



OCCASIONAL PAPER

**Centre of African Studies
University of Copenhagen**

Controversy over Recent West African Wars: An Agrarian Question?

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January 2004

ISBN 87-91121-12-4

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Professor Paul Richards visited the Centre of African Studies in October 2003 where he gave a paper as part of his ongoing research into the causes of the numerous civil wars in West Africa. This *Occasional Paper* represents a revised version of this presentation and a presentation given at the Institute of Social Studies in The Haag. The author wishes to thank both audiences for helpful comments.

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Introduction

Inter-related civil wars in Liberia (from 1989), Sierra Leone (from 1991) and Cote d'Ivoire (from 2002) have attracted various explanations. One briefly influential theory suggested "new war" was a post-Cold War upsurge of African barbarism (Kaplan 1994). Other accounts have stressed economic motivations (Berdal & Malone 2001; Collier 2000). Every war needs resources, but whether economics is a sufficient cause of war is controversial. There seems little evidence the West African wars were started by economic competition alone, and the "greed, not grievance" hypothesis has lost some of its shine. Cultural determinism, by contrast, continues to attract adherents (Huntington 2000). One account of the war in Liberia (Ellis 1999) links the violence to "privatization" of ideas about human sacrifice associated with Poro (the male initiation association). Those who consider culture effect, not cause, will be anxious to examine other approaches (Kuper 1999). This paper outlines an institutional approach, with an emphasis on the rural background of the armed factions in the war in Sierra Leone. Explanation focuses on the evolution of agrarian labour from "domestic slavery" in the late 19th century through "community work" and "bride service" in the colonial period to a predatory exploitation of uneducated rural youth today.

"Lumpen" violence?

There is agreement the civil war in Sierra Leone (1991-2002) represents a crisis of youth. Some see urban drop-outs as major protagonists. Abdullah (1997), Abdullah & Muana (1998) and Rashid (1997) substitute

the word *lumpens* for the more usual *rareh*, a Krio word apparently derived from the mispronunciation by 18th Century Savoyard entertainers in London of the English word “rare” (as applied to the delights on offer in their street shows). The *rareh* in Sierra Leone are urban youth of “no fixed abode”. Applied to a male, the term implies a lay-about or petty criminal, and to a female, a commercial sex worker. *Rareh* were recruited as election thugs under the regime of Siaka Stevens (1968-1985). The military regimes of 1992-96 (the National Provisional Ruling Council) and 1997-98 (the Armed Forces Ruling Council) also inducted *rareh* from impoverished East Freetown into the ranks of the army.

That the Revolutionary United Front (henceforth RUF) was also a movement of “lumpens” is an assumption that occurs readily to commentators of the Sierra Leonean diaspora, many with urban backgrounds (Abdullah & Muana 1998). Some have carried out research on urban youth, and some suffered at the hands of the “thugs” recruited by Siaka Stevens. It was easy to suppose the brutal RUF was a recurrence of a strategy by which some sections of the elite have sought to maintain a grip on political power (Kandeh 2000). Some commentators, additionally, were anxious to establish a clear “break” between their own radical political activities in the 1970s and ‘80s and the RUF’s naive and “improper” use of the same revolutionary teachings (notably the Libyan Green Book and the writings of Kim Il Sung on guerrilla warfare).

The present essay explores the implications of a different finding - that the majority of the RUF were, in fact, young people of rural backgrounds, and that among the RUF leadership there was an “intellectual” core with a belief in tackling the country’s problems not just through revolution

(hence *Revolutionary* United Front) but specifically through *agrarian* revolution (Richards 1996, Richards et al. 2003). Food security, not diamonds, was the motivation claimed by the RUF, and a number of senior cadres have gone on, through demobilization opportunities, to establish social programmes for agriculture.

