents of war and violence' may be part of a more general political project by aid donors to reshape social attitudes and beliefs in the South, in the hope of making the underdeveloped world a less dangerous place. Human rights is, on this reckoning, a new missionary

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project, aimed at facilitating what Duffield terms a 'liberal peace'. It is not hard to identify a source for Duffield's unease. Human rights are expressed in documents drafted by global elites and endorsed by the United Nations. They appear as classic 'top-down' instruments of governance and social control.

Human rights lawyers point out, however, that a declared right means little until specific cases are decided (until a point of principle proves 'justiciable'). Some lawyers believe that thereby all law becomes common law, reflecting the situated social insights of judges and juries. De Gaay Fortman (2001) speaks of human rights as an aspect of 'living law'. In a comparable vein, An-Naim (1998) refers to what he terms the 'inductive' approach to human rights. This is the idea that we may expect to find within 'local' codes notions equivalent to those within principles of universal justice. We can conclude that human rights, properly understood, depends upon a 'double hermeneutic'—the discovery of practical application based on declared principle, and the discovery of larger principle within local (legal) practice. All but the most ardent cultural relativist among legal pluralists might agree the top-down bias of human rights is more apparent than real.

Following this line of thought, our article considers the role of social agency in the making of *local* cultures of human rights. Our case concerns rural populations recovering from civil war in Sierra Leone (1991–2002). The evidence indicates a new enthusiasm for rights, comparable in some respects to pursuit of justice through conversion to world religions. But this has to be understood, we argue, not as the embrace of any pre-existing global doctrine of rights, but more as an aspect of local social renewal, constrained and shaped by wartime experience. In other words, rights have to be understood, in contextual terms, as an aspect of the reconfiguration of the social (a process Mary Douglas, 1986, refers to as 'making communities that work'). Duffield's critique risks placing too much emphasis on the role of the 'missionaries' of human rights and conflict resolution, and too little on local agency and experience.

The core of the article has three parts. In Part II we assemble evidence concerning local ideas about rights and justice in rural central Sierra Leone as it emerges from war. A better, transparent, more effective system of justice is widely seen as a basic requirement to ensure that the war does not return. But, unlike current ferment in northern Nigeria, popular debate in rural central Sierra Leone does not result in demand for Shari'a law. Rather, hitherto silent populations of youth and women seem to be engaged in a process better characterised as the invention of human rights 'from below'. In Part III we consider why this should be so, paying particular attention to how changes in social circumstances triggered by war and resettlement have reshaped local debate about rights and justice. In Part IV we consider the implications for external agencies involved in the process of post-war reconstruction. All aid has consequences in terms of rights and justice. Choices have to be made. A key question is 'Which local debate to back?' We explore two criteria: whether proposed new arrangements

are likely to lead to communities that work, and the extent to which local ideas align with wider, trans-boundary, debates about rights and justice.¹

Data sources and methods

As with other anthropological work in disaster and conflict zones (de Waal, 1989; Nordstrom, 1997) we are dependent on cross-checking evidence from a variety of sources, often obtained under difficult circumstances. These sources include:

1. Interviews on the war undertaken as part of a research project on human rights and forced migration (items 1.1–2 below, cf. Archibald and Richards, 2001)
2. Evaluation of a post-war rural relief programme (Richards *et al.*, 2001).
3. Discussions in village workshops on how to reform humanitarian assistance (items 2.1–12 below, cf. Archibald and Richards, 2002).
4. Long-term ethnographic work in the area (cf. Richards, 1986, 1995).

We cross-reference our own findings to two independently compiled sources:

5. Reports of community consultations on local government undertaken by the Governance Reform Secretariat, 1999–2001 (items 3.1–4 below).
6. Recent interviews with combatants from the different factions in the war (Peters, 2002; items 4.1–10 below, cf. Peters and Richards, 1998a, b).

The focus of field investigation at three periods during 2000–01 was a roadless tract north of the main Freetown–Bo road, adjacent to territory controlled by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF).² Administratively the tract falls within the northern extremity of Moyamba District in the Southern Province of Sierra Leone. The villages lay on the southern side of the boundary between the Temne-speaking populations of Tonkolili District and the Kpa Mende-speakers of Moyamba and Bo Districts. Mende and Temne are the two major language groups within the country. The Kpa Mende (or western Mende) speak a distinctive dialect, and are differentiated from other Mende groups by their institutions. Most notably, a powerful male sodality—Wunde—rivals the better-known and more widespread Poro, and marriage with the mother’s brother’s daughter (*kenya huan wui*, lit. ‘head of the uncle’s animal’), favoured among the Ko Mende of Eastern Province, is

¹ By ‘trans-boundary’ we mean a generalising discourse of human rights emergent among and between different social groups and national and religious traditions.

² The insurgent group in the Sierra Leone war. Founded in the 1980s, the RUF launched its campaign from Liberia 23 March 1991. The war was officially declared at an end in February 2002.



FIGURE 1 Sierra Leone and the field of study

prohibited among the Kpa Mende. The Temne of Tonkolili District and Kpa Mende of Moyamba and Bo Districts share an extended east-west boundary running from about Mile 100 on the Freetown-Bo road to the Kangari hills (north of Bo). RUF expansion north and west of Bo late in 1994 drove many Kpa Mende villagers into displaced persons' camps in Bo and Freetown. When the RUF regrouped in the north from 1996, based on a major forest camp in the Kangari hills, and later (1997-98) in Makeni and Magburaka, the main towns in Bombali and Tonkolili Districts, Temne villagers were displaced southwards into Kpa Mende territory. Many sought refuge in camps at Mile 91, but some were scattered among the Kpa Mende villages. There is a long-

established pattern of intermarriage across the Temne/Kpa Mende ethnic boundary.

From the point of view of rights we were interested in this boundary zone for the following reasons: the presence of internally displaced people (IDPs) from north of the boundary, the difficulty of distributing humanitarian supplies in a roadless area, leading to arguments about inclusion and exclusion, resettlement occurring close to RUF-controlled territory (inhibiting the return of chiefs and court chairmen), and the fact that open discussion was taking place of grievances reported only 'in confidence' during ethnographic studies from 1983 to 1994. We provide further introduction to the various data sets below.

II

Administration of justice: the local context

The administration of justice in the Sierra Leone provinces depends on a modified form of the indirect rule introduced under British colonialism. The Paramount Chief (head of each of 149 chiefdoms) is elected by a college of Tribal Authorities (each representing twenty taxpayers). Under British rule certain leading families were recognised in each chiefdom as 'houses' permitted to put up candidates for election. Rules were sometimes established for the rotation of the paramountcy among these houses. As Abraham (1978) has demonstrated, these rules in no sense continued pre-colonial practice but were arrangements devised by the British to secure a modicum of local stability through the practice of divide and rule. A chief is appointed for life, unless deposed by the government. Political interference in the election of chiefs was rife, especially under the regimes of Presidents Siaka Stevens (1968–85) and his successor Joseph Saidu Momoh (1985–92). Cabinet Ministers sometimes shamelessly bribed electoral colleges to select a candidate thought favourable to the ruling party.

The hierarchy of chiefs—paramount chief (Mende *ndɔ mahei*), 'section' chief (Mende *kpati mahei*), village chief (Mende *ta mahei*)—provides local administration, under the supervision of a government agent, the District Officer. One of the tasks of chiefdom administration is to maintain a system of chiefdom courts to try minor cases. These may include land disputes, the recovery of debts, and 'woman damage' (cases in which a cuckolded husband seeks damages from a wife's lover). More serious cases—murders, armed robbery, etc.—will be reported to the Sierra Leone police service and the accused arraigned before a district court. Paramount chiefs once presided over local courts. These were later replaced by Court Chairmen appointed by government. The chairman of each chiefdom court is assisted by elders appointed to the court as expert assessors, and by members of a local law enforcement agency (the chiefdom police).

