# SWEET BATTLEFIELDS

## Youth and the Liberian Civil War

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## ABSTRACT

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This dissertation presents an ethnography of youth in Liberia and of how their lives became affected by a civil war which raged in the country between 1990 and 1997. The focus is on the experiences, motivations, and reflections of young combatants who fought for a variety of rebel factions. For these young people, the daily prospect of poverty, joblessness and marginalisation effectively blocked the paths to a normal adulthood; drawing them instead into a subculture of liminality, characterised by abjection, resentment and rootlessness. As opportunity came, their voluntary enlistment into one of the several rebel armies of the civil war therefore became an attractive option for many. Based upon one year of fieldwork during 1998, conducted among groups of ex-combatant youths in both the capital Monrovia and in a provincial town in the rural hinterland, I describe and analyse the young people's own accounts of their involvement in the civil war; their complicity in atrocities, their coping strategies in the context of armed conflict, their position as ex-combatants in a post-war environment, and their outlook on their past, present and future.

*Keywords:* Liberia, anthropology, civil war, youth, children, child soldiers, street children, conflict, violence, women in war, West Africa.

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*Mats Utas*
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# INTRODUCTION

## INTRODUCTION

My opening contact with the much-mystified Liberian 'child soldier' was in 1996 and happened to be at the very spot where the Liberian Civil War had started in late 1989. On Christmas Eve 1989 a small group of insurgents trained in Libya and Burkina Faso had crossed over the Cavally River entering Liberia from the Ivory Coast. This first battle in fact took place in Butoe, just a few kilometres from the same border crossing to which I had now walked. Surrounded by a lush green landscape, I sat down under the shadow of a large cotton tree on the Ivorian side of the Cavally River. On the opposite side, in battle-weary Liberia, a Lada Niva car which had clearly seen better days, was parked and a small group of young, armed militia had gathered nearby around a cooking fire. As I looked across the river I could observe how their curiosity was mounting. What was the white man doing on the other side? And indeed it did not take long until a few of the boys jumped into a canoe and crossed the river.

As they walked up the bank I was immediately struck by the way they walked; the over-explicit body language and the clothing they wore clearly being inspired less by local convention than by US inner city hip-hop/rap culture. Watching them, I became for a moment transported back to scenes from the youth club in Sweden where I had previously undertaken research for my MA. During my later fieldwork in Liberia, I was able time after time, to observe similarities between the seeming lot of the predominantly immigrant youth of

suburban Uppsala in Sweden and the young fighters in the Liberian rainforest. I came to the conclusion that child/youth soldiering had in fact many similarities to elements of youth life as found in urban spaces throughout Europe and North America; not just as a matter of style and other superficial signs, but revealed through the hard issues of poverty, marginality and youth crisis.

These all hinder in their own way an ordered path into adulthood, something which is ever present in the lived experience of most Liberian youth. Racism (and racialised ethnic categorisations, in the Liberian case), unemployment (or blocked paths to adult futures, in Liberia), economic exploitation and infrastructural decay are as valid causes of alienation for Liberian youth as for the inner-city youth of the Western world. Phillippe Bourgois, commenting on this issue writes: "This nourishes among the excluded an angry sense of inferiority that results in acts of humiliation and demobilizing self-blame" (Bourgois 2001:29). Thus the life stories of young combatants in Liberia often have more in common with those revealed in ethnographies such as Phillippe Bourgois' *In search of respect* (1995), on Nuyorican drug dealers, or classic ghetto accounts like Oscar Lewis' *La Vida* (1965), and William Foote Whyte's *Street corner society* ([1943] 1993) as well as Ulf Hannerz' *Soulside* (1969), than with traditional anthropological accounts of Liberia and its surroundings, past and present.

A few weeks after my experience of those rebel soldiers by the river on the Liberian border, I was given the opportunity to travel into Liberia itself. Undertaking research among Liberian refugees in the Ivory Coast had not required me to visit war-torn Liberia, but as the opportunity arose, I felt that I could not let it go. On the journey down

from the Ivorian border and all the way to the coast I passed many destroyed houses, burned-out cars and innumerable checkpoints guarded by young boys. From my perspective as a passenger, Liberia simply seemed to have been emptied of its older people. The youth had taken over. Eventually entering the Liberian capital, Monrovia, on April 5 1996, our party found that the security situation had become precarious and in the event, during the next day, things began to really turn ugly. The April 6 battle of 1996 turned Monrovia once again into a burning nightmare. Midst all the chaos I became acutely aware of the massive presence of children and youth with guns. On occasions, when I actually dared walk out on the balcony to spy on the combatants down below in the street, I counted only young men, at a rough estimate mainly in the age-range of 14-21. Later, when I finally managed to leave Liberia, I was already convinced that a study of children and youth in the civil war was more important than my existing work among refugees.

Child soldiers have in fact been a focus of attention in the reporting from civil wars in several African conflicts in recent years. In the western media for example, we appear time and again to be confronted with images of minors with arms. In this respect I believe the basic media frame presents all subjects of investigation from two opposing gazes: that of humans as either perpetrators, or victims. This fabricated dichotomy becomes particularly obvious when it comes to reporting on child soldiers. Child soldiers are very often presented either as ruthless murderers, or as powerless victims (Peters & Richards 1998a)—paradoxically at times, being simultaneously depicted as both. Alternatively, the perspective of humanitarian aid agencies (Save the Children/UNICEF, in particular) will often describe child soldiers,

and deal with them, solely as victims. In this alternative construction, to be a child implies being deprived of human agency. In fact, these interconnected perspectives have emerged in recent years as a norm in representations of child soldiers; and as a result, these forms of explanation tend to work as a kind of emotional bedrock, appealing to aid, on the one hand (following implicit ideas of development and evolution, quite often with a paternalistic affectation), whilst on the other, also working as a means to differentiate 'us' from 'them' (Africans). In addition, these ideas appear nourished by certain widespread essentialist ideas about culture, promoted by a largely populist media, but also by certain academics claiming Africans to be fundamentally different: read inferior, from 'us' and putting 'our' culture and society at perpetual risk of being culturally contaminated by 'them' (see in particular Kaplan 1994; 1997; and drawing from the same ideas but with different focus, Huntington 1993; 1997). The wont of enlisting underage soldiers tends therefore to locate these societies in an inferior predicament to the cultural hierarchy stipulated by western countries.

By attempting to steer clear of this stereotyping of victims and perpetrators, I do not suggest that children are not victims of war, quite the contrary. I believe in fact that more people are victims in war than under other circumstances. Civilians who lived through the Liberian Civil War certainly saw child soldiers both as victims and as perpetrators. So did the child soldiers themselves. Often, because of economic and political reasons they would portray themselves as victims, but to many of these young people, the civil war was a time when they actually enjoyed more agency than ever before. With this in mind, in the following chapters I have chosen primarily to use the word 'youth' to describe these young combatants. In doing so I am

arguing that the word 'child' in itself connotes passivity, automatically transforming them into victims. To many of these young people, the decision to join the rebel armies reflected a marked individual effort, designated as a passage to adulthood.

During the seven years (1990-1997) of civil war in Liberia, a high proportion of the fighting forces consisted of youth combatants. Even where forced recruitment took place, most of the young people still joined voluntarily, making Liberia rather different in its recruitment of children into rebel armies, than others such as the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) of Sierra Leone and the Lords Resistance Movement/Army (LRM/A) of Northern Uganda (see e.g. Boothby & Knudsen 2000). I will argue that if it had not been for the willingness of youth to take up arms voluntarily in this way, the Liberian Civil War would never have escalated to the extent it did. In the light of this, the chapters making up this dissertation all set out, in one way or another, to answer the question as to why so many young Liberians, given the relatively little direct coercion, joined rebel groups to fight in such a civil war. What therefore are the experiences, motivations and perspectives driving these young Liberians into conflict? My aim is to try and catch the perspective of young combatants themselves—i.e. identifying the agency of the perpetrators. Rebel warfare is inherently an individualised form of agency rather than a socially embedded activity. My working hypothesis is that the marginalisation of young people is the central factor, and that the experience of abjection (of being thrown aside) is a main driving force in the process of enrollment into these rebel movements. The method of data collection could be labelled "deep hanging out" with Liberian youth excombatants.

## THE LIBERIAN CIVIL WAR[1]

The Liberian Civil War commenced on Christmas Eve 1989, when a group of roughly 150 ill-equipped rebel soldiers, supported by Libya and Burkina Faso (Ellis 1999), crossed into Nimba County, Liberia from the adjacent Ivory Coast. This group, which became known as the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), initially enjoyed massive popular support, with many young men and women joining the NPFL, armed only with single barrelled guns and at times sticks. The government forces: the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), were soon driven out of Nimba County. Later, following an internal struggle, the NPFL split into two factions: the NPFL, as led by Charles Taylor, and the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL) under Prince Y. Johnson. Taking different routes, and at times fighting each other, both defeated the AFL and reached the Atlantic coast and Monrovia in July 1990. By that time a West African peacekeeping force, ECOMOG, had been created under the leadership of Nigeria and been sent to take control of the situation in Monrovia. Prince Y. Johnson seemingly struck a deal with the peacekeepers and lured President Doe into a trap, capturing him, torturing him in front of a video camera and then eventually killing him. The struggle that at the outset had been viewed as a popular rebellion by the Gio and Mano ethnic groups in Nimba County, eventually turned the whole of Liberia into a war zone, where young rebel fighters not only fought each other, but terrorised, looted and

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[1] This is a brief overview of the Liberian Civil War. There are however numerous other sources discussing the war in detail. See for instance: Atkinson (1997); Ellis (1995; 1998; 1999); Huband (1998); Reno (1995; 1998); Riley (1996); Sesay (1996); Van den Boom (1995).

committed gruesome atrocities against the entire civilian population.

Soon after the killing of President Doe, the INPFL was dissolved, only to leave several other rebel factions to appear. The United Liberation Movement of Liberia (ULIMO) was one, formed in Freetown, Sierra Leone, with assistance from the Sierra Leonean government. Soon ULIMO itself split into two: ULIMO-J and ULIMO-K. The Liberian army, AFL, continued fighting and was later aided by another faction, the Liberian Peace Council (LPC) originating in the Southeast of the country. Other factions, often enjoying localised regional support, came and went; such as the Lofa Defence Force (LDF) and the Congo Defence Force (CDF). The main incentive however to continue the war was financial. Soldiers fought to obtain instant booty, whilst warlords aimed at gaining control over productive geographic areas, especially those having gold and diamonds, as well as also timber and rubber, coffee and cocoa plantations. Rebel movements kept some amount of popular support alive by feigning the protection of the interests of particular regions and ethnic groupings. These were further politicised by the war itself (Atkinson 1999). In reality, the brutality of combatants towards the very people they claimed to serve, kept civilians submissive. Shady international businessmen,[2] conglomerates of West African states and at times foreign departments of powerful Western states all supported the warlords (Keen 1998; Reno 1996).

After seven years, the war finally came to a halt, culminating in

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[2] One of the best known is the Dutchman Gus Kouwenhoven, a large-scale drug trafficker who has made Liberia a base for his illegal operations in drugs, arms, diamonds and timber (see Global Witness 2001).

democratic elections in 1997. Ironically, in what Jimmy Carter, ex-president of the USA, called the "most just election in African history", Charles Taylor and his National Patriotic Party (NPP)—formed out of the NPFL—won a landslide victory and thus succeeded in achieving what they had not been able to accomplish through warfare (on Taylor's political carrier see Harris 1999). The war had by then caused between 60,000 and 200,000 deaths.[3] Without relying on uncertain statistics, it is true to say that during the course of the war most Liberians were displaced at some time. Areas across the borders in Sierra Leone, Guinea, and the Ivory Coast were at times flooded with refugees (Utas 1997). Internally displaced persons (IDPs) moved up and down between temporary safe havens in search of the protection of some form of authority. The coastal cities of Monrovia and Buchanan, zones guarded by the peacekeepers, received most IDPs and up to this day, Monrovia, for instance has twice the number of inhabitants it had before the onset of the war.

During 1998 and 1999, the security situation in Liberia remained uncertain. Parts of Liberia experienced moments of unrest verging on the brink of war with heavy shooting and civilians fleeing helter-skelter. Even so, most observers regarded the war as a closed case. Yet in late 1999 upper Lofa County experienced the first of a series of armed incursions. By mid 2000, groups of subversive soldiers were entering from neighbouring Guinea on a regular basis. Liberians saw the birth and growth of a new rebel movement, ironically named Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD). LURD

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[3] Popular estimations point towards 200,000 deaths, but in a recount, Ellis (1999) argues convincingly for a much lower figure (60,000).

rebels have since that time operated in Lofa County, on occasions advancing towards Monrovia. During the first half of 2002, LURD made a series of successful raids in Bong, Bomi and Montserrado Counties, temporarily taking control of the major towns, Gbarnga, Tubmanburg and Klay Junction, before troops loyal to the government were able to recapture them. In mid-May, an attack on President Taylor's native town of Arthington, less than 20 kilometres from Monrovia, caused headlong panic in Monrovia. The tide changed, and during the autumn of 2002 LURD was forcibly driven back. However, in February 2003 LURD groups again captured Tubmanburg and Bopolu.[4] With a core of soldiers recruited from among Guinean exiles, LURD has also been able to enlist young people from within Liberia. Similarly, the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) along with various governmental security forces and pro-governmental paramilitaries, have also succeeded in drawing fresh support and recruitment among young Liberians, mainly from Monrovia and surrounding counties. It is highly conceivable that many of the young men and women present in this text have taken part in these new developments of the civil war.

[4] Most observers believe that pro-government groups stage certain attacks so as to go about the business of looting, logging and diamond digging with impunity. It is also likely that the government makes use of these attacks so as to enable new political space in Monrovia. Thus it is therefore difficult to verify what is rebel activity and what is actually government sponsored.

## Children and Youth in the Civil War

The number of combatants during 1990 to 1997 is estimated to lie between 40,000 and 70,000, peaking in 1991 (Brett & McCallin 1996; Fleischman & Whitman 1994, internal statistics from SCF-UK and UNOMIL). The estimated ratio of child soldiers within these statistics varies considerably, from 10 to 40 percent, depending partly on whether a child soldier is defined as being under fifteen, or under eighteen (Fleischman and Whitman 1994). During the demobilisation exercise, from November 1996 to February 1997, UNDHA (United Nations Humanitarian Assistance Co-ordination Office) counted a 24 percent figure for child soldiers. The LPC had the highest number at 37 percent. The modal age of demobilisation was twenty (UNDHA-HACO 1997). If for instance a soldier had fought the entire war and was twenty years of age at demobilisation, he or she had then joined at fourteen, thus clearly falling within the category of child soldier. The value of these statistics is not entirely clear.[5] According to my own observations during the April 6 fighting, a majority of those who fought in Monrovia were boys and girls under eighteen. I estimate an average age of conscription to be around fourteen to sixteen, but some rebel soldiers were as young as nine years of age (Brett and McCallin, 1996, have recorded fighters as young as six).[6] Commanders often state that soldiers of this age are more reliable, loyal and fearless than older soldiers (Cohn & Goodwin-Gill 1994). In the type of war fought in

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[5] A former UNDHA employee states that the demobilisation exercise was merely a numbers game (e-mail communication).

[6] Children at such a young age did not generally form part of a regular troop, but would more often than not function as assistants to older soldiers, providing them with a first step in a military career.

Liberia, and many other African countries, very young soldiers can be used, because the weaponry is mainly light and simple enough for a young person to handle.

Even though forced conscription took place in Liberia, most young combatants still joined out of free will. At the outset of the war, as noted above, the people in Nimba County viewed it as a rebellion designed to free them from a repressive government seen as anti-Nimbadian. Parents sent their children off to fight in what seen as a righteous war. However, young people also saw it as a youth revolution, a possibility to get rid of an elitist urban leadership made up of autocrats who showed little concern for both the young people of Liberia (Clapham 1976; 1988; Liebenow 1987), and the local gerontocratic leadership (Bellman 1984; Murphy 1980). In this way, war was fought by marginalised youth who saw the hostilities as possibly the only opportunity for them to experience mobility from the margins, into the centre of politics and economy.

The war shifted shape and, as rebel groups increased their terror against civilians and as looting excursions increasingly became the *raison d'être* for war, the grounds for joining as combatants also changed. Many young excombatants admit that it was the possibility of personal advantage that caused them to join the war. These advantages also worked both ways: certainly in direct gains, but also in escaping the disadvantages of being a civilian. Advantages included loot from raids, bribes paid during security assignments and payoffs received from protecting locals. A direct advantage would also be the acquisition of power in local communities. The leap from being a powerless young boy, under the authority of parents and elders, to being a commander with a gun is both tremendous and momentous.

Being a soldier would also imply having girlfriends, often many at a time, and taking a girlfriend for the night as often as one would like. On the other hand, escaping the disadvantages of being a civilian would primarily involve preventing other rebel soldiers from harassing oneself and one's family. During the war it was crucial for every family to have someone—a son, an uncle, or another close relative—in the rebel army in control of the area; otherwise, family members would constantly be harassed and farms and property looted. Finally, young Liberians would at times join the rebel forces in order to avenge family members killed by other rebel factions. During the early stages of our relationship, my informants would state that a desire for vengeance had been a main motive for their joining the war. But, as our relationship evolved, vengeance motives often disappeared behind other objectives. Most Liberians lost close relatives in the war, but very few of them took up arms for that reason.

In early 1998 excombatants moved around uneasily. Peace was still fragile and many had no clear vision of how their lives would be in postwar Liberia. Some returned to their hometowns and villages. However, large numbers of demobilised fighters also remained behind in cities and rural towns. The relative anonymity and distance from kin gave many a breathing space and time to think about their futures. In consequence, within towns all over Liberia, groups of excombatant youths could be found squatting (at times paying rent) in deserted buildings. For greater security, the living in collective houses along with other excombatants, girlfriends and children, seemed to be the norm for the immediate postwar period.

## FIELDWORK AND METHOD

*In ethnographic practice, as in theoretical debate, the idea of a dominant "people and culture" in any location carries ever less conviction. Ethnographically, much of the best work today no longer fits within the notion of "a culture," while the most challenging contemporary fieldwork cannot be contained within the stereotypical "among so-and-so" mold. (Gupta & Ferguson 1997:2)*

### Situating the work in the field of anthropology

It is worth stating that this text, I believe differs from traditional ethnographies in three important, and interconnected respects. Firstly, it views society as trans-ethnic or cross-boundary, rather than adopting the model of bounded 'ethnic' entities (cultures). My ethnography deals with the notion of an open-ended entity—youth—which could be seen as crosscutting the entire Liberian society. I have not in practice found it possible, or meaningful to isolate ethnic entities or 'cultures', even though the Liberian Civil War to some extent became ethnified on the level of national politics (see Atkinson 1996; 1997). It would be more accurate to say that many excombatants experienced the contrary, i.e. 'ethnic' break up. As it was, warring factions recruited youth with various ethnic backgrounds and it was quite common to see movement between the competing factions. In addition, the accepted lingua franca in most of the rebel movements was Liberian English. Local vernaculars were used, but only to a limited extent and by combatants who largely originated from remote rural areas. Despite the presence of 'ethnic mixing' inside actual rebel forces, enemies were still often being defined in ethnic terms. For example,

the NPFL targeted peoples of Krahn and Mandingo origin in particular—and there was a clear rule of thumb that rebel groups were fighting for the cause of a particular ethnic group.

Secondly, anthropologists have traditionally portrayed societies from an adult, male angle. From a gender perspective, this trend has drawn its opponents for quite some time (see Moore 1994b). However it is only quite recently that the factor of age has been recognised as equally problematic. Some important studies on childhood have been published (Mead 1929; Mead & Wolfenstein 1955; La Fontaine 1986; Ottenberg 1989; Reynolds 1989; 1991; 1996), but they have remained surprisingly few. Studies of youth as a distinct category and not only as a passing stage in a person's individual development, have remained largely absent. Even if traditional ethnography has had partial focus on youth, it has nevertheless tended to be presented from an adult perspective, emphasising youth as socialised into an adult corporeality, or as part of elaborate political systems based on age-based fraternities or peer groups (Eisenstadt 1956; Evans-Pritchard 1940; Legesse 1973). By comparison, the focus on youth in this dissertation coincides with the rather recent emergence of an anthropological category covering youth in African Studies (Abdullah 1998; Argenti 1998; Burke 2000; Comaroff & Comaroff 2000; Cruise O'Brien 1996; De Boeck & Honwana 2000; forth.; de Waal & Argenti 2002; Durham 2000; El-kenz 1996; Gable 2000; Honwana 2000; Jensen 2001; Kynoch 1999; Marks 2001; Rasmussen 2000; Reynolds 1995; Richards 1995; 1996; Ssewakiriyanga 1999; Weiss 2002; West 2000). This rapid growth of youth oriented literature, pinpoints in many respects the urgent need for social scientists to understand the roles of young people in contemporary African society. Cruise O'Brien (1996) talks of African

youth as a lost generation. The travel writer Robert Kaplan (1994; 1997) portrays youth in West Africa as loose molecules unattached to larger society, solely creating havoc.[7] Recently Jean and John Comaroff (1999) have noted that in South Africa "the dominant line of cleavage....has become generational". In addition, Paul Richards (1995) suggests that a focus on youth can be seen as being more important than the issue of ethnicity as we try to understand the present conflicts in West Africa.

Thirdly, this text deals with the fluidity of society. Anthropology has often been criticised for treating societies as stable and unchanging. It is important therefore to point out that war zones are inevitably fields for rapid change. This was certainly the case in Liberia.

In short, this study is about youth, both as a loose and open-ended category, and in an unbounded cultural landscape at a time of rapid social and cultural change.

## The fieldwork

Fieldwork for this dissertation was carried out in two different settings. The first phase was undertaken in a thoroughly urban environment, within the Liberian capital Monrovia. It was conducted during six months from December 1997 to May 1998. The second phase was carried out in rural Liberia, in the town Ganta, Nimba County, which lies towards the Guinean border. In this location, fieldwork was carried out for another six months, this time from June through to November 1998. In that same year, most excombatants had returned to livelihoods at the margins of society. To locate this set of

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[7] Acknowledging the critique of Richards (1996; 1999) on the idea of 'loose molecules'.

people I ventured out into the streets. I observed, tarried on street corners and spent much time in cheap joints. By doing so I became accustomed to dealing with poverty and the many painful experiences on a daily basis. I became acquainted with beggars, street children and the homeless. In my search for a feasible fieldwork location, I was eventually led to explore what was known as the Palace, a deserted factory in down-town Monrovia where more than a dozen excombatants had taken refuge and where they struggled for daily survival. The Palace was literally just down the road from my own apartment and I had often passed it during my strolls down to the town's waterfront. I had seen people there before, although it was still hard to grasp that people were actually living there. Spending time in the Palace I came into contact, in a very natural way, with both the depths of human misery, as well as a special kind of belonging and sense of love. Even if these young people were stuck at the bottom of society and could not see any possibilities for the future, these Palace youths still managed to convey genuine human warmth, despite the experience of being let down on occasions.