Detached agrarian youth (and a Zimbabwean parallel)

I will not dwell on the ideology of agrarian revolution, since the evidence is summed up in a paper in preparation by Krijn Peters based on interviews with some of the wartime leadership of the RUF. What I want to examine here is the social and historical background to RUF identification with “the agrarian question”, and why agrarian revolution might appeal to rural youth in Sierra Leone. There are parallels in my argument for Sierra Leone to the diagnosis Norma Kriger (1992) offers of the guerrilla war in Zimbabwe. Kriger studied under what conditions the peasantry allied with or resisted the Zanu-PF guerrillas. She concludes, for her sample, that “settled” peasants - i.e. those with land and families - either resisted Zanu or aligned with the movement only under pressure, but that the main supporters of the guerrilla were to be found among the ranks of the young people, and especially among those who lacked the land or other resources to marry and settle to the peasant good life. Similarly, I shall suggest that the recruits to the RUF were, in the main, young people marginalised from the rural agrarian structure by others more centrally placed within a decaying rural system. In itself this is perhaps not a very surprising claim. The army is often an option for the rural unemployed, and young people with few social commitments tend to be high risk takers. But what made some rural young people in Sierra

Leone rally to a movement promising deep agrarian reforms was the way a national political system preoccupied by wealth from diamonds “bypasses” rural administration, forcing its agents (chiefs and elders, themselves marginalized by years of neglect), to intensify “traditional” modalities for the exploitation of the labour of young people. The practices in question are rooted in the institutions of domestic slavery widespread in the Upper Guinean forest zone in the pre-colonial period, but prolonged by British colonial indirect rule. Rural squalor and diamond wealth flow in separate circuits. The diamond elite uses its money to import foreign food rather than secure it from local agriculture. The countryside suffered an arrested development, and the resulting sense of political community divided implacably into worlds of “haves” and “have nots” resurrected some of the resentments associated with an era of servitude not yet quite banished from living memory (domestic slavery was ended only in 1928). The resulting explosion has displayed some of the society-overturning violence of a classic slave revolt. As a movement the RUF was a brutal failure. But the problem of agrarian opportunities it tried to address remains. The key to preventing war in Sierra Leone, and perhaps more widely in the West African region, it is suggested, is institutional reform in the countryside that concedes to young people greater control over their own labour power.

Bringing grievance back in

The paper amounts to an explanation of the war in Sierra Leone in terms of “grievance”, not “greed”. A consequence of a forced division of labour (as Durkheim clearly understood [Durkheim 1893]) is low societal regard for the efforts of uneducated rural youth. Those of no account hunger to

be noticed. The war in Sierra Leone, it is here argued, is less about diamonds than respect. The grievance is perhaps the oldest in the book - the notion that violence can compensate a lack of social esteem.¹ But it is also suggested that violence, as a reaction to grievances, is blind - conniving at the reconstitution of the very grievances it seeks to eradicate.

The exposition proceeds in two steps. First, evidence is presented that the RUF acquired volunteer adherents mainly from rural communities in which institutional practices rooted in domestic slavery survived longest, and that these adherents cite the exploitation of their labour by elders as a factor in joining the movement. Second, it is noted that these practices of exploitation emerged as adaptations to late 19th century insecurity, and that by disorganising the countryside the RUF itself helped create conditions for the re-emergence of exactly the oppressive institutional arrangements against which it fought, helping perpetuate conditions for disaffection. New approaches to the agrarian question need to be tried.

RUF volunteers

Like the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, the RUF became infamous for building its movement through abducting young people. Recruitment by capture occurred from the outset, the RUF believing that malleable young people would become loyalists when they fully understood the movement's message. Others joined, as they themselves say, "by

¹ In the Book of Genesis Cain killed his brother Abel because Cain's sacrifice was not acceptable to God. Durkheim taught that our sense of the sacred is a way of recognising society as a distinct reality, independent of (though sustained only by) individuals. If we accept Durkheim's notion of the societal origins of the sacred then Cain's violence stemmed from his lack of social esteem.

adoption”, i.e. they were fleeing atrocities committed by the government forces. Recruitment by capture or “adoption” tends to obscure evidence of significant voluntary adherence.

Recent fieldwork in northern Kailahun and south-eastern Pujehun District (May-July 2003) provided more evidence of willing adherence than earlier apparent. There were many volunteers to the movement from among young people in the most isolated parts of the populous Kailahun District and in border villages in Pujehun devastated by political thuggery and the operations of an unofficial anti-smuggling force during the 1980s.