Much day-to-day dispute settlement is handled informally—by the chiefs and elders meeting in what may best be termed customary moots. Such moots take place as compound or village meetings, depending on the nature of the dispute. The male and female sodalities (Wunde and

Poro for men, and Sande for women) also try breaches of obligations of membership and levy fines and other punishments. When complaining about injustice informants do not always clearly differentiate between formal 'customary' courts, moots and sodalities.

An important aspect of the administration of justice in rural Sierra Leone is that there was never a comprehensive reform of 'native' administration based on the documentation of chiefdom legal norms, as in the reform of local administration undertaken under the governorship-general of Sir Donald Cameron in Nigeria in the 1930s. Thus not only does customary law vary from chiefdom to chiefdom, but also a plaintiff cannot readily find out, from any central source, or ahead of a case being brought, what the law actually says. Only local 'citizens' (in Mende *tali*, 'townspersons') are entitled to bring cases in customary courts. Sierra Leonean nationality notwithstanding, a migrant from another chiefdom remains a legal minor, i.e. he or she can enter a plea, or be charged, in such a court only through a citizen protector (known, in Mende, as *hotakee*, 'father of the stranger').

Many villagers consider customary justice—formal and informal—expensive, unpredictable and open to bribery. Young men find it particularly onerous. In a rural society in which polygyny still prevails older men are married to several younger women, but younger men are often too poor to marry. In these circumstances young men are frequently brought to court accused of 'woman damage'. Young men claim such charges are often trumped up, to extract a fine, or to teach them lessons in respect for their elders.

The rebel RUF in its earliest forays into eastern and central Sierra Leone (in 1991) targeted and killed government agents, including chiefs and court chairmen. From the outset it was clear that some rebel cadres were settling old scores for justice gone sour. The threat of RUF attack thereafter effectively ended local administration and closed many courts. At various times almost all the country's paramount chiefs sought refuge in Freetown or the camps for the displaced. It has been a major preoccupation of the government of President Ahmad Tejan Kabba (1996 onwards) to ensure the restoration of local administration based on paramount chiefs. Residences have been built (as part of a programme funded by British aid) to encourage chiefs to resume their duties, but many courthouses remained wrecked by fighting. Chiefdom police started to receive salaries in 2001 after about eight or nine years. But little or no progress has been made towards the codification of customary law. In central Sierra Leone villagers displaced in 1995 began to resettle from 1997, and by 2000 most village or section heads were in place. Some—it is unclear how many—were regents, or even self-appointed. Senior members of the chiefdom hierarchy remained reluctant to reside in the countryside on a permanent basis.

The evidence: the war as product of injustice

In this section we review evidence from rural central Sierra Leone about the causes of the conflict. Scholars continue to argue over the relative importance of 'greed' and 'grievance' (Berdal and Malone, 2001;

Collier, 2000; Richards, 2002b). Our material, however, indicates that in local perception the war was fuelled more by social factors than by the lure of diamonds (the international explanation of choice). The data are remarkably consistent, with opposed parties (villagers, RUF cadres and Civil Defence Force fighters, the latter a militia formed in 1996 from earlier village-based anti-RUF vigilante groups, henceforth CDF) *agreeing* on the significance of a combination of poverty and injustice, especially affecting youth.³ There are two recurrent aspects of this local debate. First, informants point to a crisis in patrimonial values. (The young lacked sponsorship for education or help in finding jobs, chiefs manipulated the local justice system against youth, subsequent social exclusion provided the RUF with recruits.) Second, there is open debate about the reform of justice. Youth and women now assert rights as individuals where once they would have been restrained by deference. Elders agree that deference has collapsed. Most informants (even including elders) think new approaches are needed, or war will return. This, we argue, is a window for human rights.

Two extracts from field notes, Kamajei chiefdom, 2000–01

We present first two representative extracts from our field notes, compiled during joint fieldwork in northern Kamajei chiefdom, Moyamba District, Southern Province, in November 2000 and February 2001. In some cases the interviews and group discussions involved key informants, known over a period of twenty years, who have never spoken in such explicit terms before. This can be regarded as clear evidence that discussion of rights and justice is a new aspect of rural discourse in this part of Sierra Leone.

1.1. J. was visited in February 2001 to evaluate distribution of inputs (seeds, tools and food-for-agriculture) supplied the previous year to farming households resettling after displacement in 1995. Immediately, we were told about a dispute between elders and youth . . . The quarrel concerned the distribution of humanitarian supplies. Asked by the agency supplying the inputs to form a committee to oversee distribution to the most needy, the elders immediately excluded the youths in the village, arguing they had the energy to stand on their own feet. No one under the age of forty was to be admitted to the list of needy beneficiaries. The elders on the committee, on the other hand, had all included themselves (by virtue of seniority) and were in receipt of inputs . . . This caused a bitter feud. Many of the young people had opted to withdraw from the village, to make a new settlement in the bush. This hamlet (Mende *fakai hun*, lit. ‘among the pawpaw trees’) so resembled the camps in which the RUF sequestered its young revolutionaries

³ ‘Youth’ (Mende *kɔŋɡaa*, *nyahangaa*, ‘young man’, ‘young woman’) involves social status as well as age, as opposed to ‘big person’ (Mende *numu wai*, a person with power, wealth or status). *Kpakɔ* also signifies a ‘big person’, but more in the sense of ‘adult’; a little girl behaving in a grown-up manner is referred to, ironically, as *kpakɔ nyahci*. Some informants—especially in the RUF—hint at old distinctions between freeborn persons and domestic slaves when talking about ‘big people’ and youth. Domestic slavery was abolished within the living memory of the elderly (1927).

that the elders had become thoroughly alarmed. 'Through injustice we have turned our young people to rebels,' one villager lamented. The group sought advice on what could be done to persuade the young people to return. It was recognised that a distribution system treating all groups on the basis of human need might serve to heal the breach.

1.2. G. is a village bordering RUF territory, and 13 km. off road. It was attacked by RUF units from Kangari hills in Tonkolili District some time during *c.* June 1996, in revenge for increasingly effective operations by units of the CDF. Sixty people were slaughtered, their bodies arranged in a line across the village . . . Wells were poisoned and houses burnt. People began to resettle from 1997. Indeed, some never fled, but hid in caves and other hide-outs (*Mende sokoihun*, lit. 'in corners'). The town chief tried to set an agenda for a meeting to discuss humanitarian input supply. He was overruled by various women and youths, determined to voice concern about injustices in earlier distribution. They told how 'corner dwellers' had survived on their own resources, cooking by night for fear of attracting rebel scouts. Later they were protected by young men from the village initiated and trained as CDF fighters. Houses were rebuilt, and eventually the returnees constructed a large mud-built thatched building doubling as church and school. Here 120 children were being taught by two teachers, paid for by the community. (The teachers' names had been eliminated from the computerised payroll in Freetown as 'ghost workers'.) The village was reached by a humanitarian agency in 1999. Some elders returned to help organise the distribution of relief. This was the nub of a grievance the meeting wanted to discuss. A young man—a Temne tailor, suspected by the elders of being an RUF member—complained bitterly about his exclusion from distribution lists. He had been one of those whom the bush 'corners'. The chief tried to make him sit down, but without success. 'Chief,' the young man persisted, 'you ran away, and were fed by the agencies as a displaced person, whereas I stood on this ground . . .' This—he concluded—made him a citizen. Angered by the boy's 'arrogance', the chief threatened to withdraw from the meeting,. He was prevailed upon to stay. Then the chief also began to talk freely. 'Yes, it is true, the relief inputs bring bitterness and division . . . But what can we do? It is natural to favour family and friends in the distribution of benefits . . . This brings division, and with division comes war . . . we need to find a better way.'