Later as I was venturing up-country to Nimba County, I met with another set of young excombatants. After some days in Ganta, it was there that I ran into Paul. I knew Paul from the time I had spent in Danane, in the Ivory Coast. He had been fighting for the NPFL, although at the time I had got to know him, he was in school. In Danane I had interviewed him about his war experiences. I remember him stating that he would never take up arms again. However when we now met in Ganta I was to learn otherwise. In fact he told me that he had been on his way down to Monrovia at the same time as I had been travelling there, back in 1996. He had seen me passing on the

road and had tried to stop our vehicle in order to get a lift from us, but I had failed to see him. Amongst the excombatant community in Danane, word had gone out at that time that there was to be a final battle in Monrovia. The rumour subsequently turned out to be correct, and so Paul had again taken up his soldier's fatigues. He eventually settled in Ganta where he and his friends lived together in a small house along with their girlfriends and children. In distinct contrast to the inhabitants of the Palace, this group had arduously worked on reintegrating into society and on creating a brighter future for themselves, thus appearing in a rather different post-war configuration than those in the Palace. Interestingly, and in opposition to the prevailing public opinion of the day, I found that in relating to both groups, time and time again, I was struck by the vital intelligence revealed in their discussions.[8] Their dialogues relating both to social and cultural matters from the Liberian soil as well as to global visions of politics and economy, were at times quite profound, even though some of them had only negligible formal schooling.

Fieldwork in the Palace took the form of both participation in daily activities and in conversation. The sensitive circumstances under which these people lived, really did not allow for taped interviews on many of the topics I was concerned with. Among Paul and his friends however, it was easier to make taped interviews, both of life stories and of group discussions. In addition to this, I carried out a string of semi-structured interviews with 97 young men and women in Sinoe County whilst working for a period in cooperation with the Belgian Red

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[8] In a similar vein, Shay has noted that US Vietnam veterans were no 'uneducated Joe Six-pack' types as prevalent stereotypes would have it (1994:xxi).

Cross. These interviews definitely added yet another valuable perspective on youth participation in the Liberian Civil War. Later, after analysing this Sinoe material, it became very clear however that structured or semi-structured (often called a qualitative approach) interviews were actually rather ill-suited for this type of group and this kind of work. In this kind of situation it seems often much too easy to hide behind schematic identities of victimhood. On this point, Michael Jackson (2002) and Don Handelman (1997; forth.), amongst others, have paid attention to the issue of the construction of stories during times of social distress. In line with their work, I therefore argue that among Liberians in the post-war setting, official stories of what happened to individuals have become standardised. Private stories, however, often actually appear as something persons do not readily share with others, and, as a consequence it usually takes excessive time and effort for a researcher to get there. My observations in the Monrovia and Ganta studies thus give a much more complex picture of the war years, blurring considerably the often taken for granted border between victim and perpetrator. In addition, the pattern of actively presenting oneself as a victim is important for our reading of the many interviews conducted with child and youth combatants and indeed is a central problem embedded in much of the research done in this field. I label this apparent contradiction of agency—the agency of presenting oneself as a victim—for victimcy.

During my fieldwork I moved to choosing a loose focus on young excombatants whose age range fell between the ages of 16 and 30. My experience of working with younger excombatants was that they were, in general, not able to relate their wartime experiences in comprehensible forms. I also found that many young ex soldiers under

the age of 15 had a strong tendency to fabricate stories in any way that they felt would be advantageous to them in any given situation. In one such setting, a young excombatant would state say that he had never fought, or at least had been forced against his will to participate in the war, whilst in other situations he would take the full responsibility for carrying out the most horrific of atrocities. Their stories thus hovered precariously between agency and victimhood, creating highly contextualised versions of their war lives. The reason for this was probably both a reaction to issues of morality, the striving for post-war acceptance in local communities, and a response to economic incentives. In certain contexts it was clearly profitable to say that one had fought, even if one had not. This is regularly the case for instance with regard to international NGO's catering specifically for excombatants, or international media who would usually provide some form of compensation for an interview. In this way, it is indeed fascinating to see how children living on the streets, would calculatedly display themselves as either victims or perpetrators in order to generate income from the local expatriate community.

Among my many contacts made during my stay in Monrovia, I became friends with a boy who had been made homeless because of the war. As time went by, he and his friends increasingly related to me as someone not part of the Monrovian expatriate subculture and thus started to reveal secrets as to how they were able to elude and work around the other expatriates. I eventually became acquainted with some of their elaborate procedures, including the shrewd system of name rotation, making it quite difficult for expatriate staff to compare the children they were aiding if they tried to discuss the matter with each other. During a successful period of indulging in this practice,

each young person could indeed have several sponsors paying for example for the same education; (we tend to be particularly sympathetic to children who want to go to school). Clandestine arrangements with clerks in the local school further enabled these youths to get a fair share of the school fees in cash (the expatriate sponsor would naturally go to the school and register the boy or girl). In addition, a system for resale of school uniforms, schoolbooks and other items also existed.[9] This particular boy was in reality a young man who had turned 18, but his 'baby face' made it possible for him to pretend that he was still around the age of 15. He was in fact, acutely aware of how the minds of expatriate NGO staff worked, in that they wanted specifically to aid 'children', and that being 18 was definitely a border that one needed to stay below.

[9] Even if not known to most of the expatriate aid workers, some of the long time staff at Save the Children in Liberia had some ideas of this system.

## A STUDY OF YOUTH

*'Teddy-bear man. Go back now. You go back now teddy-bear man,'
he ordered him, and the teenager dragged his Kalashnikov and his
teddy bear back along the wet road towards the smoke and the
swamps. The Nigerians shook their heads with pity as they watched
them go ñ the boys of Liberia, playing with their lives among the
swamps of the suburbs where the dead nuns still lay.[10] (Huband
1998:215f)*

### Children and women only as victims in civil wars?

To a great degree it was young Liberians who fought the civil war. As
I stated above there are no reliable statistics available, but an
approximation would indicate that around 20,000 underage
combatants fought in total. Adding to the lack of clarity is the fact that
according to UNDHA-HACO demobilisation statistics, less than two
percent of demobilised combatants in 1996-97 were actually females.[11]
Out of these, only about 15 percent were shown as being under the age
of 18. Again it is difficult to assess the reliability of these figures.
However, interviews that I personally carried out with female
excombatants seemed to indicate that female participation in the civil
war was more irregular than with their male counterparts. This factor
alone revealed women to be less prone to participate in the official

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[10] Alluding to five American nuns of the *Order of the Adorers of the Blood of Christ* who were killed in the
outskirts (Gardnersville) of Monrovia by NPFL soldiers in October 1992.
[11] Others have suggested 4% (David 1997).

demobilisation practice. In reality more women fought in the war than the UNDHA-HACO demobilisation figures indicate. It is also possible to conclude that female combatants were generally older than their male counterparts. As I will discuss at length in chapter 5, women participated in the war effort in other ways than just as combatants; as girlfriends of fighters, as traders of war booty, etc.

In studies of war, women are often placed in the same category as children, namely that of victims. This categorisation is derived from the dichotomy of victims and perpetrators which is in part linked to the dichotomy of fighters and civilians (Macek 2001). In classic works on war (the Clausewitzean tradition), the dividing line between fighter and civilian was hardly disputed. Even some more recent analyses tend to maintain a rather clear-cut line between the fighter and the civilian. For example, Carolyn Nordstrom's *A Different Kind of War Story* (1997b) is preoccupied with the civilian population in a way that upholds the notion of opposition between civilian and soldier/rebel, i.e. victim and perpetrator. Nordstrom's *War-scapes* are inhabited mainly by military, rebels (or bandits), a few brokers (named jackals) and expatriate businessmen. In contrast to these evildoers is the clearly defined civilian, essentially free of evil, and devoid of agency. David Keen (1996; 1999), amongst others, has opposed the usefulness of this simplified opposition of victim/perpetrator. In ethnographic accounts from other parts of the world, Begoña Aretxaga (1997), and Ivana Macek (2000) have emphasised more complex images of agency in war/conflict zones. Children and women in this portrayal are often conceived to exist on the fringes of a war zone; inhabiting camps for internally displaced; or as refugees in neighbouring countries (Ruiz 1992). In practice, women and children are only slightly over-

represented in refugee populations. It sounds impressive when relief agencies declare that 80 per cent of the refugees in any given camp are women or children, even though it is a demographic fact that over 72 per cent of the African population at least are either female, or are under 15 years of age (Karamé & Bertinussen 2001:18; Turshen 1998:15).

## Children or youth?

*An emphasis on passivity eclipses many aspects of children's lives, including some of complex relationships of power which can exist at any one time. The passive model of the child, promotes the notion that he or she remains standing idly by whilst awaiting to be filled with adult knowledge. (Caputo 1995:29)*

Often, child soldiers in Africa and elsewhere have been depicted in both academic and popular writing as mere victims (Brett & McCallin 1996; Cohn & Goodwin-Gill 1994; Dodge & Raundalen 1987; 1991; Eade 1995; Fleischman & Whitman 1994; Furley 1995; Sly 1995; Sutton & Leicht 1999; Whitman & Fleischman 1994). Recently however alternative modes of analysing the agency of children have emerged (Cairns 1996; Honwana 2000; Peters & Richards 1998b; Richards 1995; 1996; West 2000). This dissertation aims to make a contribution to this latter kind of studies. Without asserting that childhood is only a western construction, as Aries (1962) once proposed,[12] it is important nevertheless to bear in mind that the construction of categories like

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[12] I acknowledge the critique by Reynolds (1996:xxxiv) and Ottenberg (1989:20).

'childhood', 'youthhood' and adolescence are differently defined and demarcated in various geographical and cultural areas; and, may also differ over time.

In the Northern part of Liberia, the activities of secret societies such as Poro and Sande, have come to demarcate the parameters of childhood. Bush schools operated by these societies denoted the passage rites between childhood and adulthood (Bellman 1984; Harley 1941b; Hoejbjerg 1990; Little 1965; 1966; Murphy 1980; Zetterström 1980; d'Azevedo 1980; Gay 1973). I am suggesting that children who are initiated early in their lives become adults quickly, while others considered immature by their parents, or who have descended from poor families, may have to wait until they are quite old in comparison.[13] In contemporary Liberia, secret societies like the Poro are now perceived as having become less influential or at least now function quite differently from earlier days. However, I am arguing, that many of Poro's and Sande's capacities still prevail (see chapter 3 and 4).[14]

There exists a marked difference between studies focusing on children or on youth. With the focus on children, most studies present their subjects as being devoid of agency, whilst presenting the opposite

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[13] As the initiation takes place in cycles of 7 years or so (differing in degree depending on place) a child regarded *only almost* mature at the commencement of one initiation, will have to wait a long time for his/her next opportunity.

[14] Today the length of initiation has been cut down in size and an instant form of initiation now exists. A one-week initiation for those living in urban areas during school leave is now quite normal. At the same time, many Liberians in fact do not even initiate their children any more. To balance this, an upsurge also seems to have taken place, both during and after the civil war.

to be true of youth—who appear amply furnished with agency. In psychological terms it is known that children, or even infants (Gotlieb 2000), can actually demonstrate agency outside of the domestic sphere,[15] a fact which is often ignored. The dividing line between childhood and adulthood can often be said to vary, depending on a particular regional focus (socio-cultural factors). It can also express dependence on the focus of the particular study. Strikingly, a study which includes persons aged between 18-19 categorised as children, deals with a set of people without agency. On the other hand, if authors label a 15-16 year old in the category of 'youth' it indicates then that this is a person with agency. Hall and Montgomery (2000) argue that in the Western world, we have developed a tendency to label young people as youth at an early age, stemming from our home environment, i.e. implying their individual agency. Quite the contrary if it is a place distant, in say Asia or Africa. Here we specifically prefer to employ the victim-prone label of the child. On Western streets, juvenile delinquency, youth homelessness, youth prostitution and drug abuse by the young, are often portrayed as being perpetrated by those old enough to be blamed for their actions (the youth label often involves forms of negative agency). We also label young people falling within the same age range but this time from Africa, as child labourers, child soldiers, street children and child prostitutes. This characterisation is by no means based on any inherent logic, but simply gives the impression that a 16-year-old person in Britain, Sweden or

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[15] Giddens (1994:205) argues that 'our' culture regards socialisation as a passive form of 'cultural programming' making room for descriptions of children as being passive.

the US is somehow more 'mature' than say a 16-year-old person coming from Liberia.[16] We should note that these assumptions owe their basis to highly politicised notions of who is to blame: the society or the individual, i.e. the analytical dichotomy of structure, or agency. In local Liberian discourse addressing child or youth soldiers, commentators would generally pinpoint the individual agency of the person, calling them rebels, bandits etc. irrespective of age (Peters & Richards 1998a). The massive support given to aid projects dealing with the reintegration of excombatants is regularly scorned by ordinary Liberians. The cry is often, why should western aid agencies support the very people who demolished their country and not the 'real' victims of the war?

In order to specifically denote the agency of young people who fought in the Liberian Civil War, I have chosen to employ the label of youth rather than that of child or children. I have also chosen to use the expression agency, as an analytical tool itself with the aim of understanding the individual, as well as the collective motivations of young people joining the civil war.[17] In discussing the agency of youth combatants in this context, it is also fruitful to further distinguish between two perceived separate types of agency, that of tactic and strategic (Honwana 2000; forth.). In de Certeau's (1984) terminology,

[16] This tendency is in sharp contrast with popular notions that children in other parts of the world grow/matures into adulthood at an earlier age than in Europe and North America.

[17] Agency is not studied from a theoretical perspective in this dissertation. The emergence of the concept of personal agency in anthropological literature has been both a rejection of rigid structural-functionalism (combated for a long time in work of personhood, personal identity, the branch of psychological anthropology, etc.) as well as being a response to an upsurge of a liberal political agenda (Dahl 1999). Among others, Talal Asad (2000) has been critical to an over-emphasis on the subject.

tactics are short-term and therefore agents using tactics do not inhabit a position so as to clearly foresee the outcome of their actions. Strategies on the other hand tend to be long-term, and agents enjoying strategic positions have the structural standing, and judgement, of predicting the outcome of their conduct. We should note nevertheless, that the distinction made between tactics and strategies in this context is analytically artificial. However in so far as it is useful, I will suggest that the agency of youth in the Liberian Civil War is by and large tactical.

## Towards a definition of youth

*Young men who took up arms could be seen as demonstrators. (Young ex-combatant in Ganta, Nimba County)*

*The prolongation of youth-hood is a metaphor for Africa's poverty. (Ibrahim Abdullah in Momoh 1999:17)*

Emerging aspirations to become an agent within the public arena, i.e. the obtaining of a distinct voice in the decision-making processes of the larger society, marks the entry into youthhood.[18] With all its ambiguities, youthhood is an open-ended project "everywhere and at all times quite contrasting for different gender, class, or occupational groups" (Durham 2000:116). In the Liberian setting, the term 'youth' is most often used to mark certain attributes, such as liminality and

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[18] Louise J. Kaplan (1984) views adolescence as being a rite of passage between childhood and adulthood where male and female children take different routes; boys are socialised into the public sphere whilst girls into an adult domestic sphere. Even though agreeing that young boys and girls enter adulthood (in addition to being raised) in different ways, and that the domestic sphere in the Liberian case is 'more' female than male, in most aspects, young women also actively participate in the public sphere.

marginality. In the pre-colonial setting, youthhood was seen in Liberia as a demarcated period of time when a person was isolated from larger society, away from family and hometown, in Poro or Sande bush schools in the forest. The person left as a child for bush school and later returned to the town as an adult. It is important to note however, that youth is not primarily about chronological age but denotes the dependency to elders. William Murphy states that

> *.… most old men, along with women and young men, remain junior dependants of the high-ranked lineages. Despite their age they are still essentially 'youth' in their dependence on these elders, and they exercise even less authority than important younger members of the high-ranked lineages. (Murphy 1980:202)*

Even more so now in the wake of urbanisation and the partial withering away of secret societies and 'traditional' offices in contemporary Liberia, youthhood has become a prolonged period where participation in public matters will take place without having sufficiently obtained the status of full membership into adult society. As such, this period of being 'youth' has become highly negotiable: a 'crash course' in Poro or Sande 'business' for example might be sufficient to enter adulthood. The change between childhood and adulthood could in theory be instant. But the liminal period of youth seems to vary depending on each personal situation. Appropriating the right support, both economic and socio-cultural, and from parents and society, would generally implicate a short period of youthhood. However for a large proportion of the Liberian population, youthhood actually becomes an extended struggle, played out over many years and met with growing frustration.

The term youth has become politicised in large parts of Africa into two rather different forms. Firstly, highly organised political movements often become dubbed 'youth associations'. On this point, and in her research on youth associations in Ghana, Carola Lentz notes that "the term 'youth' would generally imply no age limit on members, but rather a socio-political category which places the associations in the communal framework of the 'chiefs', 'elders' and 'people'" (Lentz 1995:395; see also Laurent 1998). According to this definition, youth can therefore be people of all ages, but who nevertheless consider themselves politically active not directly in a national power position, but certainly aspiring to get there. Secondly, and this is the way I use the term youth in this dissertation, the term is presented as being a label for the young deprived; those who are marginalised, or considered in some way to be second class citizens. The youth under this label is also seen as possibly outgrowing their chronological age, whilst retaining its attendant chronological behaviour—becoming 'youthmen' (Momoh 1999:17). Further, in discussing the Sierra Leone Civil War, Ibrahim Abdullah and other Sierra Leonean scholars have devoted much effort in trying to increase their understanding of 'lumpen youth culture' in Freetown as the root of RUF (Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone) creation. Lumpens, being "largely unemployed and unemployable youths, mostly male, who live by their wits or who have one foot in what is generally referred to as the informal or underground economy" (Abdullah 1998:207).

Lumpens or subaltern youth (often interchangeable labels) respond in much the same way to the impact of marginalisation and socio-economic pressures as everywhere in the world, whether it be in urban Africa or in small-town Europe. Youth in this sense can be seen as a

social effect of power (Durham 2000). On the surface, one will find the most striking similarities with young people in similar situations worldwide. Expressions, styles, modes of these marginalised youth, including dress code, music and film taste, show considerable resemblance, because of the outcomes of globalised forms of communication and trade. Also, when the subject of youth is discussed, we will often find that rural youth is omitted. The label youth is mostly used it would seem in connection with urban style and its modernities. I argue that this is a misconception. The notion of a cosmopolitan mode (Ferguson 1999)[19] and homeboy cosmopolitanism in particular (Diawara 1998),[20] are not only an urban mode, but in reality carry influences deep into the bush or rainforest. The Liberian Civil War was influenced by homeboy cosmopolitanism as a movement of empowerment. During the course of war many more young people found access and salvation in cosmopolitan ideals, not only those of urban consumption patterns of commodities and drugs, but also ideas of civic rights and individual value.

[19] Ferguson describes cosmopolitanism as implying neither travel, nor cultural competence "it is less about being at home in the world than it is about seeking worldliness at home" (Ferguson, 1999:212). Certainly "cosmopolitanism has special affinity with both privilege and youth but it is reduced to neither" (ibid:213).
[20] Diawara devotes a chapter in his *In search of Africa* to the 'homeboy cosmopolitan'. Based in American inner-city hip-hop culture, the 'homeboy' is "perpetually on the move, looking to make progress and achieve individual redemption" (Diawara 1998:255). In his pursuit, he transgresses borders and cate- gories, shapes individual identities to escape from social bondage. This is highlighted in the 'homeboy's' anti-social behaviour (ibid. 245). This black American culture of the margin, communicates well with the lives of young Liberians even in the rural areas.

## THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY OF WAR

In the history of cultural/social anthropology, studies of war and violence have been surprisingly few. Small-scale societies studied by anthropologists were generally seen as standing closer to our biological origin than Western complex societies. This line of anthropological thought, historically made comparisons between warring, non Western peoples and primates, for instance seeing violence as a biological spin-off from young 'men in groups' (Tiger 1969). In the tradition of Tylor (1871) and others, evolutionary anthropology found a certain interest in studying 'primitive' warfare as means of studying our own past (Simons 1999). The interest in studying man within a unilinear evolutionary perspective is still kept alive today in archaeology, but does not attract much interest at all in cultural/social anthropology. Up until quite recently, it was instead certain functionalist studies of small-scale societies which dominated the anthropological scene. 'Indigenous warfare', 'wars in the tribal zone' (Ferguson & Whitehead 1992), or feuds, were seen as consequences of local ecology, where material elements provided both constraints and limitations (Rappaport 1968). Certain peoples, like the Yanomami, were portrayed as perpetual warmongers, fighting over the means of reproduction (read women), or hunting grounds and status (Chagnon 1983). Such viewpoints have clearly remained in our popular ways of depicting present warfare in Africa. However, this functionalist framework also led researchers to overemphasise the rationality of war, describing warfare as carefully calibrated and set according to common rules (Pospisil 1993).

In recent years the anthropological study of war and violence has undergone a complete metamorphosis and is now aiming at

understanding complex, or large scale, conflicts fought with modern weaponry in both north and south (Aretxaga 1997; Ben-Ari 1998; Besteman 2001; Daniel 1996; Feldman 1991; Green 1999; Jabri 1996; Löfving 2002; Macek 2000; Nordstrom & Martin 1992; Nordstrom & Robben 1995; Nordstrom 1997b; Richards 1996; Scarry 1987; Sluka 2000; Taylor 1999). Warfare is no longer perceived as a response to certain constraints in the local ecology, and neither fought between small-scale groups of culturally estranged peoples. Instead these anthropologists analyse warfare as a process that cannot be understood unless we take the larger world into consideration. Nevertheless, anthropologists maintain the importance of a distinct cultural understanding. Much in opposition to political science and peace and conflict studies, anthropologists state that material and political analyses of a conflict area are not enough. It is not only a question of greed and/or grievance as Paul Richards has pointed out (Richards forth.); the whole dimension of local cultures needs to be accounted for.

My intention is not to say that anthropologists do not have anything to learn from political scientists, quite the contrary. Nordstrom's idea of warscape (Nordstrom 1997b) puts pressure on anthropologists to take peoples and powers outside of the immediate warzone into consideration, an issue taken for granted by other social scientists. Nordstrom's work on the shadow economies of civil wars, or the shadows (Nordstrom 2001), are equally challenging to anthropologists who by scholarly tradition are bound to a specific research site. Likewise, and much in line with other social scientists, we are now questioning old categorisation, such as the inimical opposition between fighter and civilian, or victim and perpetrator, in ways rarely done a few years ago. We are also growing more

comfortable with the idea that wars have neither clear beginnings, nor ends (Richards & Helander forth.) and that violence is perpetually reproduced over time in loose transitions of pre-war/war/post-war scenarios (Löfving et al. 2002). These recent anthropological gazes have formed a backdrop for my understanding of the Liberian Civil War.

## VIOLENCE IN ARMED CONFLICTS

*…. studies of violence tend to focus on the victim's perspective, often missing out on the perpetrator's view altogether. (Schröder & Schmidt 2001:12)*

Generally anthropological studies focus on war and violence from a victim perspective. Most discuss categories such as trapped civilians, refugees, women or children generally void of violent agency (Green 1999; Nordstrom 1997b; Daniel 1996; and on everyday and structural violence Scheper-Hughes 1992; Kleinman et al. 1997; Das 1990). This dissertation takes a different stance, contributing to the relative small amount of anthropological work concentrating on war and violence from the perspective of the perpetrator (Lieblich 1989; Ben-Ari 1998; Lomsky-Feder & Ben-Ari 1999; Simons 1997; Lan 1984). By focussing on the perpetrators of violence I do not however intend to gloss over atrocities and create yet another group of victims, nor do I intend to legitimise the actions of this category. My aim instead is to contribute to the building up of a picture of actors with quite rational modes of violent behaviour, located and formed in fields of everyday life.