The movement was well prepared. Its advance guard had spied upon local disputes before the rebellion was launched. I met one of these spies in Waiwayehun, an enclave in the Gola Forest, in 1989, when he gave me, after a suspicious grilling, a long and surprisingly well-informed account of colonial intrigue in re-delimiting the international border in 1911. Colonialism divided many border families, and excluded some from chieftaincy, resulting in a long history of dissidence by certain local land-owning groups.

This dissidence was exploited by the RUF in its own attempts to divide and rule. A number of chiefs in Kailahun District, for example, refusing to recognise British overrule in 1896, and prevented from contesting colonial chieftaincy elections, developed a nomadic existence, in villages strung across the Liberian, Guinean and Sierra Leonean borders. Sandeyalu, bordering Luawa and Kissi Teng chiefdoms, was one in a chain of such dissident locales. Perhaps not accidentally, it was occupied by the RUF as its headquarters for about ten months in 1993.

A number of larger Kailahun villages were controlled by the RUF through their knowledge of factional tensions, and these settlements today remain divided into pro- and anti-RUF factions. But this is in contrast to some of the smaller off-road villages, where young people tend to be nearly 100 per cent ex-RUF. The point about these smaller villages is that these were, by origin, the farm camps inhabited by domestic slaves. This offers an hypothesis to test - that there is a correlation between RUF activity and a high former incidence of domestic slavery.

The legacy of domestic slavery in Sierra Leone

It is first important to know that domestic slavery lasted an unusually long time in Sierra Leone, and that even in its last days (in the 1920s) it was a far from benign institution. The threat (through the imposition of the Protectorate Ordinance of 1896) that the British would deprive Mende chiefs of their domestic slaves was a factor in the uprising of 1898. It was fear of recurrence - during a period of rapid colonial expansion in West Africa - that was in the minds of British administrators in Sierra Leone when they argued slavery was a dying institution, vainly hoping it could be left safely to expire.

Closer to Freetown it did indeed decline sharply, because slaves could find paid work in the city. But slaves in the more remote districts had less opportunity to find paid work. Forced labour - work extracted for a subsistence wage, and with legal sanctions - continued unabated. Thus arose a great paradox of British colonial rule in Sierra Leone - a colony founded as a home for freed slaves in 1787 became (in the surrounding

protectorate) one of the last parts of British Africa to outlaw domestic slavery (January 1st 1928).

The continued assertion by chiefs and land owners of rights to mobilize unwaged labour was, in fact, functional to the rural economic revolution stimulated along the Liberian border by the arrival of the railway in Pendembu in 1911. The first roads feeding the new railway were made through the obligatory community labour of young men, with severe punishments (the whip and stocks) for absenteeism (Stocks are still to be seen in active deployment in some parts of rural Sierra Leone today). Cash-crop plantations were laid through the unpaid efforts of young men tied to lineage elders in “bride service”, or in work supplied in lieu of payment of fines imposed for “woman damage” (adultery), a tort enforced by customary courts. Prodding by the League of Nations finally forced the British to legislate for abolition and to qualify the circumstances under which chiefs could command the unpaid labour of young men (Fenton 1943).

Grace (1977), an historian of domestic slavery in Sierra Leone, makes clear that far from moribund, the institution was actively preserved until the last. He notes that chieftdom court records in Pujehun District in the 1920s show petitions for recovery of domestic slaves to be among the more prominent items of court business. At abolition, up to 50 per cent of all persons in some chieftdoms bordering Liberia were slaves. The clustering of the RUF in farm villages in Kailahun and Pujehun Districts, where voluntary adhesion was strongest, might reflect the fact that these isolated places were more easily defended by the movement against the army, but they also happen to be, in the main, the redoubts of the former household slaves.

Tied labour, bride service and court fines

The intricacies of domestic slavery in the Sierra Leone/Liberia border region are expounded in Holsoe's analysis of the institution among the Vai, a people who straddle Pujehun District in Sierra Leone and Grand Cape Mount County in Liberia (Holsoe 1977). He describes four classes of *jonnu*, or tied or dependent (persons lacking full kinship status) in Vai society. One of the four is the war captive. These were the people most liable to harsh treatment, especially where acquired at a distance and placed in separate farm settlements, the origin of many subordinate villages dotting the Vai countryside today.