Village peace and rights discussions

In 2001 the relief and development agency CARE-Sierra Leone sponsored a number of village discussions on peace and rights, using a consultation methodology pioneered in Sierra Leone by a conflict resolution agency, Conciliation Resources. Some items from group discussions on local grievances are reproduced below. They confirm the salience of local debate about a 'generation gap'. Youth and elders' groups both refer to young people quitting the village and becoming 'footloose', due to heavy fines.

2.1. The heavy fines levied by chiefs on youths have led to many leaving the village. The chiefs are concerned that these youths will return and seek revenge on them. [Elders' group]

2.2. Chiefs do not allow youths to express their views. [Youth group]

- 2.3. Chiefs victimise youths by imposing heavy and unjust fines; criminal summonses make youths run from the village, resulting in disunity and grievance. [Youth group]
- 2.4. There is . . . no support for vulnerable groups. [Women's group]
- 2.5. Chiefs withhold benefits meant for the community, resulting in defiance by youths . . . chiefs protect their own children from doing communal work. [Youth group]
- 2.6. There is no proper distribution of humanitarian inputs. It is done according to whom you know. [Women's group]
- 2.7. Youths are never [appointed] chiefs, unless they become [secret] society elders, even if they are the best person, youths have no rights over elders, they are always in the wrong. [Youth group]
- 2.8. [Secret] society heads levy fines on youth in the bush, subject to no appeal, chiefs levy frequent contributions on youths for 'development'; refusal or inability to pay brings a criminal summons and a fine, 'up to Le 40,000, or whatever they need'. [Youth group]
- 2.9. Those who pay fees and fines 'never see any development'. [Youth group]
- 2.10. There is disrespect for youth leaders, youth leaders connive with chiefs to humiliate the youths. [Youth group]
- 2.11. Displaced people were excluded from registration for humanitarian assistance. [Women's group]

An interesting comment on this material was provided by a senior government figure. He had never heard such complaints in his own extensive rural travels. These sentiments could have been placed in the minds of simple country folk only by external agencies. Specifically, he considered the views we cite to be artefacts of our own interest in human rights. The next section provides grounds for rejecting any such interpretation.

Local consultations concerning the restoration of chiefs

To cross-check our own material we examined consultation reports prepared as part of a government-sponsored programme to restore paramount chiefs.⁴ Issues voiced in our own interviews recur in this second body of evidence, despite it being collected for a different purpose, thus helping confirm that our material belongs to a more general rural discourse, rather than being an artefact of a focus on humanitarianism and human rights.

Chieftdom consultations were undertaken by teams commissioned by the Secretariat for Governance Reform in more than sixty accessible chieftdoms (mainly in the southern and eastern province) during 1999

⁴ President Ahmad Tejan-Kabba was elected in 1996, deposed by a *coup* in 1997 and restored, with international assistance, in 1998. The programme for the restoration of chiefs was one of the restored government's top priorities for UK aid.

and 2000. An aim was to listen to local grievances, to gain the support of young people to contribute labour to the building of houses to accommodate returning chiefs. Meetings lasted two days and often involved role-play exercises on factors participants put forward as having contributed to the war. The number of people attending meetings was generally about fifty to a hundred, mainly from landowning groups. Attempts were made to secure adequate representation of women and youth (including CDF militia fighters). Less attention seems to have been paid, however, to the systematic representation of 'strangers' (people resident outside their chiefdom of birth—traders, migrant labourers, displaced people). We summarise material from four reports (Governance Reform Secretariat, 1999, 2000a, b, c). Three were selected because they were localities in which one of us (P.R.) had worked previously (Dasse, Kamajei and Nomo chiefdoms). The fourth was a report covering a chiefdom in which pre-war grievances had been documented by Ferme (2001). This gave us the chance to assess the quality of the material, which we judged reliable, if at times less than fully explicit about some local disputes.

3.1. *Nomo chiefdom*,⁵ 11 and 12 July 2000. 'The Civil Defence Militia [CDF] boys spoke about their grievances and the high-handedness of the Chiefdom authorities . . . at one time the co-ordinator had to intervene in order to prevent a serious confrontation between the Youth group and the Chiefdom Authority group.'⁶ The chiefdom authorities claimed it was hard 'to regain lost power' from 'pompous and arrogant kamajor [Civil Defence Militia] boys' . . . who had 'usurped the power of the chiefdom authorities' [and were] 'arrogant towards the chiefs and civilians . . .' The authorities complained there was now 'no respect for leadership' as evidenced in the 'establishment of kangaroo courts by CDF [fighters]'. The 'pompous and arrogant' boys, for their part, argued they faced problems as a result of 'injustice', 'nepotism', 'partiality', 'laying of heavy fines by chiefs' and a 'refusal to forgive ex-combatants'. The co-ordinator then proposed a role-play on a scenario in which a man bribes a chief who lays a heavy fine on a youth who could not pay. In break-out sessions the women's group complained that women were marginalised and that 'customary law keeps women at the bottom of the social ladder' and 'the chief grabs everything that should be women's'. The youth group reported 'chiefs antagonise the youths'.

3.2. *Kamajei chiefdom*, 12 and 13 June 2000. Elders complained about a power-hungry Civil Defence Militia, but youths (several of whom were CDF 'ground commanders'—i.e. local vigilantes) listed among their problems 'selfishness', 'dishonesty' and 'poverty'. A group arriving late from a remote

⁵ A remote diamond mining chiefdom on the Liberian border enclaved between the Gola East and North Forest Reserves, where the RUF sought refuge in 1992–93 (cf. Richards, 1996).

⁶ The CDF were fighting on the government side against the RUF, to restore the authority of the chiefs. In this report—as in others—the mood of the CDF seems close to that of their revolutionary opponents.

village reported that 'aid materials were not equitably distributed among regions'. In a final comment the report notes that 'the CDF are fairly a law unto themselves'.

3.3. *Dasse chiefdom, 17 and 18 December 1999.* The co-ordinator organised the delegates into four groups—youth and civil society, women, CDF members and chiefdom authorities. The first group reported that 'The youth of Dasse have been suppressed by the ruling elite for too long'. Two Court Chairmen were accused of 'intimidation tactics to extort revenue', resulting in 'justice being denied'. The CDF group reported that during the war there was a good relationship between the CDF fighters and the chiefs, but that with the war effectively over the chiefs no longer 'have . . . respect for' nor 'recognise the sacrifice of' the CDF.

3.4. *Wonde chiefdom, 5 and 6 July 2000.* It was reported that 'the level of destruction . . . due to rebel attacks and atrocities is 95 per cent'. Much of this destruction came not from the RUF but from 'Wonde indigene rebels' expressing 'long years of resentment against the NA [Chiefdom Authority] through the destruction of their houses . . . the NA quarters were a major target.' The youths and CDF fighters reported that among their problems were 'heavy fines . . . imposed by the few respected chiefs' who were said to have 'no love for the youths'.

The perspective of ex-combatants

Finally, we turn to the views of ex-combatants, from all factions (RUF, CDF and the government army). The material has been made available to us by Krijn Peters, based on interviews undertaken in Kenema in November 2001 (Peters, 2002).⁷ Once again the consistency of explanation is striking. Former enemies *agree* about the causes of the war (cf. Peters and Richards, 1998a).