The culture of terror which became the trademark of the various

rebel factions involved in the Liberian Civil War, anticipated violent methods linked to local and at times ethnically specific, mythologised histories aiming at communication with enemy forces, civilians as well as own combatants. In times of both war and peace, violence often takes symbolic form, connecting locally mythologised histories, to the human body that might at times function as a writing surface for communication (Taylor 1999:105). In the words of Allen Feldman: "The body becomes a spatial unit of power, and the distribution of these units in space constructs sites of domination" (Feldman 1991:8). Writing on the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, Christopher Taylor (1999) describes how the Interhamwe militia made routine, certain violent techniques such as the cutting of Achilles' tendons, emasculating Tutsi males, slashing of Tutsi women's breast, impaling males from anus to mouth and women from vagina to mouth. Likewise in Sierra Leone, the practice of RUF rebels (and to some extent the militias aiding the Sierra Leone Army) in cutting off limbs, has vividly caught the world's attention. Cutting off arms at different lengths such as 'long sleeve', 'short sleeve' and 'body fit' might have little to do with mythologised histories and local symbolism; however, one should remember that cosmology is a constantly changing project, thus violent mechanisms within such a project "has its fashions and its styles and these are partly transnational in origin" (Taylor 1999:142). New forms of violence in any given situation will be incorporated so as to communicate with enemies as well as civilians. Myth appears as lived reality. As Kapferer notes on this point, "myth…. can become imbued with commanding power, binding human actors to the logical movement of its scheme" (1988:46-7) and more vividly so during times of war and violent upheaval.

Human bodies in fact function efficiently as message boards for

mythical communication. Others have categorised violence into different types (see Bourgois 2001). Here I do not attempt to follow such delineation, but use the term everyday violence in a wider sense, partly including the all-encompassing categories of structural violence as developed by Galtung (1969) and the Bourdieuan notion of symbolic violence (Bourdieu 2000; 2001). By using the term everyday violence I am seeking to pinpoint a 'from below', or ordinary citizen, perspective, thus by and large covering then the segment 'youth'. Violence is ultimately a measure of control. Liberian youth of the civil war appropriated violent measures for themselves. By taking up arms they were transformed, from victims of gerontocratic violence, to social masters. Those who had been in control of their lives lost the upper hand as control passed to others through violent means. In the process, young combatants tried to take control over every possible measure of violence, and by controlling social space they also aimed at monopolising the use of these types of violence. With this aim they moved far beyond the levels of what society claimed to be legitimate violence. The abuse of violent means lead to widespread atrocities.

## ENCHANTMENTS OF MODERNITY

The range of subjects and issues contained in this dissertation can be seen as being situated in a social landscape where the trajectories of tradition and modernity are continually being negotiated and contested. For example, a battery made to function in an electronic appliance is clearly 'modern' in the sense that it has been developed in a technologically oriented Western world. But nevertheless its components are also part of the traditional world, because traditional

medical practitioners use the battery's chemicals, along with leaves and herbs, to disinfect wounds. Many recent accounts have shown that in practice, the intersection between modernity and tradition is much more blurred. For instance, researchers have spent time studying witchcraft as a modern phenomenon with its roots in colonialism, post-colonialism (Bernault & Tonda 2000; Comaroff & Comaroff 1993; Geschiere 1997; White 2000), and the Atlantic slave trade (Shaw 1997; 2002).

Modernity has essentially the capacity of a meta-narrative in the African arena, as James Ferguson vividly demonstrates in *Expectations of modernity* (1999; see also Englund & Leach 2000). The concept of modernity, or as the Liberians like to express it, of 'being developed', 'exposed', or kwii (the word used in many Liberian vernaculars), is constructed upon a particular teleological perception of social development. To manifest a break with such ideas, many anthropologists and other social scientists now prefer to talk about modernities. In similar vein, there has simultaneously been a turn in anthropological studies to the use of the equally problematic concept of globalisation. Based on similar conceptions of Western biased technology, globalisation has become a catchall phrase. An advantage of focusing on globalisation I might suggest, rather than on modernity, is that not everybody has to develop into sameness. Even if the basic argument is that we are getting increasingly (inter)connected—the world is getting smaller argument—the term is more flexible and dynamic than 'modernity'. For instance, the idea of globalisation permits explanations of economic downfalls, dependencies etc. in specific geographical areas, without erasing itself. Even if globalisation is popularly upholding the idea of socio-cultural homogenisation, it

might also sanction ideas of cultures as heterogenising—a case visible in contemporary Africa. Ferguson, for instance, turns globalisation upside down and introduces the Zambian Copperbelt as a case of global dis-connection. The psycho-social side of experiencing disconnection from the rest of the world, fits into what Ferguson, borrowing from Kristeva, has called 'abjection'. Abjection connotes being thrown down—to be humiliated and degraded. Studying global disconnect and the consequent abjection in the Zambian Copperbelt, Ferguson observes:

> *a sense that the promises of modernization had been betrayed, and that they were being thrown out of the circle of full humanity, thrown back into the ranks of the 'second class,' cast outward and downward into the world of rags and huts where the color bar always told 'Africans' they belonged (1999 p. 236).*

Among Liberian combatants it is possible to observe the same sentiment, however the notion of abjection would cover not only disconnection from a wider world order, but also from the order of things within the national arena of Liberia as well as in local communities.[21] Some of the events of the Liberian Civil War pinpoint a disconnection of modernity. This became real in a very visible way for example when a set of electric powerhouses, complete with its wires to connecting towns and the local telephone lines, were dismantled and carried abroad to Guinea or the Ivory Coast by rebel

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[21] To talk about a general African disconnect is however invalid. Certain areas are instead increasingly 'connecting', or what might be labelled globalising (Utas 2002).

soldiers or to Nigeria by elements of the peacekeeping forces. Roads connecting cities and towns also were destroyed, or simply regained by nature.[22] However it was not the civil war that actually dismantled Liberian 'modernity', quite the contrary, it was the dismantling of modernity images that made the war possible. It was rather that failed expectations of modernity lead many people to doubt their future, thus providing a bedrock for a level of dissatisfaction, which ruthless political oppositions successfully harnessed in the creation of insurgent rebel armies.

To many young Liberians, war itself became part and parcel of an African identity. Hearing of a war going on in Bosnia for example, led some Liberians to believe that Bosnia was actually situated on the African continent. War had clearly become a marker of the failure of modernity, and in their minds it was only Africa that could possibly fail so bitterly. Such a failure is often in public discourse blamed also on the immorality and selfishness of the Liberians themselves, and indeed often the entire African population. It was repeatedly explained to me that Africans have not only black skin but also black hearts in opposition to 'white man'. One of my informants said jokingly, that when Jesus first arrived to our planet he initially tried to land in Africa, but he bounced! Africa was simply too immoral for a pious being like Jesus to remain. Such ideas echo the messages brought

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[22] Ferme (2001) has pointed out that in southern Sierra Leone this disconnect was sometimes deliberately actioned by local communities who stopped clearing roads and paths so as to avoid external actors pillaging (both governmental and rebels). This has also been the case in many Liberian settings. For instance in Nimba County, EU staff complained over the lack of cooperation, among villagers, in the reconstruction of bridges. In some cases they were even met by masked devils of the secret societies who forced local staff to stop their work.

to Liberia by early missionaries, slave traders, as well as the range of colonisers in general. As we shall see in chapter 3, even though Liberia was never formally colonised in the conventional sense, the Americo-Liberian leadership of the country still managed to shape Liberia in the same fashion as other colonising powers. In popular thought, the idea of development follows a linear path. So, it also stands that the experience of being disconnected from modernity implies exclusion from membership of the larger world (Ferguson 2002). Such imaginations have provided fuel to many Afro-pessimistic ideas in post-colonial Africa (Diawara 1998). The rise in Afro-pessimistic ideas following the failed promises of the meta-narrative of modernity, have led to the search for alternative paths towards individual status as modern, rather than the abandonment of the meta-narrative itself. The elite of Liberian society still upholds the image of being modern, and global, i.e. still having the latest technological gadgets, shiny cars and clothes, travel possibilities etc. What is different however is that this has become limited to an increasingly shrinking elite. Being aware that their fragile positions are becoming ever more contested, these elites are prepared to use whatever means available to retain their position. To young people with a desire for modern pretensions, two paths appear: either to move to a space where such facilities are readily available for all, i.e. Europe or the US (according to popular knowledge), or to use brute force to enter the contested space within the national arena. As is clear from the Liberian case, both paths have been used. I am therefore arguing that the war could partly be seen as individualised competition over a limited modern space in Liberia.

In Liberia, to be 'civilised', or modern, is of great significance for the status of the individual. It is a lucid marker of power for young

people especially. To most Liberians, modernity is what comes from overseas and predominantly takes the form of commodities (technology, clothes etc), communications, the western form of education, and world religions such as Christianity and to some extent Islam. Modernity comes in the guise of consumption. We might talk about modernity as consumerism, or the seduction of consumption (Baudrillard 1990; Bauman 1998). Tradition on the other hand is what is locally produced, whether it comes in the form of commodities, or of ideas. Traditions also occupy a space largely dominated by elders, thus youth, contesting the powers of elders, are prone to seek status in the modernities. Traditions, even if often contrasted to modernities in popular discourses, are in practice however neither constant nor singular and are not to be easily separated from the modern. There are both modern and traditional trajectories leading to power and respect within Liberian society. Although traditional paths had largely been inaccessible to young people, the routes of modernity nevertheless remained within their reach up until the economic crisis of the late 1970s. The increased instability of the 1980s was in part a result of a blockage of paths within the 'modern sphere'.

## THE CHAPTERS

This dissertation is comprised of six essays, each highlighting different perspectives of youthhood in relation to the Liberian Civil War. Originally the essays had been written as autonomous papers, some published or accepted for publication in edited volumes. Here they are presented in their reworked form so as to fit the general framework of this dissertation.

Chapter 2 is a discussion on fieldwork methods. Undertaking fieldwork among excombatants is a particularly difficult task and it raises a number of concerns about the methods used. It can be difficult enough just to get access to a group of informants with a combatant background, but access in itself does not necessarily imply the full level of trust, needed for effective research in this environment. On the contrary, everyday fieldwork becomes in itself a battle for trust. In the particular situation presented in this chapter—the Monrovia part of my fieldwork—many topics remained taboo because of the extreme fragility of my informants life situation. As fieldwork progressed I actually had to crosscheck information over and over again, as my informants kept giving me different stories. Despite these problems I argue that qualitative methods, such as participant observation, are the only conceivable ways of collecting data in this setting, since trust, born out of relationship, is so pivotal. In anthropological studies there is an idea of getting acceptance in the field as a rite of passage. Anthropologists tend to see effective inclusion as a permanent stage, but in this chapter I show how the fluidity of the people's lives within my field site made my presence ever-questioned and indeed my exclusion was inevitable—it was just a matter of how long I could hold on.

In Chapter 3 I trace the connections between the recent conflict and more general historical information on warfare and militarism in Liberia. However, ethnographic data containing information on war offices, warrior categories and other war structures is curiously sparse in the anthropological library on Liberia. A fact that has made commentators to backtrack to early colonial or pre-colonial studies (prior to the pacification of the hinterland peoples of Liberia) to find

written sources covering the relevant issues. The net result has been the reauthoring of an array of exotic materials on 'tribes engaged in endemic warfare'. By careful reading of ethnographic sources I now intend to somewhat adjust this picture. I also point out that the colonial Liberian State so thoroughly and violently militarised the country's hinterlands, that this violent pacification remained in place right up to the onset of the civil war. In this regard I show how power regimes of both pre-colonial and of colonial Liberia fit into local cosmology and thus create legitimisation of both modern and traditional trajectories of power. Thus in this vein, the Liberian Civil War rests upon both traditional and modern ground. In this context too I locate the roots of youth participation in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial (post-1980) wars alike.

Chapter 4 has its focus on violence. Commentators often dismiss the violence of African wars as illogical and anarchic; the aim of this chapter is to place the violence of the Liberian Civil War into its right context. The youth of Liberia played leading roles in carrying out atrocities. Violence is by no means something primordial to Liberian society, it is a process, within which youth participated. My starting point is thus to analyse the often quite violent period of childhood, where parents, other adults and the educational system can be identified as using violent measures in the socialisation of children. Significantly, combatants often copy patterns of socialising violence in their punishment and torture of prisoners and civilians. I further argue that violence is legitimate for local leadership in Liberia and that the cultural concept of the hero is thereby morally neutral. It carves out space for legitimate violence. With this backdrop, young Liberians often chose violent paths, aiming at reaching powerful social positions through highly individualised means.

The participation of young women in the war is scrutinised in Chapter 5. It would be too easy to see women in the context of war simply as passive victims, with men as their oppressors. This chapter is based on a series of interviews made with young women who at various stages of their life during the war have been both prisoners and victims of rape as well as other forms of oppression. These interviews also show that in the same process, they have also been girlfriends to fighters and traders of war booty, as well as being rebel soldiers in their own right. I hereby unravel some of the complex patterns of dependency, and also of individual choice.

The aftermath of the war is discussed in Chapter 6. In this chapter I situate the lives of my informants within the post-war predicament and discuss their potential for reintegration into mainstream society. I compare these three settings: the urban, the semi-urban and the rural, where I find quite distinct features in the reintegration process. It is in the urban setting where most of the international aid projects catering for excombatants can be found. However, and in a somewhat contradictory way, reintegration here is not really working very well. It is actually in the rural areas that people readily accepted their sons and daughters coming home from war. Despite the fact that many combatants carried out atrocities prior to their departure, most rural dwellers still state that they are prepared to forgive excombatants. In fact, many had already returned as early as the first half of 1998. I argue in this context that the semi-urban setting is the most enticing. Although there are also many aid projects catering for excombatants in these areas, still it is largely the excombatants themselves who appear to be arduously working to get reintegrated.

# ENTERING THE FIELD

*The architecture of this work is rooted in the temporal. Every human must be considered from the standpoint of time. (Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Masks)*

## INTRODUCTION

In most studies of under-age combatants, research methodology has been a rather neglected topic. Research carried out in this thematic field has generally been undertaken using a quantitative approach and tends only to be based on short-term fieldwork. Direct encounters with under-age combatants are often limited to one, or at most a few appointments, and interviews are generally carried out using a tape recorder. Moreover, research is often done from within aid organisations. These approaches tend to yield responses within victim modes, and tend to conceal every modulation of lived experience (Brett & McCallin 1996; Cohn & Goodwin-Gill 1994; Fleischman & Whitman 1994). Victimcy (a word formed out of a combination of victim and agency) is the seemingly contradictory agency of presenting oneself as a powerless victim. It is not only (ex)combatants who present themselves in such a victim mode, but also refugees and other internally displaced people. In addition, 'victim' responses often go on to form the raw material for standardised as well as collectivised discourses of, for example, victims of war or repressive regimes

(Handelman forth.; Jackson 2002; Tiljander Dahlström 2001). Victimcy is a tactical manipulation aiming, in part, at maintaining a moral façade in line with cultural ideals. However, victimcy can also be seen as a political response to security realities on the ground, as well as an economic tactic, adhered to mainly in relation to foreign aid projects. As a framed response in the presence of humanitarian aid and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), victimcy is an obstacle to research and it is essential to find alternative modes of data collection.

Pre-civil war studies of Liberia include works by scholars such as Bellman (1975; 1984), Bledsoe (1980c), Clapham (1976), d'Azevedo (1962; 1969-1970; 1972; 1989; 1994b), Liebenow (1969; 1980; 1987), Moran (1990) and Tonkin (1992). Regrettably, with the exception of Mary Moran, these scholars have not actively engaged with the civil war. Instead, it appears that along with emergency aid provision has come a set of emergency researchers. Such social researchers are typically staff or consultants of INGOs or government agencies and they copy the rapid response methods in their own work of medical teams like Médecins sans Frontières, or Merlin.[1] In 1992 Hiram Ruiz, employed by the US Committee for Refugees, produced a research report on the refugee situation in Liberia (Ruiz 1992). In eleven years (1988-1998) Ruiz covered at least eight other conflict zones, on three continents, and released a series of research reports very similar to the one on Liberia. What profundities could we then expect to find in such work? Anthropological field methods may need to be modified to

[1] Political scientists who use personal contacts within political networks as a base for their analysis are less troubled by wars, but are equally newcomers to the region (Ellis 1995; 1998; 1999; Reno 1995; 1996; 1997; 1998; 2000).

study war-torn societies, but they cannot be neglected altogether. Long-term approaches are certainly difficult to carry out in times of war, but as such, they are of no less importance. In order to more deeply understand individual motives and collective dispositions underlying child and youth participation in civil wars, scholars need longer-term personal contacts with their research subjects, particularly as these kinds of issues are unusually delicate. They are indeed delicate for many reasons, some of which I point out in this text. Long-term fieldwork and participant observation "can be seen therefore as being much better suited than exclusively quantitative methodologies for documenting the lives of people who live on the margins of a society that is hostile to them. Only by establishing long-term relationships based on trust can one begin to ask provocative personal questions, and expect thoughtful answers" (Bourgois 1995:12f). Victimcy also becomes transparent in the light of long-term ethnographic fieldwork. However, even long-term fieldwork conceals problems and shortcomings, some of which I will discuss using my own experiences from fieldwork with excombatant youth residing in urban Liberia.

Entering the field for the first time, getting in or gaining acceptance is generally a delicate business. Anthropologists tend to dwell on this topic with an air of mystique and in their ethnographic work, treat it often as a rite of passage (Geertz 1973a; Hannerz 1969; Jensen 2001; Whyte [1943] 1993). My own inclusion into the field was not particularly dramatic, but nonetheless of great importance to my research. I will discuss this in some detail below. However, I would like first to take the discussion on the idea of acceptance, or inclusion, a step further. Researchers tend often to see inclusion as a permanent state one can reach. Although whilst in a turbulent field such as my

own, the promise of inclusion is, in practice, continually under threat by the possibility of exclusion. In this setting, it becomes clear that people are constantly on the move, power is being utilised in so many diverse and often brutal ways; criminal livelihoods and dangerous military pasts (and presents) loom large to contest the legitimacy of the researcher on a day to day basis. In retrospect, given the nature of the situation in Liberia, my own eventual exclusion was probably inevitable and indeed fieldwork proved in fact principally to be an exercise in how long I could hold on.

On the ground, humanitarian aid agencies tend to make a fetish of childhood as a closed, age-bounded category made up of agency-free individuals (on turning eighteen, the individual is dumped in another less well-funded bin). By contrast, in this text I treat childhood as an open-ended period of time. Likewise, the liminal phase between childhood and adulthood is also a non-linear, open-ended project of adult formation; i.e. youth-hood or adolescence (Kaplan 1984). Age is social in the sense that members of an age group can "outgrow their chronological age but not its chronological behaviour" (Momoh 1999:17). One can in fact stay within the youth category for a prolonged time period. As the youth category is also a social effect of power (Durham 2000), it follows that individuals who have been unable to establish themselves as adults, with the socio-cultural implications which this entails, remain in the category to ages far beyond our general Euro/American understanding of youth. Below I include the story of Washington. He is thirty-six years old, but still I argue, very much part of the youth category. Likewise, on the other end of the youth spectrum, I would be justified in arguing that many of the eleven or twelve year old rebel fighters I encountered live lives

which disqualify them from traditional notions of childhood, as we want to understand it, but rather qualify them in the liminal category of youth. It is clear that we need therefore to discuss both child and youth soldiers in Liberia as an integrated part of a wider, 'crisis of youth' (Richards 1995). By talking about youth in this wider sense we thus do away with the victim-prone label 'child soldiers'.

In what appeared to be a common aftermath of the Liberian Civil War, many young excombatants ended up homeless on the streets of the country's cities and larger towns. In the capital, Monrovia, young excombatants could be found squatting in vacant and damaged housing complexes, office buildings, shops, hospitals and hotels. This chapter focuses on a small group of youths who lived in a deserted petro-chemical factory (nicknamed 'the Palace'), situated right on the beach in central Monrovia. All of them had actively participated in the civil war as combatants, and at the time I got to know them were living rough (forming part of the social segment labelled 'lumpens' by Abdullah and others—Abdullah 1997a; 1998; Abdullah et al. 1997; Rashid 1997). In early 1998, normality was slowly returning to Liberia. Excombatants from most factions, with the exception of some soldiers from President Charles Taylor's own rebel army, had been discharged and were desperately looking for new civil employment. The peace proceedings from late 1996 up to the elections of July 1997 had reduced their status from masters to subjects, returning them back to the lowly social positions they experienced at the onset of the war.

Participation in the civil war was to many of these young men and women an active move towards power and influence. Peace was thus often seen as an immediate loss. In fact one could argue that for many excombatants, the peace that followed the civil war was experienced as

more hostile and warlike than the war itself, often due to the tremendous increase in hardship; i.e. 'war is peace', to paraphrase the slogan of Orwell's 1984. On occasions, Palace youth admitted to me that they wished that the war would start all over again, as one of them put it, "when the shelves of Stop and Shop (a supermarket situated nearby) are again filled to the brink". Food, commodities and respect would return to them, as they again picked up their guns and became masters of at least a fragment of Liberian society.

## ENTERING THE PALACE

For a researcher, the accepted procedure for establishing contact with excombatants is usually via one of the demobilisation and reintegration programmes offered by a plethora of national and international aid organisations found on the ground in Liberia. Initially, when I arrived in Liberia, I too explored this path. On visiting a few of the (I)NGO projects they did indeed bring me close to possible informants, yet they also placed me in what I soon believed to be a problematic category. Inevitably my association with aid agencies predetermined my relations with those I wanted to understand. Every single person I talked to for example saw me as a donor, and responded to my questions with answers which were tailored to suit that imagined identity. It felt as though I had been placed in a straightjacket from which I could not escape. Respondents appeared to make the most of presenting themselves as victims: victims of war,

devoid of any other agency than asking the donor community for aid. Far from being satisfied with these victimcy-modelled responses, I left and went looking for something else.

During my search for a more satisfactory way of engaging with excombatants, I came across a local social fieldworker employed by one of the INGOs, who was also active in the field outside of the specific projects. He took me to some of the spots in town where he knew excombatants were squatting. Our second visit was, significantly to 'the Palace'. Here, in contrast to the first site we visited, I was well received, undeniably because they simply mistook me for a donor, even though I did what I could to deny it. Despite my own initial feelings, it also occurred to me that my supposed donor status could really be an advantage and indeed had let me in, in the first place. I realised too that in truth I wanted to do non-victimcy biased research and accepted that I needed to do away with this donor status, but only at a pace slow enough to be able to establish an alternative personal trust. As I was living nearby, I scheduled a further visit the next day, this time without the social worker. I was now on my own and I had found a place which I felt I could visit on a daily basis, where I could spend all the time I wanted with my research subjects. Better still, at least half of the group remained idle and readily available for chats during the daytime. Entering the Palace I had entered the clandestine world of excombatants; a realm of fighters unified, but one too of broad chasms born out of the separate experiences and liaisons faced by each in the Liberian Civil War. It seemed to be that these intertwined clandestine networks shared the same marginal space, yet beneath the surface they competed fiercely over limited resources in the extreme margin of postwar economics.