Particularly interesting among Holsoe's other categories is the young man who tries to evade the control of elders over the rights of sexual access to young women. The crime of "woman damage" (adultery) led to the punishment of "women servitude", in which the miscreant paid off this debt by labouring on the farm of the offended husband. Typically, the man benefiting from "woman servitude" would be an elderly and wealthy polygynist. The young man might be offered his lover in marriage, but then had to work for his "father-in-law" for many years to work off his debt.

The charge of woman damage is still frequent in customary courts in Sierra Leone today. Those convicted sometimes complain that the plaintiff is several times married not for reproductive reasons but simply to ensure a "tied" labour force. The lover works for the offended party, and will lose any child born of the relationship to the legal husband. High and arbitrary fining for "woman damage", among other torts, is a factor frequently cited in our recent research on the causes of the war, when

we invite discussion on why some young men quit the village and joined the RUF (Archibald and Richards 2002).

The testimony of one young RUF ex-combatant interviewed in Tongo Field, July 2003 (Richards et al. 2003) serves to sum up the voices of many:

“I am from B. in Nongowa Chiefdom. We have problems with our elders in that village....They force young men to marry their daughters as soon as we harvest our first bunch of palm fruits. If you refuse they cause more problems for you than even being in the bush as a rebel. They charge you to court for smiling at a girl, saying they had offered you a girl and you refused...But the bride price is not reasonable. You will be required to do all sorts of physical jobs for the bride’s family, like brushing and making a farm for the family, offering your energy in the form of labour to build houses for them, and sharing the proceeds of your own labour, harvest or business, three-quarters to them, one quarter for you. For example, if you process one [50 gallon] drum of palm oil you will be forced to give them 35 gallons [70%], or you will lose your wife and be taken to court for breach of contract... What most of us have done is to avoid the scene...here [in the diamond pits of Tongo] you can get some respite and marry a woman of your choice. In B. marriage is synonymous to slavery.”

Let us add a woman's voice. A young wife interviewed in an off-road part of Kamajei Chiefdom, in central Sierra Leone, September 2003, joked with us about whether it was preferable to be married to a young (but poor) or older (but wealthier) husband (Richards et al. 2003). She herself had been married two years ago (at age 15, the average age for marriage of girls in the area) to a young man. Of course it is preferable to have a young husband. But she readily agreed it would be hard for her man to get his own farm. Because of bride service he would work for her father and brothers for many years to come. In fact, for the rest of his life, she added, laughing. Yes, he would remain poor. But then her children would marry, and her husband could rest on the bride service the daughters would attract. She had missed her chance to go to school. Her best interests were now served by maintaining the old subsistence-oriented status quo.

The following six comments are extracts from more extensive interviews with ex-combatants compiled by Krijn Peters, Steve Archibald and Paul Richards at various times between May 2000 to November 2003. They substantiate points made above about voluntary adherence to the RUF, the problem of high and arbitrary fines in customary courts, and the link that rural young people trace between exploitation of the labour of commoners by chiefs and outbreak of war (for sources see Archibald & Richards 2002):

- "I joined the rebels purposely because of difficulties we were having. We were suffering too much. The RUF was encouraging us to help them in their fight so that later we could enjoy a proper life...there were about 20 young

boys and girls in my village - 7 girls and 13 boys, who joined the RUF willingly, without force”.

- “The main reason [i joined] was the lack of job facilities and lack of encouragement for the youth. [This was] why the RUF [was] fighting.”

- “[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...making you to pay a lot...”

- “Chiefs protect their own children from doing communal work.”

- “Our chiefs... 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.”

- “[Things are changing now, because] we have a democratic government and we have to fight for our rights...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.”

A war rooted in slavery?

The argument implicit in these statements might be summarised thus. Domestic slavery (prolonged under colonialism) sustained an expectation that community elders and other prominent people had certain rights to use the labour of young people freely. Born in the class distinctions of a slave society, these expectations have not been dulled, as we might otherwise expect, by an active rural labour market, due to the weakness of rural development in Sierra Leone. This weakness reflected massive government corruption and a focus of entrepreneurial attention on the diamond sector. Mining was no stimulus to rural food production because wealth from diamonds mainly accumulated overseas. Mining entrepreneurs (including figures in government and the security services) used overseas wealth to import food rather than seek local sources. The rural economy stagnated.