4.1. Most of the young men and women were suffering . . . our chiefs and some elderly men were doing wrong to our young men and women . . . some young men prefer[red] to go and join the RUF, either to take revenge or to protect themselves. [CDF, ex-combatant, male, age 36]

4.2. Greed and selfishness [were factors] which made the rebel war come . . . Nobody was willing to help the young men, especially the politicians . . . When the Ministers or the paramount chiefs . . . visit . . . any village they ask us to contribute rice and money, instead of bringing development . . . That . . . really inspired us to fight even more. Actually we were fighting for awareness and also to have justice in the country . . . We fought against bribery and corruption . . . We were fighting for righteousness and justice . . . Before the war there was corruption, misuse of power and justice. [RUF, ex-combatant, male, age unknown]

4.3. There were no jobs for the youth . . . So they preferred to go to the bush . . . The youth should be given their rights, such as work, or the possibility of learning a skill or trade. [CDF, ex-combatant, male, age 24]

⁷ The full interviews will be presented and analysed in the forthcoming Ph.D. thesis of Krijn Peters (Technology and Agrarian Development Group, Wageningen University). Permission to quote is gratefully acknowledged.

4.4. The elders were not really helping us. They cannot help any young person. Even if you have only minor problems, they . . . exaggerate it, taking it to the district chief and then, you as a young man, cannot handle the case any more and have to run away . . . a case [was] brought to the chief and I was accused. So I ran away and hid . . . Then I heard about the Kamajor society, so I decided to join . . . But it was the bad government . . . that made so many young men to join the fighting. There were no jobs, even if you were educated . . . [CDF, ex-combatant, male, age 32]

4.5. [The chiefs] levy high fines on the youth, if you are sent to do a job and you refuse. Up till now the chiefs are pressuring us. They can summon[s] you and no sooner as you appear, they start to fine you, making you to pay a lot of money . . . [RSLMF/CDF, ex-combatant, male, age 24]

4.6. The paramount chiefs were not honest because if the APC government⁸ is corrupt, the chiefs will get involved in that . . . The [local] chiefs were also not honest because they did not tell the truth. If there is a case, the one who did wrong and [should] lose can easily bribe the chief and so becomes the winner. These are some of the grievances which made the war to come . . . Still the same chiefs and paramount chiefs are in place, but they can be changed if the law is rightly enforced upon them. [CDF, ex-combatant, male, age 50]

4.7. [Things are changing now, because] if we notice that you, as a chief . . . accept bribes or are doing bad, we will have to kick you out of power, because now we have a democratic government and we have to fight for our rights. We cannot run away from any chief any more because this is a democracy; we have to stand up for our right to make sure that it will not be misused again . . . if you, as a bad chief, will send us anywhere to brush some land or do some other work, we will refuse . . . you may summon us to the highest authority but . . . we will explain what you have done to us. [CDF, ex-combatant, male, age 36]

4.8. [I joined the RUF because] they told us that they are fighting to overthrow the APC government because they exploited the people and were taking all the money to Europe to build mighty houses or buy luxurious cars and forgetting about the youth. We, the young people, do suffer a lot in this country. [RUF, ex-combatant, male, age unknown]

4.9. I joined the rebels purposely because of difficulties we were having. We were suffering too much. The RUF were encouraging us to help them in their fight so that later we could enjoy a proper life . . . there were about twenty young boys and girls in my village—seven girls and thirteen boys—who joined the RUF willingly, without force. The main reason was the lack of job facilities and lack of encouragement for the youth. [This was] why the RUF [was] fighting. [RUF, ex-combatant, female, age 23]

4.10. The good effect of the war is that we will fight for our rights now because we are a democracy now. [CDF, ex-combatant, male, age 36]

A window for rights?

Human rights offers a straightforward story about common humanity.

⁸ The All People's Congress, in power from 1968 to 1992.

It poses a basic question: 'Is the creature before me human?' If the answer is 'yes', then certain basic standards apply. There is disagreement about how short or long the list of basic standards should be. To Walzer (a rights minimalist) there are only two human rights—not to be deprived arbitrarily of life and liberty. Everything else—even membership of a nation or community—belongs to the sphere of distribution of social goods (Walzer, 1983). Walzer makes an exception for refugees, who have been stripped of all except membership of the human race. Others have longer lists, embracing basic material requirements, i.e. that which is needful for human existence (Klein Goldewijk and de Gaay Fortman, 1999). For such needs-oriented theorists of human rights dignity plays a part in deciding what is needful. In most societies it is not possible to appear naked in public; without clothes we cannot be fully human, we can only hide. A modicum of clothing becomes a human right. It follows from such a notion that the basic materials of subsistence cannot be distributed according to particularistic rules—family membership, or loyalty to a patron, for example—but only on the basis of human need. In a war-torn community comprising citizens and non-citizens it would be better to subdivide that which is available without distinction than to deny access on the grounds that non-citizens (or youth, or women, etc.) 'are of no social account'. Human rights transcends the rules of social distinction. We claim human rights because we are human.

In the material we have presented it is possible to argue that young people are making claims in terms of human rights—that becoming an adult is an inevitable aspect of common humanity, and that whether or not young people make a successful transition to adulthood should not have to depend on the whims of patrons. Basic education—for example—is a human right recognised in international declarations. President Momoh opened the door for the RUF when he argued in a speech in the late 1980s that education in Sierra Leone was a privilege and not a right (Richards, 1996). The argument about the terms under which young people become fully adult is especially forceful when arbitrary fining leads to being stripped of membership in the community. In rural Sierra Leone to become 'footloose' is in a real sense to risk becoming sub-human—to be recategorised by society-at-large as a 'lumpen', a monster, a lost soul (Abdullah, 1997; Kandeh, 2001). The RUF dealt in lost souls. Internally it tried to create its own social order and system of justice (see below). Externally, it failed because it sought—in a spirit of revenge—to obliterate the communities from which its cadres had been excluded. It met human rights abuse with even greater abuse of human rights.

Yet—as we will argue—this paradox has been thought-provoking for all classes in the countryside of central Sierra Leone. Elders think greater respect for the rights of the person is needed to reduce the threat of dismissed youths returning with yet more revenge in their heart, e.g. the village committee members who realised that in distributing humanitarian inputs according to age or family membership they had created a dangerous rebel world in their midst (1.1, 2.1). Young people

use a language of rights when commenting on injustices leading to social exclusion and problems over the transition to adulthood (4.3, 4.4, 4.7, 4.10). Women—kept by customary law ‘at the bottom of the social ladder’ (3.1)—are equally explicit that a more general scheme of rights is needed to overcome inadequacies of patrimonialism, criticising the exclusion of strangers and the fact that access to humanitarian inputs depends not on need but who you know (2.4, 2.6, 2.11). Thus we would make two broad claims: (1) youth and women are prepared to speak out about grievances or rights, (2) what they say aligns with international rights discourse, e.g. the distribution of humanitarian inputs according to need (2.1), social inclusion (1.2, 2.11) and the subordination of youths and women to be ended (3.1, 3.3). While not the sum of local argument about causes and consequences of the war, this rights-oriented discourse represents a significant strand in local thinking, attested by the fact it repeats across different sources.

III

Why rights now?