The Palace was a place feared in the neighbourhood. People dared

not enter the premises and rumours were rife that the inhabitants were cannibals. Even a European aid worker living in a neighbouring building told me that she had seen people in the Palace bringing in a big basket of human flesh—presumably for consumption.[2] Outsiders entering the Palace included army soldiers absconding from the nearby barracks to buy marijuana, or just to smoke a joint, or to arrange some deal with the Palace dwellers. Some civilians also bought marijuana from dealers in the Palace, but normally people would not enter the premises. In fact, at the beginning of my research, traders who wanted to sell their goods, halted at an invisible line outside and waited for the inhabitants to come out. The gate to the building had also disappeared a long time ago and although the entire building was physically open and accessible, it remained socially closed.

Under these circumstances I found that it was quite a delicate matter to get under the skin of the Palace youth, a skin considerably toughened by all perceived betrayals from early on in life, through the war years, right through to their current outcast status. At a time when everybody else seemed to be ignoring their very existence, I believe that it was curiosity about why I was interested in their lives that initially made them accept me. During the war years they had all experienced international journalists in some form and had been let down by their promises.[3] In

[2] Stories of cannibalistic rituals among combatants during the civil war were widely told and most Liberians never doubted their validity. Clearly such rituals took place, but it appears to me that the regularity is exaggerated by Liberians, by international media, and in some academic writing (as for instance in Ellis 1999; 2000; 2001).

[3] One American journalist had recently visited the Palace and promised them all that he would send them beds to sleep in. He also talked about establishing long-term contacts, which might one day lead to a visit to the US.

contrast, I came with no promises. Visiting them day after day slowly convinced them of my positive interest in their lives. The fact that they had been shunned by the larger society I felt made my endeavour even more important to pursue. In that vein, I felt too that my presence had also become a status symbol for Palace youth, equivalent to what Rodgers experienced undertaking fieldwork in a Nicaraguan gang (2000; forth.). I had imagined that my ethnographic knowledge of Liberian society and good orientation in contemporary Liberian war history, with specific reference to issues of youth, would give us a common ground for discussions. Yet what turned out to be my prime asset was that I had been in Monrovia during the April 6 battle in 1996. Back then I was caught for a few days in a downtown apartment before I managed to get across town to the US Embassy. Here I was eventually airlifted out of the country. Indeed I had not fought, but I had experienced nevertheless wild bullets whistling around my ears and detonating grenades all around me. I too had experienced the grip of panic, profound fear and indeed experienced Palace equals acting out the very war. I had experienced a little piece of 'their war' and it was enough, my rite of passage, which made my transition from being a stranger to being a peer possible. I was constantly reminded of this fact when they introduced me to friends in their social networks, often with an opening line such as: this is our friend; he was here during 'April 6'. I shared the experience of their war and as a consequence they let me gain access to their lives.

I further gained their trust by keeping my house open to them. My closest friends from the Palace would drop in for a chat, some food or a game of cards. Together we started to plan other activities. First we proposed a small project to an INGO. We got some money for a basketball court and cleared the yard inside the Palace. This had a

tremendous effect on the neighbourhood. Within days, youths started to come from all around to play basketball on 'our' court. Flowers grew out of the concrete. Sammy, one of the leaders in the Palace, even got himself a girlfriend from the neighbourhood. We later developed an idea for another small-scale project to put up a small carpentry workshop; this time, however, it grew out of our hands and eventually collapsed.

Even with the tremendous effort I put into gaining their trust and cooperation, it was nevertheless a delicate matter to succeed in and I certainly failed in some areas. My main focus had been on their performance during the war years and this turned out to be the most sensitive area. On these issues, I could get one answer before lunch and another after. Sometimes they would tell me that they had been fighters, only to withdraw their statements during our next discussion. However, after some time, I had a pretty clear picture of who had done what during the war years. But who had they fought for? This appeared to be a pretty straightforward question and I was initially satisfied with the answer that most had fought for the NPFL. However, some neighbours told me otherwise. They said that most Palace youth had been part of the ULIMO-J in the 1996 fighting. Many had indeed fought for NPFL or INPFL at some point—change of faction had been very common in the civil war and many excombatants had experienced life in more than one faction—although they would not reveal that they had had any relationship with ULIMO-J.[4]

During 1998, ex-ULIMO-J fighters were still a source of unrest in

[4] One thing that signalled their ULIMO-J status was that they had red nail polish on one fingernail. When I asked about it, they agreed that it had been a marker for ULIMO-J affiliation during the war but that in the postwar setting it was mere street fashion.

Monrovia. Tension remained high around the house of their leader and several skirmishes had taken place between ULIMO fighters and government security forces. On September 18 1998, these tensions brought Liberia back to the brink of civil war. Large parts of downtown Monrovia were again turned into a battlefield when fighting broke out between security forces and irregulars, loyal to the ULIMO-J leader. When government forces took back control, changes also occurred at the Palace. One of the younger boys actually turned out to be in the bodyguard for the ULIMO-J leader. He subsequently fled with this leader to the US embassy and was later airlifted, together with the ULIMO-J elite to Nigeria. Thus it became obvious why he had refused to participate in our 'lecturing' and why he always seemed to keep a low profile in my presence. Further, Scarface, one of the seniors in the Palace, a corporal in the army and a ULIMO-J soldier during the war, was picked up by security forces and taken to the military barracks where he was first interrogated and eventually executed.[5] By then it was pretty clear to me that most of the Palace youth had fought for ULIMO-J during the April 6 war and the tragic death of Scarface made it extremely clear why war issues were not discussed with an outsider, and possible infiltrator like myself.

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[5] After his death I made some investigation in the matter among my acquaintances within the security forces. According to those familiar with the case it was quite clear that he had not played any active part in the September 18 unrest.

## PALACE GEOGRAPHY

Like the ruins of a fortress overlooking the ocean, the Palace consisted of the concrete remnants of a factory situated right on the beach at the far end of one of the main streets in downtown Monrovia. Immediate neighbours were two rather superior apartment buildings, inhabited by expatriate NGO staff and naturalised Lebanese businessmen. A deserted lot with an old garage was situated in between these complexes, occupied by another band of homeless youths. Behind the Palace was a dusty football field, often full of activity in the late afternoons when the sun was going down. And then there is the beach nicknamed the 'Puh-puh-cana', candidly because people living nearby would use it as their toilet—ocean waves flushing away the human excrement. On the beach at the far end of the street was a rubbish dump where Palace youth would frequently go and scavenge.

Inside the Palace fence one would enter the building via an old loading bridge. A pile of concrete blocks, probably a remnant from the war, barred the main door. When it was used as headquarters for militia, only one entrance was preferred for security reasons. Old concrete blocks and other debris littered the rooms on the ground floor except one which was inhabited by three of the most junior residents. A big open space between the L-shaped building and the outer walls was initially also covered with debris but in a joint effort we managed to clear the area in order to turn it into a basketball field. Upstairs, there were six rooms inhabited by the rest of the Palace youth. The most senior boys would occupy the smaller rooms up here with no, or very small window apertures. They preferred these for security reasons. Old cloth or plastic covered the doorways. The 'beds' were mainly

made up of a few pieces of cloth spread out on the concrete floor. The rooms were mainly furnished with items from the rubbish dump— primitively repaired chairs and tables, a refrigerator door functioning as a shelf etc. Surprisingly, much was done to make the place tidy: some tables had tablecloths and in one of the rooms a plastic flower was stuck in an old beer bottle. Palace youth dreamed of a decent life and indeed fed their dreams with magazine pictures of consumer goods plastered on their walls. Palace youth did not have many possessions; they also needed to keep things in close proximity or they would be stolen and sold by the other residents. Theft was punished, but it was often hard to determine the culprit, and residents were often so hungry that an extra meal would be worth the punishment.

## PALACE YOUTH

Palace youth were a constantly changing population. Some stayed in the building only for a few weeks, while others for longer. At the beginning of my fieldwork in the Palace there were twenty-one residents, only five of them female, and with an overall age range from fifteen to thirty-six. On average, most of the Palace inhabitants claimed that they had left school in the fifth or sixth grade. Some had received no formal education at all while one claimed to have finished tenth grade. Although the onset of war may have cut their studies short, leaving school in the fifth or sixth grade was actually rather

common in urban Liberia before the war.[6] About half the Palace youth were born or had grown up in Monrovia, the rest in mining and plantation communities up-country (a typical recruiting area for rebel armies—see Muana 1997; Richards 1996). In the pre-war setting, their parents had worked mainly in the wage labour sector. Most Palace youth actually had stable family backgrounds and most probably would not have been living rough, if the war had not disrupted their lives. In the postwar era they seem to have maintained little contact with parents and siblings even if they were known to be alive. Those who had relatives in Monrovia rarely, if ever, would make visits and little effort was spent reinstating contact. None of the Palace residents during my time there received any economic assistance from relatives, even though thirteen of them had relatives abroad (mainly in the US, but also elsewhere in Africa).[7]

Half of the males had received experience, or training as skilled workers (mainly carpentry), but nurtured little hope of gaining employment as skilled labour (see below). Most of them, along with two or three of the females, fought during the war. One girl proudly told me how she used to slit the throats of the enemy with her hunting knife! I have never been able to verify in which factions each individual fought, and during which part of the war, although I have good evidence of their participation in ULIMO-J during the 1996 battles. Details of their various ranks and of the units in which they served, were also classified, even if it did become a topic of debate in

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[6] In Liberia as a whole, primary school enrolment is 51 percent for boys and 28 percent for girls. Secondary school enrolment is 31 percent for boys and 13 percent for girls (UNFPA 1999, based on pre-war surveys).
[7] Economic assistance from abroad is one of the main sources of income in postwar Liberia.

informal discussions.[8] Palace youth saw action over large areas of Liberia. Those who fought with the NPFL, AFL and ULIMO-J had travelled all over Liberia as well as into Sierra Leone. They had generally been armed with AK47s (Kalashnikovs), although a wide range of guns were used—light machine guns, belt guns and RPGs. Twelve out of the twenty-one in my survey had bullet or grenade wounds from combat.

## On Returning Home

All the individuals in the Palace had personal reasons for not returning to their families or places of origin. Circumstances within their original local opportunity structure, such as inheritance factors, access to land and resources, marital status etc, all played a crucial role in whether an individual chose to return home. Relationships with parents, as well as personal associations with others in the local setting, often determined whether ex-fighters eventually went home or stayed in the cities. In some cases Palace youth did not know even where to start looking for their parents, or they had found out that they had been killed during the war years. Yet others were very aware of the fact that they had grown too old to depend on their parental generation and/or that their parents or other close relatives themselves had no, or only a limited means of subsistence. "In postwar Liberia you have to fight for yourself", Palace youth would often say. Many had also committed crimes and atrocities in their own communities and

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[8] Ranks were often given to soldiers as proof of bravery rather than commanding position, hence many of the fighters obtained unusually high ranks. For instance, one of the youngest of the Palace inhabitants (fifteen years old in 1998 but only seven at the onset of the war) had a captain's rank.

thus feared the way in which they might be received. Another important reason for staying away was often a prevalent sense that to go back, one needed some proof that the years away had not been wasted. To prove success on return was of immediate importance, and could be done by returning in nice clothes, with money in your pocket, a car or even a completed education.

### Earning One's Livelihood in the Street: the Nuku Hunt

*Nuku* is street slang for money and the daily hunt for *nuku* preoccupies Palace youth. Life in the Palace is a fight for survival. Luxuries are only available in imaginary form through returns to the 'glorious' days of the Civil War. In de Certeau's (1984) terms, Palace youth rely on short-term 'tactics' rather than long-term 'strategies'. If anyone is successful in obtaining some *nuku*, then they will often buy food and cook for everyone. A big pleasure for all, it simultaneously functions as the glue keeping Palace the youth together. Except for food, the needs of Palace inhabitants are few. Soap for laundry and personal hygiene is one of the few necessities and generally laundry soap is used for both purposes. A one-portion bag of laundry soap costs 10 Liberian dollars (L\$10). In addition, cigarettes (at L\$5 for four), marijuana (an affordable L\$5—harder drugs are more costly), and occasionally some home-brewed spirits (cane juice) for the night, cover the rest of their basic needs. Youth in the street can easily live on L\$15–20 (US\$0.35–0.50) a day.[9] Even so, many of the young dwellers in the

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[9] Since the Firestone deal in the 1920s, US dollars have been the main currency in the country. During the early 1980s a national currency was introduced but only in coins, while US bills were widely used. Today Liberia has its own currency system but US currency is still used in parallel.

Palace find it troublesome enough to get that amount of money. People often call attention to the lack of even the smallest funds as characteristic of the postwar era, and talk with nostalgia of the 'sweet' life of 'normal day' (prewar). To these excombatants, however, 'sweet' life was rather located in the war years.

Generally the *nuku* hunt is a combination of both day and nightime shifts. Among the legal (daytime) activities, one of the most lucrative is hauling sand from the beach, used for construction everywhere in town. The rubbish dump, on the beach, is another primary source of income, yielding among other things copper, found inside old engines and cables, and rubber from tyres, or slippers (made from tyres). The proximity to the INGO living quarters also means that furniture and other items with only slightly damage, occasionally appear on the rubbish dump. These are repaired and resold, at for instance the *Go-by-shop* market (for a definition of *go-by-shop* see below) in Johnson Street. Less valuable than copper but still useful, is scrap metal mainly from freezers and refrigerators, which is used to make coal pots (cooking stoves fuelled with charcoal used by a majority of the urban population). Making coal pots is one of the main income-generating occupations for Palace youth. Scrap metal is at times also bought in bulk. Palace youths are occasionally employed as day labourers; on construction sites, offloading trucks, or night as watchmen. As they have a reputation for being unreliable, they will only be employed for short periods and kept under constant supervision.

Being a young excombatant has few advantages in postwar Liberia. However, one is that there are a lot of NGO and INGOs catering for excombatants. During the Civil War, projects to aid reintegration and reconciliation mushroomed in cities all over Liberia. Most of these

projects can be found in Monrovia. Palace youth are well aquainted with these and most have been through at least one such programme during, or after the Civil War. The projects catering to ex-combatants usually offer skilled training programmes in carpentry, construction, mechanical craft etc. Some offer courses in drama and music or a continuation of ordinary school activities. Palace youth know all too well that no matter what skills they obtain, they have few or no chances of getting employed after their training. INGO programmes are still very popular however, giving homeless youth an opportunity to get off the streets, have a stable supply of food and maybe some pocket money for up to two years.

### Illegal Livelihoods

Many of the Palace youth are involved in selling cigarettes. This on the surface is a legal activity, although they also sell drugs, principally marijuana. The Palace is called a Bob Marley house, *Bob Marley* being a nickname for marijuana, where outsiders go both to buy their supplies and to 'chill out' with a joint. Other drugs distributed are *Mr. White* or *Brown-Brown*, low quality crack cocaine; sleeping pills, Valium, nicknamed *Bubbles*, or *Blue boat*. Pharmaceutical drugs, in high doses, are also taken in combination with alcohol to make the user utterly fearless in undertaking criminal activities such as night-time robberies. Drug abuse had often been built up during the war years when drugs were readily available to most combatants.

The Palace functions as illegal petrol market where night watchmen and others sell petrol stolen from the generators in nearby expatriate housing and offices. Homeless youth also form the lower echelon of patron–client networks, carrying out illegal activities on

behalf of patrons (see Momoh 1999 on Nigeria). Many of these activities are performed in collaboration with army personnel, with whom Palace dwellers have retained links from their backgrounds in ULIMO-J and AFL.

Other homeless groups in Monrovia have similar arrangements with, among others, the National Police Special Operations Division (SOD), the Special Security Service (SSS), the President's own Special Security Unit (SSU) and Anti Terrorist Unit (ATU). These groups generally consist of ex-NPFL fighters, who have kept close ties with their ex-commanders who in the postwar setting have been employed in the reconstructed police and security forces. *Go-by-shop* robberies are the most notorious type of criminal activity. Even if not directly sanctioned by the government, fully uniformed and armed police or security units will enter any store and empty it of commodities— keeping their war mind set intact, they will literally 'go by and shop', picking up anything they want but neglecting to pay. At times *go-by-shopping* will occur in broad daylight. Homeless youths play important roles in these robberies, often doing the most dangerous parts of the work, although due to their largely inferior position, they will only get a small part of the earnings. Being in opposition to the government, Palace youth will seldom take part in *go-by-shops*, but will participate in all other forms of burglaries.

### Girls in the Palace

Girls in the Palace make their own contributions. Regularly or irregularly they will work as prostitutes (Utas 1999). If they are successful, they are often able to make much more money than their male counterparts. How much they are able to earn, depends on the

clientele; generally Palace girls are active in West Point, the poorest area downtown, and are paid accordingly. Rates are from approximately US$1 upwards.[10] When Rose for example returns to the Palace after a night having earned US$10, everyone is overjoyed as she arranges a great meal for all the Palace dwellers. It is, however, rare that anyone brings home that amount of money. The Palace girls also take the same kind of drugs as the boys, but this time to be brave and daring in their work.

## EPISODES OF PEACE AND WAR

In this section I relate specific episodes which occurred during my time at the Palace. They show why Palace youths were so careful about how they presented themselves, to whom they exposed their life realities, and how they dealt with issues relating to their time as combatants. The constant threat of violent reprisals was one reason why Palace youth would not talk openly. Violence was a risk both inside and outside of the Palace walls. As the story of Washington will show, evidence of past injury can also jeopardise the future. Evident in Sammy's story, the last in this section, truth comes in many layers. In the precarious position of many of the Palace youth, being able to present themselves and their lives in different ways to different people was a necessary tactic.

[10] Expatriate workers at Save the Children Foundation in Monrovia say that as little as L$5 (less than 10 US cents) is paid.

## Stealing

There is a clear moral code maintaining order within the Palace. Stealing outside the Palace is acceptable as long as no evidence is left leading to the Palace or to Palace residents. However, it is taboo to steal from within the walls of the Palace. (There is also an informal code for sharing, mainly of food.) The police and other security forces often raid the Palace. They will generally loot everything they stumble upon and pocket the little money they find. Thus it is easy to understand why Palace youth react forcefully to anyone leaving tracks leading to the building. If a suspect is caught, the seniors in the Palace decide on a punishment, which may then be carried out by anyone. Commonplace offenders are often beaten. During my time in the Palace they avoided punishing people in my presence. On one occasion, however, I found an outsider tied up and stripped to his underwear. Being part of their large social network, the outsider had arrived the evening before asking to be lodged for the night. The police came looking for him in the early hours of the next morning and raided the Palace, but he managed to escape. Now furious, the Palace dwellers tracked him down, brought him back to the Palace and tied him up. When I arrived, he was lying on the concrete floor begging for forgiveness while they continued beating him mercilessly with a cane. After being punished according to 'the Palace law' he was then handed over to the Military Police (the Palace has connections with the military and not the ordinary police).

Things go missing in the Palace. The two leaders, Sammy and Noah, investigate every incident. Rumours are rampant and if a particular stolen item cannot be found and nobody has seen anything suspicious, the youngest boys and Hawa, an outcast girl, will generally

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be blamed. But at times the suspect will react violently. When Noah accused Small Kamara of theft, Small Kamara became really upset and started a fight, despite being half Noah's size. Noah forcibly shoved Small Kamara into a corner, temporarily ending the fight. Within minutes, however, Small Kamara had returned with a knife, consumed with an unprecedented rage. His friends explained his hyper-aggressive behaviour. Aparently he had gone up to his room to inhale crack cocaine in order to stimulate the illusion of being an immortal fighter, just as he had repeatedly done during the war prior to each battle. Everybody quickly jumped on Small Kamara, preventing him from doing any harm, and he eventually got his punishment.

### Risking Jail

Disclosing matters of everyday life in a clandestine world is hazardous for many reasons. For instance, information falling into the wrong hands could even entail prison. Palace youth actually talk about prison as a 'cool' thing, but this masks an often real sense of fear. Ending up in prison whilst lacking the right connections can be potentially fatal. Nevertheless, they all spend time in jail on occasions. Getting caught for a minor offence might even lead to prison without any hope of a trial whatsoever. To get out of jail, cash is needed to bribe officers, and Palace youth seldom have the amount of money demanded of them. Noah for example was once jailed at the Central Police Headquarters. Succeeding in getting out after just forty-eight hours, he stated that "inside there is a completely different kind of government". Some inmates have been in jail for more than three months and inevitably crude hierarchies have emerged. Prisoners regularly beat each other

up and new arrivals are methodically robbed of all valuables and at times stripped to the bone. As Noah had been caught just outside the Palace, he had entered jail bare-chested wearing only a pair of old trousers but with the small bag, where he always carries his cigarettes and drugs for sale. Inevitably this was soon confiscated by his cellmates. Those in jail generally do not get any food unless relatives or friends bring it to them. In any case, there is every chance that the senior inmates will eat it. The drinking water is brown. According to Noah, a few of those interned are so weak that they must be propped up when they walk. He does not believe that they will stay alive for long. Sammy visited Noah and described how he had to pay a bribe at every desk he passed until he reaches Noah's cell. After negotiations Sammy managed to get Noah out of the jail after two days, by promising a police officer 'beer money' and managing to borrow the L$75 needed (approximately US$2).[11]

## Washington's Story

Although Washington was born in Margibi County (in central Liberia) and grew up in Monrovia, the war still put him in a precarious situation, as his parents were from the Krahn ethnic group—Krahn being portrayed as the main enemies of the NPFL and INPFL. When these two factions advanced into Monrovia, he saw no other hope than to join forces with them. Keeping a low profile, he succeeded in getting employed in the kitchen for a group of senior NPFL commanders and ended up in the port of Buchanan. However, after

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[11] 'Beer money' signals the size of the bribe, not its employment. If someone wants a smaller bribe they will usually ask for 'cold water'.

some time, the commanders were informed that Washington was a Krahn and he was taken to the beach one night to be shot. He was shot in the left hip and left to bleed to death. After three days he got to a doctor with a badly infected wound. He recovered fully and today walks with only a slight limp, but still enough for him to be suspected of participation in the war and to remain without stable employment.

At thirty-six, Washington is the oldest inhabitant of the Palace. From a chronological perspective he is an adult, but from a social perspective he is well within the youth category. Having no official house, no official wife and no substantial income, prevents him from entering adulthood. Washington's life is an ongoing struggle to become an 'adult', to get out of the youth category. Trying also to leave the criminal sector behind, he has to start from the very bottom of society. He is employed by the MCC (Monrovia City Council) as a caretaker of two rubbish containers on a side street a few blocks away from the Palace. Civil servants in Liberia are paid extremely low wages and on an irregular basis, if at all. But to Washington this is a window of opportunity for entry into the accepted world. Washington has a fiancée, whom he plans to marry and they are expecting a baby. Because of the security situation in the Palace, Washington keeps her away from there as much as possible. In line with his aim of leaving the youth category, he takes every opportunity to get a better job, something which will enable him to rent a small place for his 'family'. Although he is a trained carpenter, every potential employer he contacts asks him to strip to check if he has any war related scars—a common practice. Having been wounded in the war, he will generally be dismissed instantly despite his skills. Washington, as the story of the powerless often goes, failed in the end to get a better job, and even lost

the one at MCC (after stealing two wheelbarrow tyres); finally his fiancée walked out on him, leaving him with only a shattered dream.