Young people without education and unable to move to towns for work found themselves all too often working for elders without wages. A particular flash point was “community work”. Colonialism sought to regulate the rights of chiefs to extract community work (Mende: *ta yenge*) and sacked chiefs guilty of abusing such labour for private ends. These controls loosened in the post-colonial period, as chieftaincy became corrupted by politics, and the rule of law was abandoned. Opposition in Kailahun and parts of Pujehun Districts in the 1970s to the regime of Siaka Stevens caused Freetown to cut back on normal investments in road repairs, schools and salaries, in the hope of coercing political compliance. Chiefs came to be seen either as Freetown stooges, or predatory on young people as they sought to make good the loss of revenue and services from central government (*[The chiefs] levy high*

finer on the youth, if you are sent to do a job and you refuse...making you to pay a lot...).

The modern trend in rural development worsened the situation by stressing the dogma of “participation” or “community-driven development”. This requires a local contribution, generally given in kind (labour and food), to unlock development funds from NGO sources (which otherwise might have been an antidote to the discriminatory distribution of government funds for social services in the pre-war period). The children of the rural elite escaped the obligations to provide “community labour” by being sent to school in town. The burdens fell more and more on the uneducated youths left behind (*Chiefs protect their own children from doing communal work*). Rising resentment on the part of this “abandoned” class peaked where benefits from “participatory” development projects were seen to pass corruptly into private hands (*our chiefs... were doing wrong to our young men and women...).*

Stories about the legacy of slavery took on a new resonance (Richards 1996, Shaw 2002). The RUF itself told such stories as part of its propaganda against corruption, injustice and the educational deprivation of the poor (Richards 1996). The movement acquired some of the vengeful destructiveness of a slave revolt (*some young men prefer[red] to go and join the RUF...to take revenge...).* Cadres speak about the gun as a means of ending shame and instilling respect (cf. Keen 2004). For Durkheim (1893) a “forced division of labour” is a social pathology that leads towards civil war, because it does not inculcate the mutual tolerance found in a community where talent is freely expressed.

The alienation arising from a “forced” division of labour, and lack of opportunity for many rural young people, has not been resolved by the ending of the war, even if the trend (for a time) is to seek more peaceful weapons (*we have a democratic government and we have to fight for our rights....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*).

The Cote d’Ivoire connection - an old argument revived

Thus there is at least a *prima facie* case for taking the exploitation of the labour of rural youth seriously as a cause of the war in Sierra Leone. It is not, of course, a new line of argument. Exploitation of the labour of cadets by elders was a theme strongly advanced in the work of some members of the French neo-marxist school of anthropology in the 1960s. Several adherents of this school did their field work in Cote d’Ivoire, where a conflict with some connections to the one in Sierra Leone has arisen since 2002. Some RUF rebels have ended up fighting for similar groups in Cote d’Ivoire. Diamond mining is not a connecting thread, but agrarian issues are. Chauveau (2003) carefully exposes the way the evolution of the *tutorat* (an institution controlling access to land by in-migrants) contributes to the current political tensions in that country.

The agrarian theme surfaces in the account one young RUF commander recently gave us of his life story (Richards et al 2003). After secondary schooling in Liberia (where his father had been driven by Sierra Leonean politics) he moved to Abidjan where he mixed with university students keen to improve their English, ending up growing cabbages (with one of

his “pupils”) in the village of the late Ivoirian military leader Robert Guei. When he joined the RUF he was sent for ideological training to a unit run by a lecturer from the Kailahun District community teacher training college at Bunumbu, Ibrahim Deen-Jalloh. The course, he told us, stressed leadership and community mobilization around agrarian issues. The aim of the RUF was rural reform. In demobilization he now heads a rural farm development programme for about 60 former comrades and over 600 villagers in the Magburaka area, assisted by the Bangladesh battalion of the UN peace-keeping forces. A mass movement for agrarian change is his aim. His comrades confirm they are training to spread the message of rural cooperation and self-reliance to all parts of the nation.