If local post-conflict discourse in rural central Sierra Leone rejects patrimonialism and converges upon the language of universal (or, better, trans-boundary) human rights, we need to explore the questions ‘Why?’ and ‘Why now?’ To organise our argument we make use of what is sometimes termed a neo-Durkheimian conceptual framework (Douglas, 1987, 1993; Douglas and Ney, 1998; Hood, 1998; Perri 6, 1999). A central concern in the neo-Durkheimian approach is not to take social values as ‘given’ or ‘self evident’—to assume (in this case) that trans-boundary human rights thinking is a more evolved or inherently superior way of looking at the world than local systems of justice and social values. The neo-Durkheimian approach is to show how norms and values make social worlds work. These norms and rules are to be judged not according to scale or abstract characteristics but according to how they perform in a social context (i.e. the analysis is functional). Rights advocacy places emphasis upon certain ideas or tendencies within the broad stream of rights thinking that may deal effectively with evident weaknesses, instabilities or inconsistencies apparent in existing schemes of organisation and social value. It is not a criticism to cry ‘functionalism’. The point is to let people whose lives have been made dysfunctional by war decide. Do they want to go back to schemes that fostered (or broke down in) war, or are they minded to try something different? Trans-boundary human rights discourse is helpful in so far as it allows options to be explored, and social change to be navigated in ways less destructive than war.

Neo-Durkheimian analysis makes it clear that the ‘something different’ is never separable from concrete local struggles to forge or consolidate social worlds that work. The problem is how to analyse on-going changes of values bound up with on-going changes of

organisation. As developed by the anthropologist Mary Douglas and others, the neo-Durkheimian approach addresses this issue through a heuristic device. This device—the grid–group diagram (Douglas, 1970; Thompson *et al.*, 1990)—serves as a kind of checklist to explore co-variation in social values and organisational variables.

Neo-Durkheimian theorists claim to have discovered four main pairings between values and social organisation—‘isolate’, ‘individualistic’, ‘egalitarian’ and ‘hierarchical’. These can be thought of as coexisting in a two-dimensional analytical ‘space’ where the vertical axis indicates strength of coercive power (the ‘grid’ dimension) and the horizontal axis the strength of community commitment (the ‘group’ dimension). The two top ‘boxes’ in the graph (high grid/low group and high grid/high group) are often labelled ‘isolate’ and ‘hierarchical’. An instance of the isolate category would be a slave-based world with few exit options. The mass of people have limited scope to exercise their own agency. They will tend to develop internally focused, fatalistic, attitudes and norms. In the space labelled ‘hierarchy’ we encounter groups organised around command and control—those at the top of the heap know best, underlings are required only ‘to do their job’, certain decisions or responsibilities are ‘above my level’. In the two bottom ‘boxes’ we find (left to right) groups organised according to individualistic or ‘market’ values, and ‘enclaves’ (Douglas, 1993; Sivan, 1995), i.e. communes. In the former case, people are (relatively) free of control but also little encumbered by community feelings and responsibilities. People must ‘stand on their own feet’ and ‘make their own way in the world’. The ‘enclave’ space is where the sect flourishes. Here people are (ideally) undifferentiated by wealth or status, bonded by strong social commitment and sharing a common fate. Any threats to community cohesion—defection to the outside world, or infiltration, for example—are dealt with by urgent, collective and at times draconian justice (ostracism, banishment or death).

It should be repeated that this scheme is only a heuristic—a way of reminding the analyst to check for a range of tendencies—not a system of ideal types, far less a theory of different kinds of actually existing society. But applying the grid–group scheme helps us recognise that the broad field of human rights is liable to be tensioned or ‘biased’ differently according to different organisational emphases. Isolates may be clear about their rights, but perhaps only in the after-life. In a hierarchy rights are guaranteed by the strength of the system as a whole; I get the benefits appropriate to my level, grade or caste. In market society human rights inhere in the individual—rights conducive to ‘freedom’ tend to be stressed. The enclave envisages rights more from the perspective of duty—that which must be sacrificed to the common good; harsh punishments abound.

What we suggest below is that the local rights discourse has been reshaped both by the weakening of local hierarchies and by a distaste for the enclave option, as manifested in the rebel RUF. Doubtless, some victims of the war have moved in the direction of greater fatalism, being prepared silently to endure their losses, while pinning hopes on justice

in an after-life.⁹ But what seems clear is that there is now a larger space than hitherto for the fourth option—individualism—as a result of organisational changes brought about by war and post-war recovery. This has imparted to local rights discourse—we will conclude—some compatibility with wider human rights discourse.

We will consider four major aspects: the religious situation in central Sierra Leone, the contradictions of patrimonialism, the interaction of organisation and values in an insecure rural world (temporarily) lacking its chiefs, and the impact of humanitarianism.

Rights discourse as an inter-faith option

First, we would argue the kind of solution being pressed for by the ordinary folk in northern Nigeria—the introduction of Shari'a law—is impossible in rural central Sierra Leone. The majority of rural Sierra Leoneans are Muslims, but Christians are an important minority (perhaps 30 per cent of the population nationally). Kpa Mende country has a very strong Christian minority, with the Catholic and Methodist missions a long-term presence. Accordingly, it has one of the largest rural Christian populations of any part of rural Sierra Leone. Peaceful religious coexistence is a long-term feature of family and community life in the area. Even so, religion remains a plane of potential cleavage. 'A simmering conflict between Muslims and Christians' was reported in one of our fieldwork villages. The RUF took great care never to risk religious hostilities within its camps, requiring its cadres to pray daily, but either as Muslims or as Christians. One female ex-combatant told Krijn Peters (2002):

I am a Muslim and pray my five daily prayers. At the base [forest camp] there was both a mosque and a church. However, you are not forced to go to church if you are a Muslim or go to mosque if you are a Christian. They just ring a bell on Sunday so you know that the church service will start. And on Friday you can go to mosque.

A female civilian held in captivity by the RUF reported:

At six o'clock everybody will be at the prayer ground. If they caught you, you don't go for prayers, you will be punished, you will be in jail for three days. [They had] both Muslims and Christians [prayers]. They will appoint one person to pray. After you have prayed then you will say the Lord's Prayer, and then you will say the Alfatihah. [Richards, 2002a]

The RUF leader, Foday Sankoh, claimed to respect, or adhere to, both faiths. (The Freetown press mocked him as a 'Mustian'.) Calls for Shari'a law are heard only occasionally in Sierra Leone. Where justice is at issue—as we have shown it to be—then negotiation on neutral ground seems a safer bet to the parties concerned. This is one reason—

⁹ Fatalism—by its nature—is rather hard to detect, especially through quick-and-dirty field methods.

we believe—for the emergence of a discourse in terms of individual rights.

The failure of patrimonialism, and the rise of CDF individualism

Second, we would point to crisis in the system of social reproduction based on patrimonialism. ‘Big people’ are supposed to act as ‘patrons’ (i.e. parent surrogates) of the young and poor in return for loyalty and political support. The system was always unstable to the degree that it involved intense competition between rival ‘big people’ to recruit followers. Expanding numbers of young people, and decline in the diamond economy and post-Cold War aid budgets in the 1980s, led to a general crisis of patrimonialism. An overextended system suffered collapse not unlike the collapse of a pyramid selling scheme. Many young people simply could not find the patronage they needed to cover schooling or a first job. Social exclusion intensified when cash-strapped chiefs imposed arbitrary fines to compensate for the drying up of political funds. Excluded youths gravitated towards numerous mining enclaves and other economic ‘hot spots’ within the Sierra Leone countryside. Good numbers ended up in the Gola forest, on the Liberian border, where they were mobilised by the RUF (Richards, 1996), becoming effective bush fighters. As the movement spread it enrolled more and more of the *rarray* (Krio ‘footloose’, the ‘masterless classes’ of early modern Europe¹⁰).

The RUF tide was turned in 1996, when agents of a new democratic government, supported by South African, Israeli and British security-cum-mining interests, reorganised ‘hunter’ vigilantes into a national militia force, the CDF. With the assistance of a South African security company Executive Outcomes, this force destroyed key RUF bases, September–October 1996, just prior to the (in the event) stillborn Abidjan peace agreement, signed on 30 November 1996. Despite mercenary helicopter support, and access to semi-automatic weapons,¹¹ the CDF was never a ‘regular’ counter-insurgency force. What made it distinct was the continuing importance of hunter initiation in recruitment.