## Sammy's Story

Sammy could speak quite openly about his current life, mainly because of his position as a senior in the Palace, but also because of the fact of our close relationship. Matters concerning the war however, were more delicate and he remained reluctant to go into any detail throughout our time together. Sammy was born in Monrovia to a Sierra Leonean father and a Liberian mother. He was one of nine siblings living with his divorced mother. I pick up on the story from a day in 1985 when Sammy was fifteen years old. He says he was going to school in central Monrovia. One day after school he was walking through Waterside market with a friend, when they stumbled upon a US$50 bill lying on the ground. This was a large sum and they instantly decided to keep it. However, they felt anxious going home to their parents, because they knew that sooner or later they would find the money and suspect them of having stolen it. That afternoon, says Sammy, they tried to spend as much money as possible, but this only increased the difficulty of hiding their catch. Then in bravado, his friend proposed that they should leave the country. Since Sammy had been going to school in Freetown, Sierra Leone, this was where they went. Needless to say they soon ran out of money. For several years Sammy then worked as a Poda-Poda (minibus) apprentice in Freetown. Through his father's efforts he was ultimately reunited with his family after three years. The war had not yet begun and during his absence his mother had progressed from being a small-scale baker to an important businesswoman running the most popular

nightclub in Gardnersville (a suburb of Monrovia). From living a marginal and difficult life in Freetown, he returned to an environment of wealth in Monrovia. When the war started, his mother's property and club were subsequently looted. For revenge, and in order to regain what the family had lost, he joined the INPFL.

I am doubtful about parts of Sammy's account. His mother had been poor before the war and according to Sammy, his father did not aid his former wife at all in any substantial way (Sammy's father was upper middle-class—as I could observe during a visit to his house). Probably Sammy did not go to school at all, and most likely he stayed with other boys in the market area looking for opportunities. The US$50—a huge sum for a poor fifteen year old, was more than an opportunity! In his story, he emphasises that the money was found, but it is more likely that they snatched the money. It is also possible that someone observed them or at least could associate them with the stolen money, hence they felt obliged to leave town for some time. Freetown, in Sierra Leone became a natural choice for someone with Sammy's background. According to Sammy, he had returned to his mother's home in Monrovia after three years. In that time she had gone from baking bread at home each morning (and sending her children out to sell it during the day), into being quite a successful businesswoman. Such a transformation would have been rather unlikely during ordinary circumstances. However, if it had occurred during the first phase of the war, and if she had become close to a high-ranking commander in the Liberian army or any of the rebel forces, it could have proved to be a rather commonplace story of upward social mobility in the time of war, something which happened to many women. I actually believe that Sammy returned to his *nouveau riche*

mother during the war and that he had returned as a ULIMO soldier, the very enemies of the INPFL with which he claimed to have served.

Sammy was nineteen when the war started and most probably he joined the rebel force ULIMO whilst in Freetown at the time it was formed in 1991. Over this period, many Liberian boys and girls in Sierra Leone were recruited by ULIMO and trained in camps there.[12] According to his story he had fought for the INPFL during 1990 to 1991, but this seems doubtful. At the time of my fieldwork in 1998, Sammy was twenty-seven. Well behaved and articulate, he makes his living as a con-artist or a picaro (Austen 1986) in the post war setting. Sammy had developed these skills during the course of the war. For example he describes how during 1992, he made use of a bogus ID card, identifying him as a captain in the police force, to arrest people who had just arrived in Monrovia and squeeze money out of them. In the Palace, Sammy kept a leading position next to Noah. He was active in keeping law and order, something of a contradiction to his other activities. My friendship with him ended abruptly as he exposed his picaro character. The first time he got his hands on some of the money from our development project for the Palace (see above), he ran away with it. He then hid himself from the other Palace inhabitants for quite some time, aware of the revenge that they would take on him if he were ever caught. It took several months for the others in the Palace to give me reports of his whereabouts, at which time he has apparently already abused the trust of another group in one of the Monrovian suburbs, and was again a fugitive.

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[12] As a consequence of NPFL flushing out people associated with the Samuel Doe government during the early phase of the war, many people with origins in southern Liberia were forced into exile. Earlier, similar cleansing exercises had been carried out by the Doe administration.

## DOING RESEARCH AMONG PETTY CRIMINAL EXCOMBATANT YOUTH

Entering the field, and the Palace, I stumbled onto many methodological problems ranging from ethical issues, issues of acceptance, personal security dilemmas, to how to classify stories in relation to their relative empirical truth. I had imagined my fieldwork would be quite different from most fieldwork carried out in West Africa, thus during a stopover in Abidjan I committed myself to read Philippe Bourgois' Harlem study on young Puerto Rican drug dealers (1995). From the point of view of methodology, the field I was entering showed greater similarities with Bourgois' work, or Rodgers' (2000) and Jensen's (2001) dissertations on gangs in urban Nicaragua and South Africa respectively, than, to take a Liberian example, Zetterström's ethnographic account of the Yamein Mano in Nimba County (1976). The fieldwork ahead of me presented me with a whole range of methodological dilemmas.

### Personal Security

Initially I experienced my own personal security as a problem. Many people told me time and again that Palace youth were dangerous. I did however take some precautions: for instance I did not stay in the Palace overnight. Although, after some time in the Palace I felt that I could trust most of the Palace youth and in some cases they even protected me: instead of viewing Palace youth as potential risks I came to view them as assets. Accompanied by my friends in the Palace for example I could venture into places where ordinary Monrovians dared not go. For instance we went to different bars in West Point, the poorest downtown area, at night. I genuinely enjoyed myself there and never even thought of the possibility of danger because of my

company. At one time, the entire expatriate community was advised to move near the US embassy for security. There were problems around the ULIMO-J leader's house, with nightly armed skirmishes in the vicinity (one night there was even shooting just behind my apartment). I asked the Palace youth for advice and was assured that there was no real danger to me and that they would inform me if there was. I took their advice and as time went by I started to trust them more than the US intelligence that the INGO community relied upon.

## Informants' Security

Even if Palace youths avoided the reciting of bold accounts from the war years or from their contemporary lives, I still had to be very careful with my own material. At the beginning of my research, government security staff took a keen interest in me. I was actually arrested at one point and intimidated. It was mainly a way to try to squeeze some money out of me, but I had to take precautions nevertheless. In my notebooks I always used aliases for all informants and every week I went to an NGO office to enter my notes on to a computer. I then burnt the notes and kept the computer disk in their safe. To avoid the risk of security personnel confiscating my material when I left, I sent it home in portions by e-mail. This text also used aliases for my informants.

An ethical matter which I have not resolved is the matter of a few eyewitness accounts which I have taped. In one, a young boy gives details of the murder of five American nuns in which he had participated.[13] It is not clear to me whether he told me about the event

[13] This incident has been widely reported. Some witness accounts have been made publicly available, see for instance Liberian Studies Journal (2001).

because he wanted people to know about it, or rather because it acted as part of a personal confession. I also have accounts of women who have been raped by people currently in high positions within the government and civil service. To protect my informants I have not been able to use these accounts.

## Getting in

As explained above, gaining acceptance in the field was a delicate task. In this case my rite of passage was that I had experienced the Liberian Civil War for myself. Even so, some topics I tried to approach with informants, proved exceptionally difficult to discuss. They would usually, and intentionally, blur everything related to their participation in the civil war. Illegal activities carried out as part of daily life at that time remained difficult to pinpoint. Initially I learned about these issues from other Palace youths who just liked to gossip about their compatriots, whilst maintaining a personal moral façade. In time however, this attitude was relaxed a little and they started telling me more. How openly they were in relating issues depended on several factors:

## Age and Social Network

One factor was age. During my stay in the Palace I found that it was much harder to get detailed information out of the younger ones. Their tactic would generally be to change their accounts time after time, leaving me with little substance in the end. I soon learned that part of their passage to maturity was being able to judge what was personally dangerous to talk about and what was not. The younger informants were the more likely in their accounts to present

themselves as being victims and passive non-agents. This became especially evident when I in a latter part of my fieldwork took on the task of making semi-structured taped interviews with a group of excombatants aged between ten and fifteen within a reintegration project in Ganta. In all cases they displayed no sign of agency.

The older Palace youth often abandoned the extreme victim mode as we deepened our relationship. Indeed their position in the social network in and around the Palace also played its part. The leaders established a much more confident tone in our discussions, while the subordinate youths watched their tongues so as not to give details on issues that might displease their seniors. A young Palace dweller could be severely beaten for any minor matter, as was the case of Small Kamara described above. Just how open one could afford to be also depended on contacts outside of the Palace; i.e. having good contacts with patrons, having the support of big men, and having contacts within larger society, all had its implications for what one dared to say, and to whom. For instance on the issue of illegal activities, youths with good contacts within the police, dared to be fairly open about their illegal activities because they knew they could count on aid if they were caught. Getting caught by the police and ending up in jail could indeed be very dangerous, without the support of such contacts. In the incident related above, Noah was actually very lucky to get out of jail so quickly.

Which rebel army they had fought for was also of great importance. Being an NPFL fighter during the April 6 war certainly made life easier in the post conflict setting. In postwar Liberia it became only NPFL soldiers that dared to talk openly about all issues of the war. Only a change in government would have allowed Palace

youths to be frank with me, thus after four months in the Palace I knew that I had to change to another setting in order to get to the heart of war issues. By moving up to Nimba County, NPFL heartland, I later managed to locate a set of young people who dared to talk about their everyday life in wartime Liberia.

## Multi-layered Stories

Doing research among groups of people living in a disturbed environment, such as was found in the Palace, is inevitably a navigation through multi-layered stories. The production of different stories for different audiences is a method of survival in the face of great danger. During the time I spent in the Palace, the youth there categorised me in different ways and at different times; thus the stories they related to me looked different from occasion to occasion. After some months, when trust had deepened between us, some of the youth in the Palace recounted stories closer to their own honest versions of their experiences. Time was the most important ingredient in this arrangement. The story told by Sammy for example, highlights this process. The full version was given to me quite early in our friendship. In due time he gave me other pieces of information. With these bits and pieces I patched together an alternative story—it is not the 'true story' but it is a story that lies closer to reality than the one that he presented to me earlier.[14]

During my time in Liberia I undertook some work for an INGO.

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[14] A cultural ideal of secrecy (Bellman 1984) also makes it hard to get a straightforward account. As Mariane Ferme has noted among people inhabiting the forest regions of Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Liberia "truth is what lies under multiple layers of often conflicting meanings" (2001:7).

As part of the task, we spent five days in Southern Liberia undertaking close to 100 taped, semi-structured interviews with young people, many excombatants. This compared with four months in the Palace where I had not gathered a single taped interview. In retrospect I can see that the taped interview material I collected in Southern Liberia was almost entirely a wasted effort, mainly because every interviewee complied with one of the pre-set frames of victimhood. To tape any interviews in the Palace would have been out of the question as their life realms were just too insecure. Such seems to be the case in most Liberian postwar settings and indeed among excombatants worldwide, who will not directly discuss issues involving their war crimes with just any outsider. My work in the Palace came therefore, to a large extent, to revolve around topics of everyday life played out in front of me by the Palace youth. In due time, trust did increase and I believe that we jointly managed to produce a unique picture of everyday life for excombatant urban youth in postwar Liberia.

## The Temporal: 'It all Chakla'

The Palace as research space highlights the temporality of research. The social framework of the Palace showed both extreme elasticity and the ability for rapid transformations. Persons who at the beginning of the fieldwork only had an outsider status as occasional visitors, eventually turned into core Palace dwellers. Likewise, within a few months some of my central informants had left the building, and were replaced with new ones. This fluidity made it difficult to establish long term stable relationships. Not only in the leaving of my main informant Sammy as mentioned above, who had taken some material and money from our micro project and had left, never to

return again, but within a month or so, two of the other leaders of the group had also moved out and into another building. I concluded that even if I had kept contact with them, it could never have been with the same frequency as before.

As smoothly as the gate had opened on my arrival, it was again closing in front of me. After four months in the Palace I was absent for a month. When I returned, I found a new leader in control. Still having some of my closer contacts among the Palace youth, I thought that I might have stood a fair chance to re-establish my presence in the building. However, the new leader did not like my presence there at all and managed to turn some of the Palace youth against me. At this difficult moment I had brought my sister (a freelance filmmaker) with the intention of recording life as it was in the Palace and maybe making a television documentary about it. The new leader however, seized the initiative and convinced most of his fellows that I was intending to make a lot of money out of the movie about their lives, and that I would not pass on any of the profit to them. Within that same day, therefore they turned from friends into strangers. In the morning we were shooting footage and then when we returned after lunch they confiscated the camcorder and took me as a kind of hostage until my sister could pay for our release. As I was about to move upcountry to continue with my research, it was from a research point of view not to a disaster to me. I had also managed to get an INGO interested in developing the micro economic project that we had established in the Palace, so I knew there was some actual hope for the Palace youth for whom I had found such great sympathy. Yet, there I was, sitting on the ground of the basketball court that we had once cleared together. It was a rather pathetic sight. My sister (in shock)

eventually came with the money. All in all they had only demanded L$800 (about US$20). I made a last effort to distribute the money equally to all, but the new leader had a different idea. He selected a 'trusted' member of the group to keep the *nuku* for the time being. Conniving with the leader, the boy then snatched the *nuku* and dashed out of the Palace followed by a wild bunch of his deceived friends. Later on I did come back for visits as a friend, but by this time the Palace as research space had become unconditionally closed. I had been excluded, and again turned into an outsider. Palace youth would say 'it *chakla*'—it fell apart.

# WAR AS INITIATION INTO ADULTHOOD

*Charles Taylors' fighters transformed the 'liberation war' into a 'carnival of blood'…… Constantly drunk or high on marijuana, wearing wigs, wedding dresses or welder's goggles, they acted out the profound identity crisis into which their shattered world has plunged them. This 'deviant' behaviour, displayed in varying degrees by all the factions, has roots that must be far more complex than that 'tribal war' that has often been called responsible. (Jean & Médecins Sans Frontières 1993:56)*

## INTRODUCTION

The roots of the Liberian Civil War are more complex than the somewhat facile notions of 'tribal conflict' which media commentators often invoke to describe African civil wars. My aim in this chapter is to specifically contextualise the Liberian Civil War so as to unravel some of its complexities and root causes. I do this by taking a broad historical perspective on Liberian warfare, both at the level of its various intertwined ethno-histories, and with a focus on 'modern' state orchestrated military power. I argue that Liberian society has for a long time actually been thoroughly militarised. By using the folk models of *kwii meni* (modern trajectory) and *Zo meni* (traditional trajectory) (Bellman 1975), respectively, I point out how new influences fit into local cosmology. Permitting and inclusive cosmologies effectively blur the fields of both modernity and tradition.

As the *kwii meni* has become the main path for most young Liberians, the gradual disconnection from the experience of modernity leads many young people to a sense of abjection (cf. Ferguson 1999; 2002). From a youth perspective, the Liberian Civil War was a response to the common experience of abjection. By cutting and mixing (Hebdige 1987), melding elements, from both the modern and traditional trajectories—of state military and local warriorhood—young people created and conformed to, various alternative power structures. They became the 'bricoleurs' (Lévi-Strauss 1972:16ff) of a social process that considerably blurred 'the national order of things' (Malkki 1992; 1995), as well as transforming socio-political hierarchies.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF LIBERIAN WARFARE

*Whatever the vocation of the primitive African, his avocation was formerly war. (Schwab 1947:228)*

There is a general agreement amongst most historical commentators (Schwab is but one) that warfare was endemic in the pre-colonial history of the peoples of present-day Liberia. This inference is drawn from superficial first hand material, but suggests that small-scale warfare was probably a common occurrence. It is also an established belief that the historical colonial presence of the Liberian State pacified the Liberian hinterland, mainly through coercion and in part through imposing a system of indirect rule—thereby actively suppressing 'tribal' warfare (Akpan 1973; 1988; Ford 1989; Harley 1941a;

Liebenow 1969; Massing 1988). This period of pacification resulted in a situation where the structures of warfare became eclipsed. Thus, Liberian ethnographies show very little written content on matters of protection and expansion through violent measures. Writing on the Krahn people of eastern Liberia, Schröder and Seibel note that, concerning military organisation, "when no military action was in progress, these offices, along with their quite considerable authority, were virtually deactivated" (1974:60). In the absence of hostilities, warfare until recently has been a topic only scantily described in ethnographies on Liberia (Bellman 1975; 1980; Bledsoe 1980c; Leopold 1991; Moran 1990; Tonkin 1992).

Most references to warfare in Liberia are instead found in the literature of missionaries or civil servants, or by the pen of those who could loosely be referred to as colonial ethnographers (e.g. Schwab, Harley, et al). Most of these were written during early colonial days and as sources they are generally also heavily essentialist, largely being produced in an evolutionary paradigm. It is not until the onset of the current civil war that observers and researchers appear to have recommitted themselves to the study of cultural factors in warfare. Relying mainly on data from these 'colonial' sources often entails the risk of then over-essentialising the 'traditional' or the 'tribal' in the current war, as is evident in the works of Stephen Ellis (1995; 1999; 2001; see critique by Richards 2001). My intention is to somewhat modify these representations.

In recapitulating a Liberian history of warfare we should beware however of over-generalising traits, taken from area-specific data. Mary Moran (2002a; 2002b) has recently pointed out that by a scholarly overemphasis on Mande-speaking cultures in Liberia, disproportionate

attention has been given to the strictly hierarchical elements found in Liberian political society, and as a result, largely neglecting the more egalitarian traits of the Kruan-speaking peoples of the south-east. Her point is relevant also to ideas of 'traditional' warfare. If we look at general ethnographic accounts of war structures we actually find more traits of egalitarianism among the Kruan peoples and a more pronounced hierarchy among the Mande peoples. However even within Kruan ethnic groups, like the Krahn, relations of hierarchy and egalitarianism also differ substantially from region to region (Schröder & Seibel 1974). As my intention is to present additional general points concerning forms of early colonial, or 'traditional' warfare, it would be important to bear the flaws of over generalisation in mind. Notwithstanding, in order to understand the Liberian Civil War more fully, we need nevertheless to find points of reference that can be generalised over this territory. In fact, some of the peculiarities of contemporary warfare in Liberia rest on 'traditional' forms of warfare.

In the small-scale polities dominant in pre-colonial and early colonial Liberia, most fighting forces comprised of a small core of professional warriors,[1] often including individuals originating from outside of the group (Westermann 1921). Undoubtedly, the loyalty of these warriors lay towards the war chief and not the local community per se. In addition to professional warriors, during times of war and unrest, ordinary citizens were also mobilised in considerable numbers. According to Fulton (1968) there was no standing army, nor police

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[1] I use the term 'warrior' for the historical or 'traditional' soldier. For contemporary soldiers I use the term 'fighter' or 'combatant'. Influenced by western film the term 'commando' is often used emically as a crossover category of 'warrior' and rebel soldier. See Moran (1995) for an extended discussion concerning these categories.

force deployed among the Kpelle he studied. Instead, what he labels, a nephew group was the leading organiser of warriors, headed by the war chief. Positions in these war structures were open to all able-bodied men, and as such, it was an important path to local power for politically ambitious young men, born outside of the dominant lineages. Fulton (1968; 1972) points out that among the Kpelle, the position of war chief itself was open to all young men that could prove bravery and ability in the battlefield (see also Korvah 1971 on Loma and Mandingo).

During times of conflict, the war chief was the society's most powerful person. He also maintained control over captured "village mini-states and turned them into private domains" (Fulton 1968:15), using his "war powers to set himself up as a virtual warlord" (Fulton 1972:1222). Spoils of war, such as looted goods, cattle and slaves, formed an important incentive of the war endeavour. All spoils were invariably brought to the war chief(s) and redistributed to the wider society according to customary rules (Fulton 1968; Schröder & Seibel 1974). Warriors who had fought bravely proportionately obtained larger shares, and it should be emphasised that great warriors often obtained substantial wealth from their war activities (Fulton 1968; Schröder & Seibel 1974; Westermann 1921). 'Big men', or senior warriors, at times kept their own group of combatants (Schröder & Seibel 1974), resembling private armies. It is suggested by Massing (1988), that among the Gio peoples, warriors with modern firearms even extended status and power beyond their immediate vicinity, allowing for speculation that contacts formed with trade and the colonial government, might have albeit temporarily, increased the individual powers of these big men warriors.

If the standing professional army comprised only a limited number of men, the group of irregulars by contrast, included "alle kampffähigen Männer und Junglinge" (Westermann 1921:108). Among the Krahn, these irregulars "were organized into paramilitary age-groups, which in wartime served as the organizational structure of fighting, but in peacetime provided the basic structure for workgroups of various sorts" (Schröder & Seibel 1974:68). Even if warriors were often labelled as 'young', as found in Schwab's account of the Mano peoples warrior class (1947:237), there is still little evidence as to the actual ages of warriors. Among the Krahn peoples, the same author also notes that warriors become separated into two groups: both young unmarried men and 'the real seasoned fighters' (ibid. 165). In their effort to describe age-groups among the Krahn peoples, Schröder and Seibel (1974) point out that after circumcision and initiation, young men entered an age-group of peers whose ages lay between 12-14 and 30-35 years. The older and more established of these took part in military campaigns, whilst the younger ones protected home villages. The older, more full-fledged warriors (and hunters) then formed part of the next age group. Among the Mano peoples, the *Ge yumbo* cult functioned mainly for the military training of young men (Harley 1950). Likewise Tonkin (1992) states that Jlao (Kru) people's public initiation into the army was the time when males became adult citizens. Finally, Harley (1941a) and Schwab (1947) describe the use of young boys, from the Mano peoples, as mascots walking in front of a warring party, protected by charms and medicines. It seems very likely that fighters that are today labelled and denounced as child soldiers under *The international convention on the rights of the child* were used in the wars fought at that time.

Magic and war medicines were widely used both collectively and individually: boy mascots were but one example. Harley (1941a) accounts for ten different types of war magic in use by the Mano peoples at that time. Power and invulnerability, as well as the lack of the same, were all ascribed to magical causes. During the war against the LFF (Liberian Frontier Force—see below) in Nimba in 1911, the death of the legendary warrior Wonkpa was attributed to the destruction of his magic invulnerability, summoned by the wife of a local trader (Massing 1988). Powerful warriors had to possess strong medicines that both protected them and caused harm to their enemies. Once a fighter had become "famous for his medicines, his mere appearance often sufficed to disperse an enemy, and his threat to apply medicine often was enough to prevent actual conflict" (Schröder & Seibel 1974:68). Practising medicine men (called *Zo*, *Nzo* or *Zoe* in many of the Mande languages) filled important roles in the war endeavour, both by producing war medicines, blessing the warriors upon departure, and performing sacrifices (Fulton 1968). Certain rituals carried out by these medicine men were often violent in appearance (i.e. human sacrifice and cannibalistic acts)[2] and were effective to instil fear into the enemy. In addition, masks usually worn during rituals and partly carried on to the battlefield along with various bells and drums, both imitated fearless and victorious deceased warriors and dangerous animals, and were used to weaken the morale of the enemy (Harley 1950).