Domestic slavery as an outcome of war

The second part of my argument is functional. As is the blessing (or curse) of functional arguments we can see domestic slavery as both cause and consequence of war.² The supporting evidence covers not the period before the war in Sierra Leone, but its aftermath. The demobilization process (from May 2000) is intriguing, because the government of President Kabbah cleverly focused not on rewarding its own fighters (the long-suffering and ill-equipped Civil Defence Force) but on patronising the enemy. In the “spirit of the gift” it calculated this as a way to break the youthful independence of the unruly RUF.

² Held in reserve for another occasion is discussion of a claim that agrarian modernization might eliminate violence from the system.

Demobilization involved RUF commanders collecting up the guns of their fighters and receiving chits for reintegration packages in return. These they were then supposed to distribute to the fighters in question. As was probably anticipated, a number of commanders took the opportunity to secure better terms for their own reintegration by mis-using these chits. Some went to female partners. Others went to nominees of the chiefs in whose settlements the commanders planned to reintegrate. But for every wrongly-directed chit (and false “ex-combatant”) there was a real fighter who lost his or her chance to start a new life. Some of those cheated were strong or resourceful enough to find their own reintegration opportunities (some have gone back to diamond mining, others ride motor-bike taxis on hire-purchase terms in provincial towns). But others have been less lucky, and have sunk into the rural underclass, in an agrarian society undermined by mercantilist politics, in which successive diamond-oriented regimes are more interested in feeding their supporters from food aid (or imported food) than reorganising and modernising the countryside. New forms of agrarian servitude have begun to emerge.

i. Men excluded from demobilization - the case of M.

M. is a former RUF fighter. A Mende, he was abducted in south of the country in one of the RUF’s first sweeps in 1991. An illiterate teenage farm boy, he learned little or nothing of the movement’s ideology. Most such recruits served as porters and labourers in RUF farms. M. spent most of the war as a member of the household of a leading fighter (Colonel J.). His “boss” taught him the rudiments of how to handle a weapon (how to “cock and fire”). Ending the war in possession of a semi-automatic M. was qualified to register for demobilization. Colonel J.

collected M.'s weapon, as required by the demobilization programme, but registered it in the name of a female companion instead. J. and his girlfriend joined a skills training programme and later settled in the diamond fields, opening a small tailoring business. Without chit, number or food, M. was stranded in Magburaka, a Temne town, one of the main RUF centres at the end of the war. He was soon on the verge of starvation, and drifted into the countryside looking for casual work. He found an opening in an off-road village about 5 miles north of Magburaka where the village head man took him on as his "stranger". The chief fed M. in return for labour on a large plantation of 22 acres established to educate the chief's children, all away at urban schools. The work was too much for the chief alone, so he was happy for M. to help him.

When we met and interviewed M. (September 2003) he had to all intents and purposes slipped into a *de facto* domestic slavery. He lived in an isolated farm hut on the plantation, 3 miles from the village. Speaking no Temne he had few social contacts. He was reliant on his patron not only for food but to pass on any information that might be gleaned from the radio about demobilization benefits. In a voice choking with emotion he told us how he had been "robbed" of gun and benefits, was grateful to his current "boss" for rescuing him from starvation, but how that, paid only in food and tips, he could see no way of ever reintegrating into society, except he ran away to the diamond districts to dig, where God might grant him his portion. His ultimate aim was to find his family, from whom he had been separated for 12 years. What he needed was a regular wage to be able to contemplate a trip back to the south to search. His father was dead, he knew. But he hoped his mother was still alive, since she had re-married an educated man and moved to Bo, the provincial centre of the south (in fact she had died, but two sisters remained at

home and were keen to welcome their brother). But to make the journey he needed not only the truck fare (about a week's wage at the national minimum, far beyond his current resources) but also enough to buy simple presents (cloth, soap, etc) through which affection and respect are conveyed in rural Sierra Leone. After 12 years of fighting for survival with the RUF he was deeply uncertain whether he would be viewed by his family as an outcast.