Would-be applicants received military training only after initiation as a *kamajoi* (Mende ‘expert hunter’, lit. ‘master of marvels’). Such hunters belong to a craft association or guild (Muana, 1997). Initiation requires money, or a sponsor to cover the costs. This—it hardly needs to be pointed out—is rather different from joining an army through the usual routes (volunteering or through conscription). To enrol through initiation into a guild is conducive more to a notion of fighting war as a craft. Warriors tend to see themselves as craftsmen specialists, jealously guarding their individual rights and privileges. CDF fighters became ‘professionals’ in the sense we might apply that term to a lawyer or

¹⁰ The phrase was used of young people squeezed out of rural communities and into forested mining areas in early modern central Europe (cf. Rebel, 1982).

¹¹ Supplied by an Israeli arms dealer working for a Belgian-based diamond mining company.

doctor in private practice (or, indeed, an officer in the eighteenth-century British army who had bought a commission).

In the bush the CDF operated in small bands organised on 'traditional' lines (i.e. a 'master' hunter assisted by a team of apprentices). But where masters came together the result, commentators noted, was often chaotic conditions—e.g. on CDF roadblocks, where a traveller might be told to proceed, only for the order to be immediately countermanded by one or other rival 'professional' in the group. According to Muana (1997) the CDF did have a command structure, but it was restricted to members of the guild itself. Civilian chiefs were excluded, unless they had been initiated. (Some were.)

The remark from the author of the report on Kamajei chiefdom (3.2 above) sums up the situation well: 'the CDF are fairly a law unto themselves'. The case of open hostility between civilian chiefs and CDF cadres reported from Nomo chiefdom (3.1 above) is one of the more dramatic instances. As a result, a significant number of paramount chiefs now feel vulnerable to the young CDF fighters detailed to defend them, especially in the deep countryside. Patrimonial deference is no longer a guarantee of long-term security for elders. While some elders complain that the youths are now 'pompous and arrogant', others recognise, more realistically, that the cat is out of the bag: they have little option but to consider the rights of young people in a more sympathetic light.

The lessons of the RUF enclave

Third, we need to understand fully the egalitarian challenge posed by the RUF. To diaspora and city-based Sierra Leoneans, and a distant international community, the RUF seemed no more than an anarchic rabble. Rural people knew the movement better. Village elites often recognised their own excluded youths returning to haunt them. Returnees preached the movement's values in the hope of making willing converts, especially among the young. 'Corner dwellers' sometimes interacted with RUF forest camps, and offered clear descriptions of RUF organisation and values (Richards, 1996). Recent evidence confirms that, even in demobilisation, cadres continue to manifest pride in a movement that shared its meagre resources of clothing, education or health (Peters, 2002; cf. Peters and Richards, 1998a). The values are those of the enclave (Douglas, 1993; Richards, 1996; Sivan, 1995). Enclave justice typically is collectivist in character. Threats to group cohesion—including threats to quit—are speedily and harshly dealt with. One female witness—a captive, and thus a more dispassionate witness than the cadres themselves—described RUF justice as follows:

when you do any wrong they have their own supreme courts. You have to face in that court if you have done any wrong. If the court states that you will die, then you will die. Yes, in the jungle they judge you before they kill you . . . For the boys that can go at the front line, if they kill innocent people, when the commander come in [*sic*] he has to bring in his report, so if you are caught, and you killed a civilian, or burned them up in a house, you will be

killed . . . if they want to punish anybody they punish you at the formation ground where we gather to pray in the morning and in the evening. They will tell you, this is the crime that this person have [*sic*] committed, so you are going to be punished. [Richards, 2002b]

The picture of collective justice is confirmed by a 35-year old fighter:

There were a lot of rules binding the fighters in the RUF . . . If I have done something wrong . . . they will take me to Foday Sankoh, *he has to gather all the other authorities to investigate the matter and also people who are in favour of me* . . . Those in favour of me will help me to answer some of the difficult questions. If I am guilty I will be punished, if I am not guilty the law will set me free. [The laws] have been written down. [Peters, 2002, our emphasis]

The emergence of enclave social values in the RUF has been analysed elsewhere (Richards, 1996, 1999, 2002b). What is of relevance here is the process triggered by the Executive Outcomes-backed CDF attacks on the key RUF forest camps in September 1996. The RUF considered this a breach of a cease-fire with the new democratic government, for which it blamed the government's deputy Minister of Defence (a rural chief with extensive mining interests, and main architect of the CDF). The camps embodied (through free basic education and medical services) the movement's egalitarian political message for Sierra Leone. Unable to communicate this message, a homeless RUF developed the kind of apocalyptic instability often associated with the disruption of other sectarian movements (Munster in the sixteenth century, Waco, Texas, in 1995). The end of the world was nigh. The cadres tore rural deference apart through atrocities that shocked the world. Sensing they were the real target of this terror campaign, few chiefs were willing to risk return, even to rural areas made safe by the CDF, while there was still any chance of RUF resurgence. Commoners had less choice, and linked up with the CDF to reinhabit the countryside (1.1 above). The alliance of commoners and CDF opened up—between a retreating chiefly patrimonialism and the vengeful egalitarianism of the RUF—a space in which an emergent individualism began to take hold.

Foundations were laid in the urban camps for the displaced in 1994–95. The RUF 'phase two' campaign (from late 1994) sought not so much to kill civilians as to empty the countryside. The populations of rural areas in the south and east flooded into refugee camps in Bo and Kenema, which were main centres of CDF recruitment in 1996. Camp life exposed deferential value structures to critical scrutiny. For a start, rural commoners from far and wide compared notes. Many found out, for the first time, what people paid for farm produce in town. A frequent conclusion was that 'our eyes are open' to the abuses of rural elites (both traders and the politicians and chiefs who colluded with them). Although rural elites invested in the CDF (through sponsoring initiation), only some younger chiefs were actively engaged in the movement in the bush. The more enterprising commoners, keen to secure plantations and other bush resources, seized the chance to follow 'ground commanders' back home, as the CDF pushed the RUF

northwards in late 1996 and early 1997. There were no chiefs on hand to overhear how these conversations developed.

For a time, from an economic point of view, the frontier of rural resettlement was the place to be. In 1997 the RUF moved into Freetown, diverted by its opportunist alliance with the rebellious government army (the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council regime, following the *coup* of 25 May 1997). Food prices rose as international sanctions halted humanitarian relief supplies. Corner dwellers were at an advantage. But meanwhile Kabba loyalist chiefs had either fled to Liberia or were keeping a low profile in Bo and Kenema, two towns maintaining quasi-independence of the military regime. Only a few were prepared to lead their people back into the bush. One who did—the Paramount Chief of Yele (Bonkolenken chiefdom, Tonkolili District), a major sponsor of CDF activity in the north—successfully created his own large ‘hunter’ militia (Temne youths initiated according to the *kamajoi* rite), freed his chiefdom from the RUF and reinvigorated patrimonial respect. Elsewhere, however, commoners and ‘ground commanders’ explored the remaking of local society along their own lines.