[2] In the minds of early researchers such as Harley (1941a; b; 1950) and Schwab (1947), human sacrifice and cannibalism were very real. In the light of the exotisation of peoples during those days and with the knowledge of how important violence is in rituals of war, one ought to handle these sources with care. To a great extent, such rituals conform to images of 'eating' on a symbolic level.

Secret societies have long been a favoured topic among anthropologists studying the region, resulting in a plethora of ethnographic studies on secret societies in Liberia and the Sierra Leonean/Guinean borderlands (Bellman 1975; 1980; 1984; Bledsoe 1980b; d'Azevedo 1980; 1994a; Fulton 1972; Gibbs 1962; Harley 1941a; 1941b; Harrington 1975; Hoejbjerg 1990; Holsoe 1980; Little 1960; 1965; 1966; Jedrej 1976; 1980; Murphy 1980; Ottenberg 1994; Richards 1973; 1975; Siegmann 1980; Vandenhoute 1989; Zetterström 1980). Of these studies, a significant focus has been given to the central secret organisations: Poro (male) and Sande/Bundu (female). Many other secret societies, more or less subordinated or connected to the Poro and Sande do exist, but by no means receive the same attention. If one returns to the earlier idea that warfare was endemic in the region prior to Liberian colonial presence, surprisingly little is written about these secret societies in relation to their functions during times of war. However, we should remember that war systems were known to be dormant during times of peace, and Liberian pacification was precisely indicative of such a state of affairs. Thus, the current generation of anthropologists can only observe fragments of these dormant war organisations which rose again to view by the second half of 1980s. Some observers have pointed towards the importance of secret societies in the current civil war (Ellis 1995; 1999; 2000; 2001), although it would be insufficient to point towards the concept of Poro as being all-encompassing.

Among the societies involved in Poro, i.e. the Kpelle, Mano, Loma, Guissi, Gio, Gola, Bella, Mende, and Bassa peoples (Bellman 1975), it is worth noting that all warriors belonged to the Poro, simply because their initiation was a requirement to become an adult

man.[3] This was so, even if the level of actual involvement in Poro issues differed widely, depending on status and power in any given local society:

> *No boy or young man is considered a member of the tribe until he has been initiated by suitable rites into the company of his elders. The adolescent must undergo certain ordeals to prove that he is ready and worthy to take on the responsibilities of citizenship—until then he does not count. (Harley 1941b:3)*

As a powerful organiser of most activities on all levels of society in Liberia, the importance of Poro should not be underestimated, however we need to acknowledge that in issues of warfare, Poro seem to have enjoyed quite limited direct influence. There would often appear to be a built in conflict within a given society between the Poro leadership and the senior warrior nomenclature; Fulton calls this "an interesting balance of the polity's power" (1972:1222). Even if the war chiefs and secret societies that are preoccupied in war issues in part fall under the authority of Poro, the warriors still form a pool of hard-to-rule individuals, often in opposition to Poro leadership. Fulton's account of self-serving war chiefs, points towards that. Bellman also suggests that, among the Kpelle peoples he studied, secret associations, other than Poro, are involved in war activities, i.e. the *Mina* (horn), and *Moling* (spirit) societies. These organisations require membership in Poro and provide services to both Poro and Sande, although they are

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[3] Hoejbjerg points out that several authors have warned against regional generalisations, especially in regard to the Poro associations (Hoejbjerg 1999 note 1).

formally outside the Poro itself (Bellman 1984, and personal communication 14/3-01). In contrast to Bellman's account, to Harley (1941a; 1941b; 1950) Poro society appears to be encompassing all other secret societies. Harley also points out that the peace initiatives of the Poro as masked men of the Poro *(ge's),* could be sent out to the battlefront to also stop ongoing warfare. In Harley's words:

> *The fixed functions of the ge's extended with some local variation, across the borders of the clan or tribe, and even across language barriers. They even exerted control over warfare. This was carried to such an extent that arbitration through the ge's was more final than the result of war. (Harley 1950:42)*

Fulton proposes further that "Poro may have been an alternate means of arbitrating disputes" among the Kpelle (Fulton 1968:14) and indeed d'Azevedo (1969-1970) points out that the Gola Poro, during the expansion of Gola peoples, turned into both a 'pan-tribal' and 'inter-tribal' institution of diplomacy and solidarity. Certainly Poro officials did enter the battlefields, but in the history of Gola warfare:

> *Pan-tribal training in obedience to Poro codes was more frequently utilized to resolve hostilities before or even after they had occurred...... Secret agreements among Poro officials of warring chiefdoms could result in the sudden cessation of hostilities in the midst of battle. (d'Azevedo 1969-1970:11)*

In reality, Poro ought to be seen primarily as a mechanism for the resolution of conflict, rather than an instigator and organiser of further

hostility. Poro leadership actually seeks to control subjects in society attempting to use violent measures on neighbouring communities. The power of Poro, as a gerontocratic organisation of established families and lineages, is continuously being contested by those who would seek power. War chiefs, warriors and some of the secret societies with their relative youthfulness (or marginality) could all be put into this category. Power obtained through bravery on the battlefield would normally appear to be the only passable route to fulfilment of such an individual endeavour. A way to sum up would be to create an imagined scheme of binary opposition: placing Poro, gerontocracy, peace and social stability on one side, opposed by war societies, youth/marginality, and conflict-proneness on the other. In doing so, a delicate balance is maintained between Poro and the war chief/war societies.[4] In addition, one could speculate that governmental as well as missionary efforts to subdue the Poro over the years have created space for increased powers of military institutions at the local level. The relative weakening of Poro has clearly restrained gerontocratic control of local government. This tilting of the balance of power may well have paved the way for the armed youth rebellion of the 1990s.

In understanding the history of Liberian warfare it would be important to consider the project of nation building in Liberia. The culture of military force of colonial Liberia forms a source, of equal importance, as the 'ethno-history' discussed above. In our aim to

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[4] Hoejbjerg (1999:539) points out that among the Loma in the Guinean forest zone, the political chief and the 'senior war father' is the same person. In this case the idea of balance between gerontocratic leadership and war leadership appears not to function.

understand current Liberian warfare, we need to take a closer look at this. It was repatriated US slaves, arriving from 1822 onwards, who actually founded Liberia.[5] Settling in clusters mainly along the Atlantic coastline, the so-called Americo-Liberians[6] established themselves as local elites, forming small colonies resembling city-states. In 1838 they established the Commonwealth of Liberia and in 1847 the settlers declared Liberia an independent republic.[7] As Akpan has noted, "settlers on whom the government of Liberia thus devolved… were essentially American rather than African in outlook and orientation" (1973:219), thus Liberia as a state project ought to be viewed as being colonial in its own right (Akpan 1988; see also d'Azevedo 1971; 1989). "Like its colonial equivalents, the Liberian state imposed itself on the hinterland by force, and to some extent maintains itself the same way" (Clapham 1978:122).

Stephen Hlophe (1973) has pointed out that these Americo-Liberian immigrants did not constitute one unified group of settlers, and that their interests were often in conflict. Constructing 'natives' as a common enemy was one way of consolidating group identity. In a study on Liberian nation-building and state use of symbols in historical documents, Blamo (1971-72) finds that officials among the Liberian elite, i.e. the Americo-Liberians, repeatedly used words as

[5] By 1900, about 15000 settlers with African background had arrived from the USA, as well as about 300 from the Caribbean (Akpan 1973).

[6] In popular discourse, Americo-Liberians are often called 'Congos'. This label originates from another settler group comprising recaptured Africans seized from slavers in the Atlantic Ocean by US navy between 1845-1862. Many came from the region of the Congo River, thus the label 'Congo'. This group soon became assimilated along with the Americo-Liberians.

[7] On the Liberian state building and its maintenance see, Akpan (1973); Blamo (1971-72); Clapham (1976; 1978; 1988); Liebenow (1969; 1980; 1987).

'aggression', 'aggressors', 'insubordination', 'interdictions', 'punitive missions', 'internecine warfare', 'military intervention', 'native raids', 'pacification', 'rebels', 'rebellion' and 'war' to mobilise public support for governmental operations, with the objective of gaining control over the Liberian hinterland.

The formation of the Liberian nation in 1847 had a limited effect on the hinterland. The control and political influence practised by the Liberian State was in reality quite insignificant. However the uncomfortable prospect of losing part of its, predominantly imagined 'domains', when European states commenced the Scramble for land (1880-90) through the formal regulation of territorial interest at the Berlin Conference (1884-85), required the Liberian government to establish firm military outposts at strategic positions throughout the interior (Akpan 1973; Ford 1989).[8] With the aim of controlling and pacifying the Liberian hinterland, the Liberian Frontier Force (hereafter LFF) was instituted in 1908. From the outset, it comprised mainly of Mende and Loma soldiers, originating from both Sierra Leone and its immediate borderlands. It also came to include other subdued Liberian peoples (Ford 1989; Wilson 1980).[9] In this 'pacification' exercise of the early 19th century, the LFF was often engaged in several battles with indigenous groups simultaneously over vast territories. Victory over a particular group of people however,

[8] Liberia claimed territory far up into what is today the heartland of Guinea, following Benjamin Anderson's Journey to Musardu in the late 1860's (Anderson [1870] 1971) and in current Mali, Medina and Djenne (see Akpan 1973).

[9] In 1912 the US Minister to Liberia also sent Afro-American army officers (Buffalo Soldiers) to assist the LFF. With a primary aim at training the army it was also believed that they would "serve as an "inspiration" to the people" (Rainey 1996:212).

rarely led to total conquest, and although conflicts were often of low intensity, they could nevertheless flare up and spread countrywide as rebellions (Ford 1989).[10] Thus the overall setting was a typical frontier *zo*ne, that could be perceived as a perpetual war *zo*ne—a colonial 'space of death' (De Boeck 1998; 2000; Taussig 1992).

Available historical sources give an unequivocal picture of the LFF as an army of badly trained, lowly disciplined as well as poorly equipped soldiers. The government of the day seldom paid salaries, forcing soldiers to 'live of the land' (Ford 1989:47), implying: "soldiers indulged in wanton pillage, rape, and harassment of the Africans in their districts, and commandeered food, labourers, and carriers without payment" (Akpan 1973:230). In the annual report by the British Consul General in 1912, the LFF goes with the epithet 'that rabble of bloodthirsty cut-throats called the LFF' (cited in Massing 1988:70). Even the Liberian President, Arthur Barclay (1904-1912) revealed his concerns by stating that the militia was "tending to become a greater danger to the citizen, and his property, which it ought to protect, than to the public enemy" (cited in Liebenow 1969:53-54). In the wake of LFF 'pacification', a system of indirect rule followed, along with the birth of a rural tax system (the hut tax) (Akpan 1973; Liebenow 1969). Using violent means, civil servants— commissioners, superintendents, custom officials—of the Liberian state, worked in close cooperation with the LFF, but frequently with conflicting incentives (Massing 1988). They blatantly extorted their

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[10] On indigenous rebellions see e.g. Akpan (1988) on Vai, Gola and Gbandi; d'Azevedo (1969-1970) on Gola and Mandingo; Wilson (1980) on Kru, Bassa, Dey, Grebo, Mende and Kissi; Massing (1988) on Gio; Ford (1989) on Gio and Mano.

counties, levying illegal fees and fines, and at times sharing this with government functionaries in Monrovia (Akpan 1988).

For more than a century, the tiny minority of America-Liberians controlled state affairs and commerce through an intimate network of privilege and dominance.[11] Even if the government in Monrovia gradually increased its presence in the interior, much remained the same. The indirectness of rule, although not as official policy, remained a system of divesting the countryside of goods and labour up until the present day. The LFF eventually became reshaped into the Armed Forces of Liberia (hereafter AFL), and continued to harass local communities in brutal fashion; manhandling and raping was routine.[12] The AFL was, to use the words of political journalist Bill Berkeley:

> …... *a malignant organism in the body politic, inherently opportunistic, unlikely to be a source of progressive change. In retrospect it's clear that the institution of the army was a microcosm for what ailed Liberia. A gang culture flourished. Violence was rampant. Ties of blood and ethnicity were paramount. The construction of ethnic patronage systems by rival soldiers would become one of the most important causes of Liberia's subsequent collapse. (Berkeley 2001:31)*

The structurally sanctioned violence of the AFL became evident in the events that followed the 1980 coup, when Master Sergant Samuel Doe rose to presidential power. The coup which put an end to the

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[11] Liebenow's trilogy (1969; 1980; 1987) gives a fabulously detailed account on Americo-Liberian rule.

[12] Keith Hart made a short trip to Grand Gedeh County to visit a doctoral student, David Brown, in the first part of the 1970's. During his stay there several rape cases involving the AFL were reported (personal communication with Keith Hart, 18/3-00).

longstanding dominance of the Americo-Liberian elite, released a hatred for the Americo-Liberians that had long boiled inside the indigenous peoples (Böås 1997). However, the public execution of the members of the Tubman government, which became known as 'the Liberian Beach Party', was not only 'people's justice' but also had its roots in military culture.[13] The AFL, under Doe's rule, resumed their violent patrols and after a failed coup attempt, following rigged elections in 1985, AFL soldiers paraded the corpse of the plot leader, Thomas Quiwonkpa (one of the senior members of the 1980 coup that had fallen out with Doe) in downtown Monrovia. Apparently soldiers in the parade publicly hacked off body parts, to be kept as souvenirs or even to be consumed to obtain some of the great powers possessed by 'the warrior' Quiwonkpa (Ellis 1999).[14]

In the aftermath of the 1985 coup attempt, AFL troops set out to pacify the Gio strong men of Monrovia, and primarily in Nimba county where Quiwonkpa and many of the other coup plotters had originated from. The wanton violence wrought on innocent civilians in Nimba County (1985-89) remains to this day a vivid historical predicament to most people from the area.[15] It also paved the way for the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) insurrection of

[13] For a detailed account of the coup and what followed see Schröder and Korte (1986), see also Bienen (1985) for a discussion on the Doe coup in relation to similar coups in West Africa, and Liebenow (1984) for study of politics under the Doe administration. After Taylor's victory in the 1997 elections it took hardly a month before people in Monrovia started complaining about the Kongos (Americo-Liberians) having returned to levels of influence equal to the pre-Doe era.

[14] Quiwonkpa is a *nome de guerre* taken from the legendary Gio warrior Wonkpa, briefly mentioned above.

[15] It is estimated that as many as 3000 civilians were killed in Nimba County by government forces (Cain 1999:270).

Christmas Eve 1989. The Krahn/Gio ethnic axis of the coup in 1980 had within a few years turned into an ethnic cleavage that spilled over from Doe/Quiwonkpa personal competition over power in the military barracks, into the country itself (Ellis 1999).

## TWO TRAJECTORIES—ONE COSMOLOGY

*Modern is what some of us think we are, others of us wish desperately to be, yet others despair of being, regret, or oppose, or fear, or, now, desire somehow to transcend. It is our universal adjective…..But though it is, originally, a Western word and a Western notion…., the idea of modernity has become the common property of all the world, even more prized and puzzled over in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, where it is considered to be just now, perhaps, at last arriving, or, for various sorts of dark reasons, still not doing so, than in Europe and North America, where it is regarded as being, for better or worse, largely in place. Whatever it is, it is pervasive, as either a presence or a lack, an achievement or a failure, a liberation or burden. Whatever it is. (Geertz 1995:136)*

John Gay has written a compelling novel entitled, *Red dust on the green leaves* (1973) about Kpelle life in the 1930-40s when the penetration of roads, growing roadside towns, a diversity of traders, missionaries and a civil service started to make an impact on village life in interior Liberia. In this rare account, often surpassing anthropological literature in detail, we follow two twins, Sumo and Koli, on their paths to adulthood. Sumo's and Koli's life-paths branch off after bush school

(initiation into Poro). At the time, two available paths to adulthood and power had emerged; that of modernity and tradition. The book makes an effort to view both paths as being educational: Koli's life goes along the modern trajectory and he is subsequently carried down the bush paths, following the dirt roads to 'civilisation' and the missionary school, managed by 'white man'. Sumo on the other hand, stays in the village and is eagerly learning traditional wisdom by listening to the old men with medicinal knowledge etc. Sumo learns to master Kpelle proverbs,[16] and by way of a wise marriage and the establishment of his own farm, he matures into a position where he can enter both the senior levels of Poro society, and become a future candidate for village chief.

Being an allegory on rural Liberia, the book builds up a close tension between Sumo and Koli, in a way representatives of the traditional and the modern, old and new, close and far away, the known and the unknown, respectively; constructing a juxtaposition which appears to be just as valid in contemporary Liberia as it was when the story took place. Even after 60 years the tension between the two different orders of reality, in Kpelle terminology the *kwii meni* and the *Zo meni* (Bellman 1975:26), remains much the same. From a rural perspective, 'modern brokers' with knowledge in *kwii* matters have "eclipsed in political value knowledge of the mystical affairs in the traditional forest" (Murphy 1981:674) creating an alternative forest of modern knowledge. The implication of this is that the seemingly very

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[16] Kpelle peoples are renown for their "extraordinary use of proverbs and of formulaic ways of dealing with human difficulties. These were their means of putting things into the perspective of the traditional" (Bruner 1973:xiv).

different paths taken by Sumo and Koli, i.e. the trajectories of tradition and modernity, ultimately lead to local power, sanctioned within the same cosmology. Even if *kwii* and *Zo* order of things are often juxtaposed in popular thought, they can be utilised by the very same person simultaneously (see Tonkin 1981).

*Kwii* is a concept which has been the focus of much attention in anthropological writing on Liberia from Fraenkel (1964; 1966) and onwards (Brown 1982; David 1992; Fuest 1996; Moran 1988; 1990; 1992; 2000; Tonkin 1981).[17] The word itself has a complex and interesting background. Etymologically Tonkin (1981) believes that the word has a Kruan origin, although currently it is used in many of Liberia's vernaculars. A *kui* (Tonkin 1981), or *kwi* (Schröder & Seibel 1974), secret society is found among several of Kruan speaking peoples. Tonkin (1992) labels oracular spirits kui and notes that it has often something to do with the dead. Kwi spirits who "are said to reside in the attics of houses" (Schröder & Seibel 1974:82) appear to be ancestral spirits.[18] Among my young informants in both Monrovia and in Ganta, Nimba County, ancestors often appeared in their dreams as being white. Typically a white person/ancestor would emerge in a particular

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[17] Even if in general agreement concerning the origin of the word, the spelling of the word differs widely from scholar to scholar. I do not suggest that kwii is more appropriate than any other spelling of the word, but I have chosen to follow Bellman (1975).

[18] Remember the leader of the 1985 coup Thomas Quiwonkpa (briefly discussed above). Quiwonkpa was his nome de guerre originating from the legendary Gio warrior Wonkpa. The prefix Qui, in this case, appears to connote the mythical link to the great Gio ancestor Wonkpa. An alternative reading of the name could be the 'civilised' warrior, pinpointing his position in both kwii and Zo meni.

geographical location showing them resources of gold and diamonds, i.e. directing them to their future success.[19] White persons have a position of immanent power in local discourse; not just from a practical point of view but also in the mythical world of spirits. Passing in Ganta town on dark paths at night, I could easily pass as an avatar of the *Tall white devil*,[20] as I am both tall and white skinned. Flashing a torchlight in my face often impelled children to run helter-skelter and adults to move uncomfortably away from my presence.

Rosalind Shaw (1997; 2002) argues convincingly that the Atlantic slave trade has played a major role in shaping Temne cosmology in neighbouring Sierra Leone. This is particularly the case when it comes to witchcraft. Europeans and witches alike are claimed to indulge in anti-social activities, but "European witches are represented as making their products public and harnessed their powers of witchcraft to achieve material success and technological dominance in the world" (Shaw 1997:860).[21] Typical European anti-social attributes include "living secluded lives, exchanging abrupt greetings, not stopping to talk, not visiting others, eating large quantities of meat, and eating alone without inviting others" (Turay 1971:338, cited in Shaw

[19] Note the similarities with the hallucinations of a Putumayo Indian after taking yagé: "Then, finally, emerges a batallion of the army. How wonderful! How it enchants me to see that! I'm not sure how the rich dress, no? But the soldiers of the batallion *are much* superior in their dress to anybody! They wear pants, and boots to the knee of pure gold, all in gold, everything" (Taussig 1986:323). On the other hand in the Yagé visions of the 'white colonist' the Indian shaman appears along with the devil.

[20] Masks and masked performers are generally called devils in Liberia. This term originates from Christian missionaries who in their efforts to christianise people equalled masks with idols of pagan religion.

[21] Shaw forms part of an influential anthropological school that analyses witchcraft as modern—partly as a response to colonial and postcolonial rule (Comaroff & Comaroff 1993; De Boeck 1996; Geschiere 1997; White 2000).

1997:860f). Such qualities of withdrawal, selfishness, and greed are also characteristics of witches, who may describe their invisible place as in the following fantasy:

> (…) a prosperous city where skyscrapers adjoin houses of gold and diamonds; where Mercedes-Benzes are driven down fine roads; where street vendors roast "beefsticks" (kebabs) of human meat; where boutiques sell stylish "witch gowns" that transform their wearers into animal predators in the human world (…); where electronics stores sell tape recorders and televisions (and more recently, VCRs and computers); and where witch airports dispatch witchplanes—planes so fast, I was once told, that "they can fly to London and back within an hour"—to destinations around the globe.[22] (Shaw 1997:857)

The 'place of Witches' conforms to images of the modern cities of the western world, vividly bundling together the 'white man' with the world of witches.[23] Trajectories of both modernity and tradition form part of the same cosmology where images of 'modern' cities become blended with images of cannibals (cannibals also being the European slave traders who were perceived to indulge in 'eating' large quantities of the local populace) as well as the shape shifters of the oral accounts (see chapter 4). The association between white men and ancestors, both

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[22] Outside Ganta (my place of fieldwork) a place was pointed out to me where a witch plane had accidentally crashed on the return from a witch tour. According to the local myth the witches died in the accident.
[23] I suspect that the imagined connection between white people and powerful witchcraft has been one of the reasons that relatively few expatriate workers have been targeted in the civil war, the exception being the killing of five American nuns in 1992 (Liberian Studies Journal 2001) and the more recent killing of three Lebanese businessmen in 2002 (International Crisis Group 2002).

being *kwii*, points to the great adaptability of culture, where to young people, the *kwii meni* and the *Zo meni* become two trajectories leading towards the same goal: e.g. respected adulthood. The *kwii meni* is a route used to contest gerontocratic power by the dominated (just as warriorhood discussed above). The *Zo meni* is that of gerontocratic stability. In historical terms, as the presence of the Liberian State grew in the interior, the *kwii meni* became increasingly incorporated into national power structures, thus also turning *kwii meni* into an elite-dominated domain.

In contemporary Liberia the term *kwii* is used infrequently. Even in local vernaculars, it has been replaced with—not surprisingly, I hasten to say—other *kwii* words, such as 'civilised' or 'exposed'. Even so, the use of these words echoes the realities of *kwii*, maintaining the same position in local cosmologies. *Kwii*-ness is as much about political and economic opportunities on the national arena as it is about social markers maintained and structured by local communities. These markers include the central complexes of religion and education. For instance, among Liberian refugees in the Ivory Coast, despite their current refugee status, Pentecostal forms of Christianity were held as proof of superiority over the Ivorian populace (Utas 1997).[24] From the early days of colonial encounters, young men, and some women, were sent away to Christian missions, or boarding schools, to 'learn book' (as was the case with Koli).[25] The mounting status of *kwii* education contributed to what Fuest calls the Liberian 'Bildungsmythos' (Fuest 1999). Many of the combatants in the Liberian Civil War state that

[24] Christianity, Pentecostalism in particular, has merited much attention among scholars studying Liberia (Ellis 1999; Gifford 1993; Noonoo 1991).