ii. Women excluded from demobilization - forced wives and sex workers

We have collected similar material from young women - many of them war widows - associated with the RUF. Their men were either fighters who abandoned them or were killed in fighting, or they were civilians who saw their husbands murdered. At the end of the war they find themselves far from home and with no support. Although the RUF recruited heavily in the east, along the Liberian border, at the end of the war it mainly controlled an enclave in the north of the country, stretching from Makeni to the Kono diamond fields. Whenever the RUF moved it took its (in effect captive) "civil society" with it. With children to protect, but with no access to demobilization benefits, these RUF "war widows" have little choice but to opt for a kind of low-status marriage in the rural districts in which they currently find themselves. Village polygynists are more than happy to acquire a hard-working wife "for free" and with no lineage to protect her interests. If the escape route for the young men like M. "off base" and stranded in rural servitude is to revert to diamond digging the escape for these young women is to come to Makeni and other main towns and engage in commercial sex work, in the hope that something better might one day open up. Those "afraid" of street life (as the women we talked to put it) are in effect condemned to a lifetime of

domestic servitude, out of contact with their kin. It is not the *rareh* who made the war but the war that made the *rareh*.

J., a woman leader in the RUF who spent the years 1998-2001 in the Makeni axis but is now returned to her well-connected political family in Kailahun District, told me that the problem was widespread. Because of the way the RUF recruited and moved there were now (she thought) thousands of “displaced” young people associated with the rebel movement but fallen through the net of demobilization - Mende-speakers in Temne areas, Temne-speakers in Mende areas, and Sierra Leoneans scattered throughout rural Liberia and Cote d’Ivoire. Without local languages and the protections of their families even the educated ones are vulnerable to the kinds of processes of dependent incorporation just described. In a countryside short of the labour of young people - where those who possibly can have sent their own children away to school (and in the case of the national elite to expensive schools overseas) - it is tempting to see the labour of these young scatterlings as a providential gift. The village patron of a young man like M., or the village polygynist “husbands” of the war widows described above, have no incentive to trace families or pass on information about reintegration opportunities. In fact, J. knew that in some cases they were doing the opposite - feeding their ex-RUF wives or labourers the false information that it was too dangerous to contemplate a return home, because young people tainted by the movement were supposedly being killed by lynch mobs on the street.

Grievance begets grievance

We see clearly that “domestic slavery” was less a system of oppression by design than the near inevitable result (as anthropologists and historians have long recognised) of losing social status and the support of a kinship group in conditions of social displacement, especially where information spreads slowly, and young, vulnerable people lack education or “transferable” skills. Lack of educational opportunity reproduces a “forced” division of labour (as Durkheim so clearly recognised), and in turn breeds resentments that feed the “fatalist” violence of the slave revolt (Richards & Vlassenroot 2002). If the evidence from the war in Sierra Leone fits the picture of “grievance” not “greed” it is equally clear that a “forced” division of labour is also a product of civil war. Domestic slavery and civil war risk subsisting in self-perpetuating cycle.

There is an irony - of course - in a rebellion against “forced labour” resulting in a worse situation of “forced labour” for many of the young people joining that rebellion (whether with or against their will). Why the RUF was such a failure is open for debate (the global climate was inauspicious, it was poorly led, it succumbed to the intrigue of its enemies, etc). It also has to be remarked that “slave” revolts generally end in disaster. But this is not my main point. The main issue to which I draw attention is that if the analysis is correct then the problem of war will recur. The present “peace” in Sierra Leone will only be an interval before further outbreaks of perhaps even more inchoate rural violence. Fundamental institutional reforms are needed to break the cycle.

Conclusion

It has been argued that if we are to understand and deal with war in current West Africa we should worry less about unruly urban youth, warlords or the perversions of Poro, and more about social and institutional factors. The issues that stand out for Sierra Leone are those perpetuating a forced division of labour. Equality of educational opportunity (for rural children with weak family support) and the need to widen agrarian opportunity structures (e.g. through market reforms and access to agro-technology) are basic issues. It also seems important to attend to strengthening the rights of rural migrant labourers and tenant farmers. Customary courts need urgent overhaul. The powers of “traditional” rulers should be regulated by a bill of rights. Fashionable concern with greed or “culture clash” must not obscure the fact that the violence of contemporary African war refracts real injustice and tangible grievance.

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