In frontier conditions basic necessities, such as bush foods, seed, labour and land, were garnered, shared or appropriated with scant regard for established landlord–stranger relations. Returnees were free of the exactions and fines of the chiefs. Commoners fed CDF fighters, and later supplied teachers and other returning professionals (e.g. village health workers) from what they gathered or grew. The CDF implemented its own ‘bush code’ of justice, in which the civil chiefs had no role. The keynote of the world of the ‘corner dwellers’ and ‘ground commanders’ was self reliance. Fatalism belonged to the camps. Without chiefs, deference declined. RUF egalitarianism had no appeal. Individualism prospered. Life as free of chiefs as of the RUF was the organisational ‘platform’ from which women, youths and strangers ‘standing their ground’ in ‘corners’ began vociferously to argue for individual rights.

The impact of humanitarianism

Humanitarianism played a part. But far from ‘teaching’ people their rights (as has been alleged) humanitarian activity (our data suggest) provided the resources for a modest renewal of patrimonialism (Richards *et al.*, 2001). When President Kabba was restored in March 1998 chiefs (and humanitarian agencies) began a cautious return to the countryside in the south and east, a process disrupted by the AFRC/RUF attacks on Freetown in January 1999 and the breakdown of the Lomé peace process in April–May 2000. Alert to the danger of misappropriation, the agencies formed Village Development Committees (VDCs) to manage inputs, excluding chiefs. These committees were often in practice thinly disguised surrogates for chiefly power. Field agents never thought to ask ‘Is the chair of the women’s committee the sister of the chief?’ No one noted, until too late, that all VDC members were members of the local landowning, trading or professional classes. Few if any strangers, or representatives of the

displaced, ever made it on to committees, and not surprisingly few strangers or displaced people qualified for inputs. Ingenious local justifications were devised. Strangers cannot be trusted with inputs, because they cannot represent themselves in court. The displaced will soon go back home, so need no materials for farming. Committees regularly made their own members the first beneficiaries. Items laboriously distributed in villages were sometimes collected up and taken back to feed the urban-based relatives of committee members. Youths thought to be 'pompous and arrogant' (or suspected of rebel sympathies), widows, strangers and the displaced managed on their own, sometimes camping at a distance and relying upon 'wild' resources in the bush. Few inputs went to the most destitute, only to 'people with friends'.

Humanitarianism, however, is not called to align itself with the re-emergence of patrimonialism. There are good reasons to avoid any such outcome, given the weight of evidence that patrimonialism cannot cope with the number of needy young people and results only in social exclusion and instability. The grid-group check list suggests other options. Aligning with the otherworldly solidarities of isolates hardly seems a choice for aid programmes (activist by definition). The egalitarian rough justice of the RUF is out of the question. What remains to be supported? The obvious option is to reinforce the culture of individual rights emergent among those who survived the bush alone. We conclude this article with a discussion of how such a practical alignment might work in the field of agricultural rehabilitation.

IV

Strengthening individual rights through humanitarianism

How might rights-oriented humanitarianism build upon local notions of rights induced through the challenges of resettlement, as just described? A key requirement would be to reconsider how humanitarian inputs work. To bolster local debates about social inclusion and shared humanity, non-selectivity in input distribution seems important.¹² Put simply, everyone gets because everyone needs.

There are, in fact, rather few humanitarian activities that are suitably non-selective. Therapeutic feeding, for example, is a tightly targeted activity. One activity that meets the criterion of non-selectivity is seed distribution. Everyone willing and able to contribute to rebuilding social life in a region where there is a very limited market for food, and a relative abundance of land (Richards, 1986), needs and should receive seed and tools. Seed rice exchanges are basic tokens of local social interaction—like a bunch of flowers (Richards, 1995). In reviving the

¹² We can envisage, as an ideal, that all humanitarian activity should be rights-compliant, but we need to distinguish between rights compliance and a sub-set of active rights-strengthening interventions.

war-devastated villages of central Sierra Leone small children, as well as the elderly, endeavour to scatter a few seeds, as much to make a statement—‘I am still here, I am still alive’—as to add to household subsistence.¹³ In one village studied since the early 1980s we discovered a tiny plot of African Rice (*Oryza glaberrima*)¹⁴ belonging to an old woman nearly blind for at least twenty years. Even the visually impaired seek to plant rice to assert survival and human worth.

In fact, seed and tools are a well-established aspect of post-war humanitarian assistance in central Sierra Leone. Arguments about who gets these inputs abound. We heard many grievances voiced at village level about who missed out in such distribution exercises. When we asked how those who received no inputs coped, we were told, ‘They borrow seed’ (at interest, generally two bushels repaid at harvest for one borrowed at planting). This is a long-established coping mechanism (Richards, 1986). When we enquired about sources of borrowed seed we were told that it would be taken ‘on loan’ from those ‘lucky’ enough to be nominated for relief supplies. In itself, loaning seed (Mende *lonei hun*) is seen as no crime. Sharing resources at a nominal return is thought to be meritorious. More controversial was why some people got and others did not. The non-beneficiaries would ask, ‘Are we not all suffering the same plight?’ Then, frequently, we would hear the refrain ‘Favouritism causes exclusion, exclusion causes war’ and the question posed ‘How do we escape the consequences of favouritism, and a return to war?’ Our reply was ‘What if everyone got the same?’ In various meetings the idea always met with collective approval and even (on occasion) a round of applause: it made sense because ‘We all faced the same dangers, and everyone should now have the same chance to recover’. Among ‘corner dwellers’ common humanity, born of shared difficulty, reaches across political or ethnic difference, or distinctions of gender and seniority.

What would this dictate, in regard to seed distributions? Agencies form distribution committees because there are never enough inputs to go round. Supposedly, seed is given to the neediest households. The defect is that patrimonially-minded committees impose divisive notions of who is ‘most needy’. The criterion, in effect, is not need as such but which head of household is deemed most needy among those thought to be loyal to the patrons sitting on the committee. It is a perfect illustration of Mary Douglas’s claim that needs always imply a specific social context (Douglas *et al.*, 1998).

Committees argue that agencies will demand accountability for what they hand on. Selectivity is one way to secure such accountability. The

¹³ Amazingly, the gesture survived the Atlantic slave trade. Vernon (1993) describes how an elderly African-American, Tom Brown, born a slave, was preparing land on which to scatter a few seeds of rice the day before he died, in the 1920s, to establish his American citizenship in an African way, after the government’s promises of emancipation through ‘forty acres and a mule’ had failed him.

¹⁴ An exceptionally hardy type that grows on poor soil with little attention—a crop of the poorest of the poor.

loyalty of established clients can be guaranteed. Displaced people (almost certainly the most needy) are an unknown quantity. Can they be trusted? What sanctions can be imposed if they waste the input?

This argument raises the question whether outputs need to be handed out in bulk in the first place. The same total amount of seed could be divided across all persons in an area, subject to certain basic criteria (residence, willingness to farm, being above the age of, say, 10 years). Distribution across the board irrespective of age, gender and ethnic group would reinforce the notion that food security is a human right (cf. Klein Goldewijk and de Gaay Fortman, 1999). It fits with the local notion, inculcated in 'corners', that survival, for pioneers, depends on sharing small things.

Is it technically viable so to subdivide the available seed? Work over two decades in central Sierra Leone (Richards, 1986, 1995, 1997) has established that starter packs of quality rice seed are both welcome and rapidly multiplied among the poorer farmers. Beginning with 2–3 kg of seed, beneficiaries typically report being able to plant a whole farm within two or three years if the seed is of high quality, locally adapted and there is sufficient motivation to care. Modest amounts of well chosen seed tend to be more highly valued and better looked after than inputs supplied in bulk. Ensuring that everyone gets a starter pack of seed is thus not 'wasteful', as some argue, but sustains similar or better aggregate outcomes than providing material in bulk to a handful of 'master farmers'. Nor does it represent a reduction in the total quantity of assistance (another criticism), since the same amount of seed is invested in the area but divided over a larger number of users.¹⁵

What is at stake, here, is to reverse the tendency among 'losers' to view the distribution of humanitarian benefits as some kind of lottery. One group who entirely missed out in a distribution exercise tried to explain why they were excluded. 'Our names were not in the computer.' They envisaged a computer as some kind of gambling machine. The symbolism of the lottery was used by the RUF, to appalling effect, after the collapse of the 1996 peace process. Cadres cast lots in the villages they attacked to select who would be killed or amputated. The message was terrifyingly clear. If the movement was to be denied inclusion via a peace process it would 'randomise' the social world it could no longer enter. Distribution to everyone, however small the amount, makes—by contrast—a statement that everyone counts. An attempt at complete inclusiveness operationalises the basic idea of a common humanity among populations scarred by the failures of favouritism and politically motivated 'bad luck' over many years.