[25] For a historic account see Himmelheber (1957).

warlords gave promises of rewarding their troops with further education and scholarships abroad. Some claim that these promises were instrumental for their enlistment in the rebel armies.

The symbolism of attending the correct church, or having obtained an education from the right school, is still often held as being more important than the particular religious beliefs or educational competency of those very institutions. Certainly *kwii*-ness is a status that is by and large constructed by the procurement of *kwii* symbols. Early symbols of *kwii*-ness included books (especially the bible), spectacles, western clothes and shoes. In rural villages a central statement of *kwii* status was to lay a tin roof on one's house. Ever increasing urbanisation lead to the introduction of modern commodities to larger segments of the Liberian populace. However, in the economic decline, of the late 1970s and the 1980s, increasing polarisation occurred in Liberian society. The elite began to consolidate its economic position, a once growing urban middle-class withered away, and the poor became comparably poorer. In this process *kwii*-ness became increasingly commodified—commodities becoming increasingly fetishised (Taussig 1980). The consumption of western consumer goods became core symbols of the *kwii* complex: women's hair styles modelled on US trends, Nike sports shoes, t-shirts sporting rap stars, all became symbols for young Liberians, claiming that despite the general economic decline, they were nevertheless part of the 'modern' world. Electronic devices, such as walkmans, portable CD players, cellular phones, and VHF communication radios, flashed by NGO employees (a very *kwii* occupation), also became powerful symbols of *kwii*-ness, of still being among those who had not been abandoned by and evicted from modernity.

## YOUTH ABJECTION

*I saw Superfly, Shaft, and other Blaxploitation films in Monrovia (Liberia) in the early Seventies. I remember being particularly struck by the opening sequence in Superfly—it seemed an extraordinary cinematic event. I had been living in Monrovia for almost a year, and was fascinated by the lifestyle in that West African city, which identified more with America than with Africa. People spoke English with a black American accent like the one I heard in the movies, on television (in shows like Good Times and Sanford and son), and in rhythm-and-blues and gospel songs. The cities in Liberia have names like Virginia, Maryland, Greenville, and Harper. I lived on an avenue called Randall Street. All the people in Monrovia liked to trace their family origin to the United States. Most of my friends had already been to America at least once, or were getting ready to join a cousin, a sister, or a friend there. Some referred to America as "home." It was in Liberia that I first learned to speak English, and developed a yearning to go to America myself one day. (Diawara 1998:247f)*

Diawara's account originates from a time when the modernity paradigm of Africa still remained intact, and opened seemingly unending possibilities for young people. Diawara grew up in Guinea and Mali and spent many summers (and later a full year) of his youth in Monrovia learning to speak English. To him and most Liberians, their country had reached far beyond other African states in their efforts to modernise (this image was however primarily an urban feature). Liberians often claim that during those times, they had their backs turned to Africa while facing North America. With the Liberian

State largely founded by returning slaves, and with kinship ties continuing across the ocean in North America and the Caribbean, the Liberian elite cultivated an image of being somehow more 'modern' than the rest of Africa. Comparing Diawara's image of Monrovia during the seventies with the later post-war Monrovia from a high modernist point of view, is in many ways stunning—and at the same time sad. Monrovia's appearance and appeal has brutally changed. Its once proud modernist buildings rendered in mirror glass now lie in ruins, the city's water network is in jumbles—for several years it was rumoured that it was under repair—and the sewers are constantly overflowing. Electricity has been down for many years. Smoke and noise from private generators has become part of city life.[26] The chaos of wires from jerry-rigged generators is still intertwined with telephone wires around the city—a throw back from an earlier age. Streets are potholed, and garbage is disposed of everywhere.

In Monrovia, the food parlour *King Burger* (a glocalisation of *Burger King*) was an obvious marker of modernity. In pre-war Monrovia there were two such establishments: one on Broad Street and one in the Freeport area. Today King Burger on Broad Street is a seedy place. Being a constituent of the modernity project, food still comes in the shape of hamburgers, chicken sandwiches etc., but its Western menu is becoming rather diluted. Indian ownership has added to the globalisation of the menu. In the bathroom, the toilet cistern has been dried out for years and is today a hideout for cockroaches; a space contested only by customers' ejected cigarette

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[26] The collapse of state run electricity is not a necessary outcome of war. In Freetown, Sierra Leone, the electricity system is actually more reliable today than what is was prior to the war.

buts. According to the meta-narrative of modernity, urban space should be taken over by establishments like King Burger. Today, however they are standing idle, frozen as peeling monuments to a failed modernity. Ironically, the other King Burger is host to a money transfer firm. Globalisation is making itself heard there in the form of rapid money transfers provided by Western Union, yet again stressing African postcolonial dependence on the Western world. Huge sums of money are every year transferred into the country from the Liberian diaspora all over Europe and North America. Money from family members working in the Western world sustains a substantial number of Liberians.

In the light of the Liberian modernity disconnect, there are, according to popular imagination and imagery, two paths available for young people hankering for modern vanities. Either to move to a space where such facilities are open for all, i.e. their idea of western societies, or to use force to enter contested space within the national arena. As is clear from the Liberian case, both paths have been appropriated. In this chapter I argue that the war could be seen as a charter for inclusion—for gaining membership in the larger world society (Ferguson 2002). The allocation of space/place to people in popular imagination is significant in this connection. Anthony, a young Monrovian man, narrated a dream to me.

*Anthony glanced at the moon. To his surprise he saw a small house, and next to the house sat a man. The man appears to be Jesus. Jesus leaves the moon to descend to earth joined by soldiers dressed in white. His destination is Monrovia. He takes ground down by the river, in the Waterside Market, where a crowd has turned up to greet him.*

*Jesus walks from the Waterside, via UN-drive, past Happy Homes,
and finally climbs the hill to reach the US Embassy on Mamba Point.
He enters the embassy compound and sits down with the US
Ambassador. The crowd remains impatiently posted outside the fenced
off area, peaking through the fence. All of a sudden the US
Ambassador gets up and calls upon Anthony to join them. Anthony
sits down together with Jesus and the American Ambassador. In con-
fidence Jesus discloses that he has not forgotten the Liberian people.
When the time is due, he, Jesus himself, will come and rescue them all.
(Fieldnotes/ Monrovia)*

The 'dream' is organised spatially. Firstly, Jesus enters the main
market area, the most public space in town which ordinary people
frequent. The market is situated at sea level. Jesus does not stop to talk
to the crowd. Instead he starts to climb up the hill to the US Embassy,
via United Nations drive. He passes the furniture store Happy
Homes—where rich Liberians, and the international staff of the
humanitarian aid organisations, buy their incredibly expensive
furniture. On top of the hill, and topmost in Anthony's dream
hierarchy, is the US embassy. This piece of territory is formally not
part of Liberia, as Liberians often point out. Behind the fence of the
US embassy and amidst rigid security, to keep Liberians out, Jesus sits
down and talks with the US ambassador. Anthony places the
American ambassador on an equal level with Jesus, whilst the Liberian
is placed people down below at the foot of the hill, in the dirty market.
The Liberian people are deliberately excluded from Western space.
Anthony is, however, chosen as a messenger, a go-between, and
included in the important conversation—a role that he is trying to

cultivate in real life as well. I would suggest however that it is not the go-between status that is most important, but rather the focus on the border transgression. Indeed his transgression is only possible because of his go-between status. As such, he is able to embrace issues which other Liberians are only subjected to, in the same way that Liberian immigrants are believed to do as they enter Europe or North America.[27] Not even a chat with Jesus is impossible. His dream is concluded with a Christian message from Christ himself, that even if most Liberians remain outside the confines of the heavenly West on judgement day, they will not be forgotten.

To Anthony, and many other young Liberians, entering an imagined Western space was conceived in order to put an end to all social suffering and to lead to almost instant achievements of personal freedom and indisputable status of almost divine character. During my fieldwork, I had endless discussions with excombatants and other youths who argued in this vein. The sense of being abject in the larger world, an exclusion from developing into modernity—the whole *kwii* project was central to them. At the same time, many Liberian youths experienced the *Zo* trajectory as blocked, or viscous. The gerontocratic leadership managed a *Zo meni* that had increasingly given in to state based modernity projects which had been banned by the Liberian government, thus could no longer embrace all Liberian youth. Youths from most urban and semi-urban environments no longer had the

[27] According to most Liberians, people (in the abstract form) in the Western world possess close to super-human powers (see above). It is widely believed that 'West' could both have prevented and stopped the Liberian Civil War at any time during the course of events. Liberians could watch huge US aircraft carriers at anchor in the roadstead just outside Monrovia carrying massive amounts of high-tech equipment, but doing virtually nothing to aid their country from disintegration.

opportunity to become adult in the *Zo* sphere. Their turning to a *kwii* order of things thus became a problem during the economic decline. The Liberian Civil War was the outcome.

## WAR AS INITIATION

In Liberian military history, two different patterns can be found: (1) At the local level, fighters, both traditionally, and in the civil war, were drawn from groups of youth loosely connected to the gerontocratic leadership, although partly contesting its power. (2) On the national level, the Liberian army—the LFF and later the AFL—were in constant opposition to local warrior societies, whilst at the same time also partly recruiting from the same category. However, it would be a simplification to say that on one side the national army was part of some modern pattern, whilst on the other, warrior societies were part of a traditional pattern; because at the local level, we have also located two different trajectories: (1) the *kwii meni* (modern) and (2) the *Zo meni* (traditional). The two boys Koli and Sumo in John Gay's book, illustrate the wide differences of these trajectories. Sumo remained in the countryside and through skilful mastery of local culture, he turned into an important man. Koli by contrast, is equally successful, but through opposite means. In his life endeavour he turns to the unknown, as he leaves his native soil and moves off to take the *kwii meni*. Koli establishes his base of power in the opposing meni. It is worth pointing out however, that neither of these trajectories should be considered as being superior to the other, both fitting into the same cosmological system. Except in extreme cases, individuals will actually make use of elements from both trajectories. From a practical

perspective they are quite inseparable, thus a person will often utilise *Zo* and *kwii meni* simultaneously.

David Parkin talks about the differences between what he calls 'routes' and 'roots'.[28] 'Roots', essentially is the same as *Zo meni* in Kpelle. It is connected to place and rootedness, guarded by a gerontocratic elite in conversations with ancestors via land. 'Routes', or the *kwii meni*, on the other hand is predominantly action-oriented velocity in the hands of young people. Velocity is dangerous both for the individual and society. To society it is dangerous, because it threatens the order of things, that is, an order maintained by the gerotocratic leaders through the control of roots. To the individual, the uncertainty and immanent danger of routes is balanced by its potential power. This type of power is manifest by the Sunjata type of heroes in West African epics (see chapter 4). In the endeavours of young people to challenge the power of gerontocratic leadership they make use of their velocity through being able to draw energy from other cultures and/or cosmologies. As argued above, within local cosmology there is room for the interjection of foreign power as well as cultural traits, thus allowing for social change. The velocity of the young is thus often the emissary for such change. Cutting and mixing the cultural, the political and the economic is part of the 'bricoleur's' route. This is obvious in the construction of the Liberian warrior, to use the words of Mary Moran:

> *The power of the warrior is manifest in the ability to meld Western and indigenous, masculine and feminine, constructing the authentic*

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[28] David Parkin, Social and bodily trails among the Giriama of Kenya, lecture at NAI research forum, Uppsala 19/4-01. See also (Clifford 1997; Gilroy 1993).

*not in opposition to the imported, but as an intrinsic part of it. (Moran 1995:80)*

I argued above that local war chiefs and the various war societies were partly in opposition to local gerontocratic leadership. As can be seen from this argument, the opposition conforms to the routes/roots distinction. War societies contained young elements within society that used velocity to obtain social status. It is clear that through military bravery and success, young men transformed themselves into strong men in society. By doing so they could also, in the long term, claim roots-based power as well. The *kwii meni* followed a similar trait, as power and knowledge were obtained geographically away from the local power base. As a result, they were seen as contesting. Nevertheless, to be able to truly enter warrior societies, young men had to be initiated into the lowest levels of Poro society. In this fashion, Poro adopted the function as gatekeeper. Not just anyone could become a warrior, a contract with the Poro leadership had to be established first. However, the gradual weakening of Poro society because of missionary pressures and a governmental ban, tilted this delicate balance.

In large parts of Liberia, initiation has remained the conceptual approach to adulthood. Poro society would be the archetype, and young boys going through Poro initiation, as a passage to adulthood, would often take part in warrior activities. I have argued also that in non-Poro societies, the warrior societies were even closer to the idea of entering adulthood. Thus with the blocked opportunities which followed the economic collapse of Liberia in the late 1970s and early 1980s, paths to adulthood had to be fashioned anew. One such path

was to join the national army, which expanded greatly during the 1980s. Eventually, as the war approached, Liberian children and youths saw opportunities to become initiated into adulthood through voluntary enlistment into the rebel armies of the 1990s. This was based upon their velocity and their ability to 'cut and mix' cultural images. It was not only on the symbolic level that they gained the status of adulthood, but changes were also apparent on a practical level—as fighters, through the barrel of their guns, or "using their gun as a credit card" (Sesay 1996), gained unprecedented amounts of power. In this way too, they managed to get hold of *kwii* items that they had never seen before. To some, the gun itself symbolised their reconnection to the modern world, something with which they previously had felt disconnected:

> *Stood-down boy soldiers in Liberia have spoken longingly of their guns not as weapons of destruction but as being the first piece of modern kit they have ever known how to handle. (Hodges 1992, in Richards 1996:29)*

By manipulating and turning Liberian society upside down (a youth revolution, as many young soldiers label it), and by the establishment of power and status on a local level, many youths attained a wealth of adult dignity in the form of land, houses and wives. Despite the many injustices experienced before the civil war, youths largely used their newfound power to mimic earlier established relationships.[29] By

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[29] Taussig (1993) points out that mimesis can be a form of resistance that has a power potential exceeding the mimicked (for further discussion see: Ferguson 2002; Stoller 2002:76).

becoming new strongmen, they were able to create households containing many wives, or girlfriends (see chapter 5), in the same fashion as the earlier gerontocratic leadership had done. In line with the rule of traditional warlords, strongmen from these groups often established their own mini-empires. Also, the taking of spoils of war became a central identifier of the armies who appeared in a tradition of ruthlessness going back to the establishment of the LFF. Rebel soldiers were invariably unpaid and lived from looted goods. Fighters rose in rank through being daredevil—parodying the war chiefs of Liberian history. This process of mimicking not only the gerontocratic leadership, but the Liberian Army and traditional war societies as well, did not lead to the creation of well functioning armies, quite the opposite, the cutting and mixing performed by young Liberians in combination with newly established power, proved quite combustible. The victory of the routes, created an air of euphoria among earlier marginalised youth.

> *Then they bought beer and started washing their car with the beer.*
> *They said they were so rich so they would only use beer for washing*
> *the car. (Interview/Ganta)*

The arousal was temporary however. The newfound power of routes eventually has to be turned into roots. Washing cars in beer, performing wanton killings and rape within local communities does not lead to long-term power in any setting—unless of course sponsored by a pernicious state.

# THE LOGIC OF VIOLENT MEASURES

*"It's a big jungle there," explained a spokesman for the Red Cross.*
*(Raghavan & Barry 1996:16)*

## INTRODUCTION

Many commentators have highlighted the brutality of the Liberian Civil War. The word 'Jungle' as a metaphor for social anarchy, as in the quote above, is also prevalent in descriptions of unstable territories worldwide. But in specific human rights related literature, for instance, accounts like the following are more typical:

> *I was forcibly taken into the bush with my three children and husband by the LPC fighters under the accusation of (trying to kill) 'General War Boss' and 'General Kill the Bitch.' We have always been accused and tortured by these rebels because many of us are Bassa by tribe. My Husband was tied to a thorny tree; black driver ants were put all over his body while I was raped as a pregnant woman in front of my three children by four LPC fighters. Later, an order was given that my husband should be beheaded in front of my children and me. My husband cried for mercy, but the LPC did not listen and cut his esophagus and my husband finally died. (Cain 1999:277)*

> *There are numerous reports of fighters moving among the displaced of various areas looking for pregnant women. When they find one they*

*gamble on the sex of the unborn baby. They then cut the mother's womb open and pull the baby to see who won the bet. The mother and the baby are then thrown to the side of the road, as the fighters go looking for their next victim (UNOMIL's Chief of Security in Cain 1999:281)*

*Cannibalism is another phenomenon attached to the bandits. The displaced … attested to seeing a bandit cut off a woman's breast, roasting and eating it, while leaving her to die of bloodloss.… Cannibalism adds a whole new dimension to human rights abuses. The right to life is based on a persecutor's appetite, and there is a fear of persecution based on one's fitness for consumption. (Cain 1999:282)*

The media is also full of accounts of human rights violations by young combatants, who are presumed to instil fear into the entire population as some media scrapbooks suggest:

*Refugees arrived in Sierra Leone telling of checkpoints fenced around with posts topped with severed heads. The voodoo rumors began: Taylor's men were invulnerable to bullets, they shot each just to scratch each other's backs; before each battle Taylor's men slaughtered a young woman and drank her blood and ate her heart; Taylor's men could turn into snakes and elephants, could stretch or shrink their arms and legs at will, could make themselves invisible. The rapine and slaughter of this conflict were no more awful than those of other civil wars, but certain sickly inference seemed to draw itself out of them: Insofar as they were attached by threads of superstition to the exercise of certain dark powers, these atrocities became inscrutable (Johnson 1990).*

*Doe muß seinen eigenen Ohren aufessen, die ihm vor laufender Kamera abgeschnitten worden sind. Am Ende des Films liegt der Präsident sterbent in einer Blutlache und fleht seinen Folterer an, ihn zu töten, was dieser höhnisch zurürckweist mit dem Satz: „Don't bring that thing to me!". Das Video ist ein Bestseller in Liberia. (Buch 1995:13)*

*I saw the war. I saw a soldier point a bayonet at a pregnant woman and cut out her baby. I tell you, it's a tribal war. There are no ideas, no politics, just tribe. Doe is a Krahn, so the Gios and Manos support Taylor…… Prince Johnson's men had juju sutures on their backs. Taylor's soldiers had scorpions on their arms. These marks gave them spirit power, so the bullets could not hurt them. The people really believe these things. (conversation in Kaplan 1997:23)*

Also, the sheer violence of the civil war is still remembered vividly by the excombatants themselves. It feeds endless discussions on the subject and at times, the memories of their war crimes and the brutality of their acts instil joy, in certain settings, pride and/or respect.

*One of my friends, they called him Disregard, because he killed plenty. He caught a girl at the Ganta parking (where taxis leave for Ganta) when we captured Gbarnga. He caught this girl and asked he to lie down on the table. As she was lying there he took a mortar pestle and cut it into half and nailed her with it. (male excombatant in Ganta)*

Violent acts were also at times avoided during the war. It was not in every circumstance that the most violent measure was taken. My

informants talked on occasions about cases where soldiers were given the order to execute a prisoner, but had disobeyed. A few cases were discussed in my presence. One involved two NPFL soldiers who were ordered to shoot a prisoner. They took him to a river, but fired into the air instead, simply pushing him into the river. The second story is similar in construction: a little boy, believed to be a LPC spy, was caught and two soldiers were commanded to execute him. They brought him into a field of cassava and he was cut with a machete. However, they intentionally spared his life, and when the boy was later caught anew, the same soldiers were severely punished for disobeying orders and the story received great attention. Other matters are simply remembered with pain and disgust:

> *I don't want to eat any kind of animal head now because of what we saw during the war. The amount of persons that were killed in my presence and the amount of people that we burst their heads with axe. Sometimes the (air)plane killed somebody and when you reached there the kind of flesh scent, when you smell it, you won't like to eat meat again. (male excombatant in Ganta)*

In human rights related literature, and even more so in the wider media (Utas 2000), efforts are rarely made to locate the origins of violence in conflicts such as the Liberian Civil War. Violence in this context is seldom seen as being part of a set of processes; it tends instead to be viewed as being a primordial, if not biological constant of certain (non-Western) societies. This chapter intends to unravel the origins of violence in its processual form. It is specifically an account of young males, a group who were by far the most numerous perpetrators

of violence in Liberia's civil conflict. While chapter 3 took a socio-centric approach, this chapter reflects a rather individualistic perspective. At this point I would like to clarify that I am not suggesting that violence is a kind of 'essence' in some distinguishable 'Liberian ethos'. On the contrary, I emphasise that we should not ignore the fact that some violent formations can be extraneous to 'traditional' society and of fairly recent origin. After a brief general discussion on violence in conflict zones, my starting point in this chapter is the early socialisation of children, often administered through violent measures and executed by parents and other senior social actors in what is often described as a gerontocratic society. I continue by discussing the ideal of leadership, i.e. how 'big men' or patrons are conceived. I do so by taking local cosmologies, mythologies and external influences into account. I show that violence is used as a technique to obtain power and then to maintain power. In the final part of the chapter I discuss how violent means are utilised and manipulated by young combatants as techniques of attaining power. I do not intend to legitimise the extreme abuse suffered by Liberians during the civil war, but by unravelling underlying structures I try to render it conceivable.

## LOCATIONS OF VIOLENCE

"Violence is a self-legitimating sphere of social discourse," writes Allen Feldman (1991:5). In his ethnography on Northern Ireland, he vividly discusses aspects of mimicry in local conflict, and how retrograde violence can easily escalate into increasingly severe forms. The intensity and brutality of violence cannot in this respect be compared

with everyday aggression in times when larger conflicts are absent. But on the other hand, we cannot entirely dismiss the violence of everyday life if we want to understand war-related violence. In this chapter I pay attention to both physical and ritual forms of violence, each evidently being a means of power and control. During the civil war in Liberia, those who had themselves been controlled by violent means, subsequently hijacked, and thus mimicked, the violent measures to which they had earlier been subjected. Forms of everyday violence were transformed into tools and techniques for an inverted domination. By asserting this I do not imply that Liberia was a specifically violent country prior to the conflict, or that the civil war was the outcome of a inherently violent society; what I am saying is that the experience of being controlled by violent means, led combatants to use these very means themselves in order to gain control. At times, violence was used to take revenge on those who had earlier exercised control, but mainly, escalated forms of violence were exhibited in order to control their new and improved social positions.

During the Liberian Civil War, young people (at times very young) carried out most of the war-related violence. I believe that in this context, violent models of socialisation are especially important, as the actors of the civil war were so young. Models of violence also arguably form the bedrock of the various techniques of aggression which were revealed during the war years. Much of war related violence, certainly in the Liberian conflict, clearly had a mimicking character, and that in turn became blown up in proportion to the original. As Ignatieff points out, "once the killing has started, dehumanization is easily accomplished: the fact that the other side has killed your own, defines them as nonhuman and then legitimizes nonhuman behavior on your

part" (1999:56). Techniques of everyday violence can thus be altered into new levels of previously unexcelled violence in a damnation game (Böås 2001:699).