The keys to the work are good seed and effective registration. Everyone wishing to present themselves as resident in the area and willing to farm, however weak their social membership or obscure their

¹⁵ There is nothing to stop household members (men, women and children) pooling their packets once they get them home, or even gifting or selling them, if they choose.

'corner', is entitled to be registered. The significance of registration is not unlike that of having a correct voters' role for democracy. It is time-consuming, wearying work but it conveys the message 'Everybody is included'. It may also 'pay for itself' through the opportunity to tailor seed choices to the needs and preferences of beneficiaries, by age group, gender and land type, thus improving the chance the starter packs will make an effective contribution to long-term agricultural recovery and agro-biodiversity.¹⁶

The other significant aspect of registration is that the record can be challenged. Activity—piloted 2001–02 in two chiefdom 'sections'—is based around a series of events called village 'Peace Rights Days'. Any arguments about people left off the list, or entered twice, are addressed and resolved in a Peace Rights Day context.

Peace Rights Days (lasting two days, in fact, and involving a mixture of plenary discussions and 'break-out' groups for women, young men and elders) begin with a facilitated discussion of trans-boundary human rights, including a discussion of food security in various declarations. The causes of the war are then debated, including discussion of the consequences of social exclusion and the maldistribution of development inputs. The symbolism of, and the technical rationale for, 'one person, one bag' as a way of establishing a new standard for inclusiveness based on individual rights and common humanity are debated. Old quarrels (often about development inputs misappropriated over many years) are reviewed, and in the presence of the ancestors laid to rest. As the proceedings wind down names are called and people depart, each with a seed bag, colour-coded for women, young men and elders. Bags balance neatly on the head, as a kind of cap. That people have their correct bags, and that no one has more than their fair share, is visible to all. Seeds-for-all conveys the message that recovery is associated with an enlarged notion of social inclusiveness.

The Peace Rights event is consciously modelled on ceremonies of 'ancestral remembrance' around which village families resolved their major quarrels.¹⁷ Participants are challenged to think about elaborating this 'tradition' to reinforce a rights-oriented 'living law' informed by experiences as 'corner dwellers'. The donor promises to support the process for a further three years, by offering further inputs (feeding and facilitation) for village Peace Rights Days, but with the understanding communities will maintain the activity once it proves its worth for remaking 'communities that work'. Restoration of agro-biodiversity serves as a promise of food security implicit in a culture of rights taking root.

¹⁶ We wish to acknowledge the effort of Sierra Leonean colleagues, led by Dr Malcolm Jusu, in reaching every corner of a yet insecure pilot area to register beneficiaries and document seed losses and preferred replacements.

¹⁷ The original suggestion came from Dr Dennis Bright, of the Sierra Leone Commission for the Consolidation of Peace, and is gratefully acknowledged.

V

Are human rights in African war zones a Northern project pursued with missionary zeal? According to Duffield (2001: 261) the liberal North's 'embrace of conflict resolution and societal reconstruction reflects a radical agenda of social transformation'. Duffield may protest too much, crediting the Northern coalition with implausible foresight and coherence. In this article we have argued that humanitarianism, far from serving to impose a Northern agenda, is more likely to assist in the revival of Southern patrimonialism. What is the implication of such a discovery? Stand aloof? This is a perspective Duffield rejects, arguing (in the end) not against 'liberal governance' but that it should 'achieve [its] goal through partnership, agreement and participatory method' (2001: 261). A key question is 'With which partners?' Choices have to be made, reflecting the range of local debate about justice. In this respect, academic emphasis on the political economy of conflict in Africa may prove unhelpful. Materialist analysis of African wars as 'greed, not grievance' risks masking local concern with justice. Enthusiasm for Shari'a law is an option in northern Nigeria but not in central Sierra Leone, where substantial numbers of Christians and Muslims must coexist. Here the neo-Durkheimian perspective may prove a helpful alternative. Certainly, it offers potential guidance to humanitarians, who have to decide between backing patrimonial networks, and risking reigniting the false hope that pyramid selling works, or aligning themselves with other options for social renewal. Egalitarianism has been discredited by the RUF, and fatalist introspection is hardly more appealing. Thus it is clear that the main emphasis must be upon enhancing the capacity of 'corner dwellers', and commoners more generally, to continue their current exploration of notions of individual rights. We have outlined one way in which a more transparent and accountable humanitarianism might contribute to this end. In our opinion, humanitarians should not worry about being accused of missionary zeal. It is the people who will decide. For, surely, one of the lessons of the study of Islam and Christianity in Africa is that religious conversion took place with or without missionary intervention. Criticising the missionary position is beside the point. Inelegant it may be; all-powerful it is not.

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ABSTRACT

Internationally, war in Sierra Leone (1991–2002) is regarded as an instance of violent conflict driven by economic factors (attempts to control the mining of alluvial diamonds). Fieldwork (2000–01) in rural areas recovering from war suggests a very different picture. War victims and combatants from different factions stress the importance of political decay, corruption, injustice and the social exclusion of young people. Other studies confirm the picture. There is broadly based discussion in rural communities about how to address the injustices held to have been responsible for the war. It seems in line with wider debate about human rights. Are people being converted to international ideals? Applying a neo-Durkheimian perspective, the article shows that this discourse about rights is a product of local social changes brought about by the war itself. The article concludes by asking how it might be consolidated by rights-oriented reconstruction activity. Human rights in Sierra Leone are as much a local development as an imposed change. In this respect the study confirms the importance of local agency already argued by anthropologists who have studied the process of conversion to world religions.

RÉSUMÉ

Au plan international, la guerre au Sierra Leone (1991–2002) est considérée comme un exemple de conflit violent poussé par des facteurs économiques (spécifiquement, des tentatives de contrôle de l'extraction minière alluviale de diamants). Des recherches menées sur le terrain (2000–2001) dans des régions rurales affectées par la guerre suggèrent une situation très différente. Les victimes de la guerre et ceux qui ont combattu auprès de factions différentes insistent sur l'importance de la dégradation du paysage politique, de la corruption, de l'injustice et de l'exclusion sociale des jeunes. D'autres études confirment cette situation. Un large débat s'est engagé au sein des communautés rurales pour identifier des moyens de lutter contre les injustices tenues pour responsables de la guerre. Ce débat semble correspondre à un débat plus large sur les droits de l'homme. Assiste-t-on à une conversion aux idéaux internationaux? Adoptant une perspective néodurkheimienne, l'article montre que ce discours sur les droits est un produit des changements sociaux locaux provoqués par la guerre elle-même. L'article conclut en demandant comment une action de reconstruction axée sur les droits peut permettre une consolidation. Au Sierra Leone, les droits de

l'homme sont autant une émergence locale qu'un changement imposé. A cet égard, l'étude confirme l'importance de l'action locale déjà invoquée par les anthropologues qui ont étudié le processus de conversion aux religions du monde.