Focusing on young Liberians relationship to pre-war, or everyday violence, it is possible to adopt two different perspectives: (1) violence, as attributed to the socialisation of children. In particular I want to pinpoint domestic violence, educational violence, and finally what is especially important in the Liberian case, initiational violence. (2) a focus on the agentive dimension of violence, i.e. a focus on the agents of violence such as big men (or patrons), or, the desire to become such, or alternatively to resist. As I intend to show, ideas of the morally neutral hero (Cosentino 1989), are of particular use here.

## VIOLENT UPBRINGINGS

Following an increased interest in describing and understanding children and youth in Africa, we now focus on these groups as both makers and breakers in society, i.e. youth are actors who both produce, and reproduce, the societal web including acting as rebel fighters and being holders of moral position. They are simultaneously therefore breakers of norms, conventions, oppression, lives, relationships etc. Continuing from a more structural perspective, children and youth are also made, and broken, i.e. made or construed in this case by family, kin, community and peers, whilst being broken by wars, poverty, institutional devastation, unemployment etc. (De Boeck & Honwana forth.; Reynolds 1999). Childhood is not only a product of a harmonious home and village life, supported by family, kin and the local community, it is also the locus for initial breaking, and even

though the aspects of being broken may have the above characteristics, we need not to take the dichotomy too far. Here I shall discuss some of the violent methods employed in breaking Liberian children from early on in life, and what implications they might have for the formation or development of society.

## Secret societies and initiational violence

Esoteric or secret societies have played, and to a certain extent still play, important political roles in Liberian society, both on local, and on a national level (Bellman 1984; d'Azevedo 1980; Ellis 2001; Gibbs 1962; Harley 1941b; Hlophe 1973; Jedrej 1976; Murphy 1980). Social organisation in some regions of Liberia is highly stratified and largely gerontocratic. Secret societies play an important role here in maintaining such order. For example, "in Kpelle society, secrecy separates elders from youth. It supports the elders' political and economic control of the youth." (Murphy 1980:193). Knowledge is property, owned individually by ritual leaders of various kinds and used for control (ibid.). The secrecy concept creates boundaries between those who have knowledge, and those who do not. Through secret society training, youth learn to honour these boundaries. Intimately linked to the initiation practices of secret societies are notions of violence: "a major support of elders' authority is the threat of physical punishment or death from mysterious powers of the secret societies" (Murphy 1980:199). To face initiation, is an ultimately frightening experience for every young person, and many face it remaining unsure as to whether they will even exit 'bush school' alive. Secret society ideals also permeate everyday life and the notion of everyday violence has much to do with notions of this omnipresence of

secret societies. The socialisation of children, knowledge and education are all firmly linked to such secret society ideals (Bledsoe 1990a; Bledsoe & Robey 1993; Gage & Bledsoe 1994; Murphy 1981; 1980).

### Sanctioned use of violence

From early in life, Liberian children learn to labour. James Gibbs offers the following summary of children's tasks among the Kpelle:

> *A girl is given her first tasks around the home at six, when she can heat water and sweep the floor. By eight, she can hull and winnow rice, haul water from the creek, care for younger siblings, and help her mother on the farm. Two years later she knows how to cook most dishes. A boy's responsibilities begin a bit later, with stress on agricultural activities. By mid-adolescence he could farm on his own if he wished to. Two values that are expected to be internalized by both boys and girls are working diligently and showing respect for older persons. (Gibbs 1965:209)*

Caroline Bledsoe (1990a) has written an insightful article on the subject of institutionalised fosterage in neighbouring Sierra Leone, with a focus on the cultural maxim: *No success without struggle*. Her argument takes its departure in notions of the general treatment of children in southern Sierra Leone and I argue its validity for the Liberian context as well. She points out that to advance, "children must work and study hard, *endure beatings* and suffer sickness to mould their characters and earn knowledge" (ibid. 71/emphasis added). Beatings ought also to be understood from the agent's

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perspective. "The 'right to beat' reflects a claim, usually before an audience, to a kind of 'ownership' (or simply power) over who or what is to be beaten, whether it is, for example, a wife, a young boy, a slave or a domestic animal; it makes it clear that for them their autonomy is limited" (Last 2000:385). The formation of character in a child's individual development in accordance with overreaching social and moral codes, is supplemented in this context by culturally sanctioned violence.

Flogging (beating by cane or rubber) is the most prevalent form of physical violence in Liberia. It is repeatedly used as a form of domestic and public punishment. As a technique for correction, it functions on all social levels and reinforces individual relationships in the kind of hierarchical, non-egalitarian fashion so visible in contemporary Liberian society. In this environment, the adult has the right to beat a child, a husband can beat his wife, and an employer may physically punish an employee. In my own work with excombatant street youth in Monrovia, it became strikingly obvious how the act of flogging was used to maintain moral order within their domain, quite in opposition to the criminal lives they upheld outside of the walls of 'home' (see chapter 2). Physical violence on the domestic scene is not something that is usually hidden away. Quite the contrary, there is at times a marked effort to punish openly in public. Flogging children in this way is commonplace. I once witnessed a man making the considerable effort of dragging his wife all the way to the market place, just to flog her in public. Reason: she had committed adultery. More high profile, was the case involving President Charles Taylor. In November 2001 he caned his 13-year-old daughter in her classroom, with an audience of local journalists. He administered 10 lashes, commenting "I have the

responsibility not only for my children, but for all the children in the country to ensure that the responsibility of nationhood will be passed on to reliable custodians".[1] Public executions of political leaders also contribute to the general ideal of public punishment. Another punishment often mentioned by Liberians is 'to pepper a child', i.e. to apply chilli pepper on naked skin, or still worse, in bodily orifices. Victims of this punishment have testified that in combination with being forced to lie in the harsh sun, it is quite a terrible experience.[2]

Food withdrawal is a prevalent form of non-violent correction in Liberia. Eating is a central metaphor for power (functions as metaphor for, as diverse activities as, capturing a town, having sex with a woman, getting a promotion, or embezzling money). Murray Last points out that punishing children by withdrawing food is efficient as it makes the disciplined experience what it is to lack power (2000:374). Punishing a child by refusing him or her access to food is indeed commonplace in Liberia. We should observe that this type of disciplining is dependent on season. Parents in Ganta, Nimba County, pointed out that this measure was not very efficient at times when children could find alternative food, such as during mango season, when surplus fruit is readily available—Bledsoe has made the same observation (1990a:79). Another form of non-violent punishment is the practice of shaming. Following this praxis a thief, for example, will be punished by carrying the items he or she has stolen on his head in public whilst everyone around him/her will yell, to get the attention of

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[1] See BBC: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/1647852.stm or
http://www.uiuc.edu/ro/observer/archive/vol11/issue3/obiter.html
[2] To say "I go pepper you" might however only imply that you intend to beat me.

the whole village or neighbourhood. I have only observed this form of punishment once. Generally, public punishment in Liberia is very violent.

In colloquial Liberian English, raising a child is called: *To mend a child*. There is actually some uncertainty around the word mend. It appears that Bledsoe simply translates the Krio (Sierra Leone's lingua franca) version *mend* as "mind" (1990a:83). However in one of the entries of the Oxford English Dictionary, we read the following: Mend can be…

> *to free (a person, his character or habits) from sin or fault; to improve morally; to reform; occas. to cure of (a fault). Now arch. or dial. exc. in phr. to mend one's manners, ways.*

To mend one's manners or ways seem to coincide with the Liberian use of the word. 'Minding one's own child' is too passive, as the implication of *mending* a child is acutely active and child raising in the Liberian, as well as Sierra Leonean, context is indeed actively carried out. We learn that:

> *After the initial two or three years of closeness with the mother… Mende children are constantly chastised and corrected, frequently bullied and deprived of food. Children are non-persons without rights (Boone 1986 in Bledsoe 1990a:73).*

Indeed I have encountered cases of contrasting behaviour where mothers over-protect their children (often the youngest one). The 'spoiling' of a particular child is popularly discussed in opposition to

the correct 'mending' of one's offspring. Telling someone that they 'don't have training', is a common way of cursing.[3]

## Educational violence

In Liberia as well as in most other parts of West Africa, children and youth regularly have to leave their hometowns and villages in order to enhance their education. In rural communities, access to education is usually limited to government run elementary schools and it is generally accepted that the quality of these is quite low (concerning the Liberian education system, see Fuest 1996). Moving to larger towns and cities, or to boarding schools, Christian missionary schools, or to Koran schools and other Muslim institutions, form part of the hardship ideal that we have discussed above. In part we might argue, like Murray Last, that the use of violence to socialise children has seen an increase through these very institutions. According to Last, physically disciplining children is, in Nigeria, associated with 'modernity' and conversely to refuse to beat a child is seen as something backward or 'wild' (2000:359).

[3] Both Mary Moran, who has undertaken fieldwork in Maryland, in the very south east of Liberia and Robert Leopold who has reserached in Upper Lofa (see Leopold 1991) have, in personal communication, pointed out to me that during their respective fieldwork periods, they encountered very little violence directed towards children. During Leopold's two year long fieldwork (1985-1987) he could in retrospect not remember encountering a single case. This might indicate that Liberian pre-war society was less violent than what my informants tended to remember. However this is contradicted in the findings of others (in particular Bledsoe and Murphy). If we follow Murray Last's argument (presented in some detail below) that physical punishment is connected with the modern state through the educational system in particular, then it is easier to understand that the physical punishment of children is absent or rare in remote areas as studied by Moran and Leopold.

*Beating is associated with a specific notion of 'modernity', whether the modernity is defined culturally as conversion to Islam from paganism or as entry into a colonial school. (Last 2000:386)*

Last goes on to suggest that in pre-colonial Africa, adults did not commonly beat their own children (ibid. 361), instead it was the advent of Muslim and/or Christian education that made physical punishment of children socially preferable. It is a well established fact that beating is instrumental in learning the Koran in West Africa (Kane 1972; Sanneh 1997; 1996), and in Sierra Leone many people compare the treatment of students by Koran teachers to slavery (Bledsoe & Robey 1993:124). Physical discipline in Liberian schools appears to be the preferred mode of correction, as the case of President Taylor flogging his daughter highlighted. Indeed, parents and other family members aiding their children with homework see it as an ideal tool of learning. Just as Last has noted for Nigeria "there is the notion that learning, or at least concentration, is effectively maintained through pain or the threat of pain" (Last 2000:377).

In the Nigerian case, parents send away their children to Muslim teachers or Islamic schools, that are often renowned for treating pupils harshly (Last 2000:363). The parents themselves went through the system and survived it, so the style of disciplining is seen as being the appropriate one (ibid. 375). In fact parents often prefer to send their children as far away as possible, so that they dare not run away and go back home. However, Last notes (ibid. 379-80) that many still run away from their school and find refuge in the larger towns, sustaining themselves with petty trade or crime.

In Last's case study on 'contrasting cultures of punishment', he

compares two settings: one firmly Muslim and the other fairly 'traditional'. He argues that "it is only in the relative isolation of the deeply rural countryside that a general policy of rejecting violence is both socially feasible and economically rational as one cultural option among many for bringing up children in Hausaland" (Last 2000:372). Although I have not undertaken such systematic research in Liberia on this particular issue, I find substantial support in the idea that violent forms of punishment are connected to the 'modern' educational systems in Liberia, as well as that of the development of the Liberian state and its system of territorial governance (frontier force, army, indirect rule, commissioners etc.—see previous chapter). However, it is important to retain that 'traditional' institutions, in the guise of secret societies, often use violence and fear of violence as techniques of keeping local communities under control. The blending of this type of violence with modern—religious or secular—forms of educational violence is the backdrop for a new culture of punishment that has developed in West Africa.

### Fosterage

Partly due to educational needs, many boys and girls live with foster parents for extended periods of time. Fosterage, or wardship, and cross-over arrangements covering apprenticeship are institutional in both Liberia (Moran 1990:101; 1992; Murphy 1981:676) and elsewhere in West Africa (Einarsdóttir 2000; Bledsoe 1990a; Hunt 1993; Sall 2002). I do not have statistics on how many children actually go through the institution of fosterage in Liberia, but it is reasonable to believe that these figures would be quite similar to those presented by Bledsoe (1990a) on southern Sierra Leone. In Bledsoe's survey, as much

as a third of the children aged below 16 lived away from their mothers. In some Mende dominated areas more than half of the children aged between 15-19 lived in foster homes (ibid. 72f). Bledsoe notes that it is often the most favoured child who is sent away. This arrangement bears economic, as well as socio-political advantages. On the financial side, a family has fewer children to feed, and generally the host of the child will pay school fees and other expenditures (ibid: 73).

Fosterage is also "inextricably linked to networks of political patronage", as "many parents foster out their children more to cement patronage relationships with other adults than to derive direct utility from the children themselves" (Bledsoe 1990a:75). Foster children generally originate from rural areas, entering towns and cities under a foster arrangement. There is also a pronounced idea that incomers will gain in sophistication, turn *kwii* or civilised, both through education and by living in an urban environment (Fuest 1996; Moran 1992). This produces a gradient fosterage in which status rises with increasing social and geographical distance (Bledsoe 1990a:74). A university degree from abroad, for instance, implies value-added status. I believe that it would be fruitful to connect these acceptances to a family of myths, which have their origins in the epic of Sunjata (as I do below), just as distance is an important aspect of powerful magic within local mythology.

The institution of fosterage clearly fits well into the system Bledsoe has labelled 'wealth in people' among the Kpelle peoples in Liberia; where wealth is more dependent on bonds of duty and obligation with people, than ownership of land and material possessions (Bledsoe 1980c; for similar reasoning see Kopytoff & Miers 1977; Leopold 1991). As a young Sierra Leonean man recounted, fosterage is a matter of 'being for' someone, and it "implies that you have made yourself

subject to the person. You work for him, fight for him, etc. And he is in turn responsible for you in all ways (such as court fine, clothes, food, school fees, or bridewealth)" (Bledsoe 1990a:75). Harsh treatment is often seen as a key part of the arrangement of wealth, with foster children generally receiving more severe beatings, less medical care and food of poorer quality than would biological children in the household. As already suggested, following the cultural paradigm 'no success without struggle', parents often send their children away to boarding schools, Muslim schools and to other foster homes, so as to ensure that their children get hardened enough.[4] As Murray Last recalls:

> *I have heard a mother argue that it is necessary for others to discipline her sons strictly in order that her own unconditional support should not spoil them. (Last 2000:378)*

In the long run it is "only these 'trained' children can be trusted to share power …. in choosing his main counsellor, therefore, a chief may brush aside his own spoiled, bickering sons in favour of a foster child he 'trained': one whose loyalty and obedience he can trust in the face of adversity" (Bledsoe 1990a:80).

Immediately, it appears that there is a clear hegemony of human development in play, where gerontocratic structures appear to control upbringing. It is often believed that by subjecting oneself to patrons,

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[4] We need to account for regional differences. In her study on fosterage in Southern Liberia, Mary Moran emphasises material (food, education) and status (networking, civilised training) as root objectives in the arrangement of fosterage. However, the socio-cultural significance of 'child-hardship', of learning to endure, is not present here. Quite the contrary, servants/foster children "are protected from outright exploitation by the moral construction of civilisation" (Moran 1992:110).

one can obtain knowledge and control that might in the future enable one's own transformation from subject to patron. As a folk model success without struggle cannot exist. Being subjected to particularly harsh conditions, children in fosterage become particularly sympathetic to the idea of youth rebellion against the established society. It is apparent in my research that children in foster homes more readily than others, would join rebel armies in the Liberian Civil War. Direct acts of vengeance on patrons and foster parents alike appear to have been quite common. However, the figure of the warlord and commander soon came to replace foster parents, and the relationship in most instances mimicked that of fosterage. As the idea of youth revolution and of foster children running away to join rebel armies indicates, the gerontocratic 'wealth in people' system, leaves room for alternative trajectories of individual development, also making cosmological change possible. In fact, I shall argue, the image of the sociopathic, or anti-social, hero, offers scope for an alternative leadership, one that involves hunters, warriors, and the like.

## The alternative—the rascal mode

Even if the model of children struggling and suffering under a gerontocratic regime is the dominant model in Liberian society, there is still room for ambivalence as individual endeavours of aggressiveness are promoted among both boys and girls.[5] As Ottenberg has pointed out, Nigerian society has a "contradictory need to develop

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[5] In Monrovia I watched high school basketball. To my surprise the referee had to stop the game several times due to rock throwing by young female supporters. No male supporters took part however in the carefully staged provocations that initiated and followed the violent sequences.

vigorous, independent males for warfare and leadership; presumably "mother's tails" don't fight or lead well" (1989:57). Parallel to the submissive ideal of children raised gerontocratically, is the fluid group of "rascal boys and palaver men…. models of a strong and active ego" (ibid. 50). *Grona boys*,[6] *rarray boys* and *savis men* (Abdullah 1997a) comply with the images of the naughty-boy present in West African oral tradition and contemporary popular culture (Cosentino 1989). As an archetype they fit into certain hunting and warrior segments of traditional society where hegemony is less outspoken and formalised than it is in secret society leadership. Indeed, as I have pointed out elsewhere (see chapter 3), this segment of society appears to function as a counter hegemonic source.

The range of urban, semi-urban, plantation and mining environments, appear as ideal places for the development of a sub-culture based upon a rascal boy model. The ease with which cultural meaning blends in such contact zones (connecting traits of the African with the Western and the Kpelle with the Sarpo etc.), tied up with the wealth of the few and poverty of the majority, functions as breeding ground for new ideals of rascals. The Gio myth of the amoral Boya Manjbe is cross-fertilised with modern images of traditional Japanese ninjas. The utilisation of violence from both images, aids young people in their understanding of their own predicament at the bottom of the social hierarchy. The violence directed towards them, is thus placed in a functioning framework whilst at the same time, counter-violence is

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[6] The term *grona*, in Liberian English, implies someone whose behaviour has outgrown the physical age thus engaging in activities that are not suited for them. *Grona* is more often used to label girls with many boyfriends, or prostitutes (Utas 1999).

presented as being the key to a change of such predicaments. If the ideal trajectory is to persist within a violent system, to accept beatings, floggings and other techniques of ritualised violence, the pseudo-social trajectory to grow up and to reach adult acceptance, would be to go *grona*. The Liberian war was a period of massive *grona-fication*; i.e. youth branching off from a mainstream social trajectory, instead following the one which was pseudo-social.

## VIOLENT HEROES

In this second part of the chapter, I discuss the cultural legitimation of violent action from an agentive perspective. I believe in this connection that it would be fruitful to look at the culturally specific concept of the hero. In the region we find a concept of the hero as being morally neutral (Cosentino 1989:31), as we shall see in two examples.

(1) Watching and analysing a Hollywood action movie with some Liberian friends initially made me quite confused, since they did not maintain the binary opposition between the hero and the bad guy in the fashion that I had learned to take for granted. Good and bad remained present in their analysis of the film, but what was striking about their categorisation, was that they talked about the 'good hero' and the 'bad hero'.

(2) A young woman narrated a story about a Liberian 'war hero' residing in a small town in southern Sierra Leone. The man was a fighter in the ULIMO force, which for some time had fought alongside the Sierra Leone army against the RUF rebels. The rebel soldier was reached by rumours that one of his girlfriends—a successful fighter has got many girlfriends (see chapter 5)—was having

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an affair with another man. As a response to this, he brought the girl into a public place, laid her on a market table and forced her legs open. He proceeded by forcing a mortar pestle, from the (chilli) pepper mortar deep inside her vagina (there is a pronounced symbolism of the mortar being the female sexual organ, and the mortar pestle as the male—remember the use of chilli pepper for punishment as well). The story is not unique, similar things happened to many unfortunate men and women during the civil war. Rather it is something else that catches one's attention: throughout the story, the female narrator attaches the label 'hero' to the perpetrator. It is obvious that she does not imply that the perpetrator is acting in a correct, moral way; rather, as in the case of the movie viewers' responses, the case proposes that the title, 'hero' is morally neutral in local terminology.

## The Sunjata model

To get a better understanding of the cultural specificity of the hero and heroism, we need to penetrate local mythology. Few Liberians have actually heard of Sunjata,[7] but most are familiar with epics having similar contests; relating to marginal young men and their socio-cultural negotiations of power. The epic of Sunjata is both socially relevant and forms an active piece of oral literature in the Guinea and Mali sub-region (Johnson 1999:9). In addition to live oral performances, in popular culture Sunjata is distributed on audiocassettes (see Conrad 1999), films (Kouyaté 1995), printed in

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[7] Some Liberians will be familiar with the name Sunjata Keita from its popularity in music of Guinean origin. However, as the lyrics are sung in Susu, Mandingo (Malinke) or any other unfamiliar vernacular, the epic of Sunjata itself is seldom referred to.

books (Innes *et al.* 1999; Niane 1965; Sisòkò & Johnson 1992; Suso & Kanute 1999), and in scholarly writing (Austen 1999; Diawara 1998; Jansen 2001).

Sunjata Keita was born the son of a king. However, being the offspring of the king's third wife and being born crippled (at the age of seven he could still not walk), he spent his childhood on the margins of society. Finally learning to walk, he started to develop supernatural strengths, thus contesting the power of his paternal brother, the future king. When his father died, the ensuing power struggle forced him to go into exile. During these years, he gained further strength, acquired magical skills and became a much renowned and feared warrior/hunter. Sunjata is destined to return, and upon his return, he emerges victorious out of all battles and subsequently rises to power to establish the Mali Empire.

In Sunjata fashion, young West Africans seek to migrate to towns, diamond mines, plantations, or to far-away countries in Europe, or the Americas. The incentive is to gain economic and partly magical strength (in a mythologised manner), ultimately returning home to establish themselves in the centre of society. Clearly modern migration myths contain allusions to Sunjata type scenarios, and they may influence the decision of young men and women to leave home. It is of course a highly idealised picture and as we know, many fail—often ending up in circumstances more precarious than those they left. Another theme present in the Sunjata epic which is of particular importance in understanding the violent steps taken by youth in the Liberian Civil War, is the conscious breaking with social norms and regulations. To reach individual status and power, Sunjata uses antisocial means. Sunjata "becomes associated with those skilled,

secretive, and dangerous practitioners of the occult, the hunters' societies, the epitome of antisocial behavior" (Johnson 1999:19).

## Other rebel heroes

Some twenty years ago, Bird and Kendall analysed Sunjata as a 'rebel hero' and noted that "the image of the rebel hero who breaks with, but ultimately returns to his people is not without relevance to the modern Mande child" (1980:22). In Liberia and Sierra Leone other myths of adventurer-rebel-heroes of the Sunjata epic genre are kept alive to this day. The Sunjata figure appears in various transformed versions. In Gio mythology we find a trickster character called Boya Manjbe, who has a clear affinity with Sunjata. This figure is an *enfant terrible*, a trickster and shape shifter that frequently behaves immorally to a powerful leadership, not as a Robin Hood or a social bandit, but rather for his own sheer pleasure. Similar characters can be found among all Mande peoples in Liberia. They are, however, better described in the literature on Sierra Leone. Cosentino has found their presence throughout that country and in his words "each group had snatched from the manifest Mande myth its own figure of a rebellious youth overturning some sacrosanct ancestral construct in pursuit of some personal sweet latent in the inherited mosaic of images" (Cosentino 1989:33). Among the Mende peoples in Sierra Leone, this figure has several names; one is Musa Wo—little Moses (ibid.), and among the Kuranko he is called Gbentoworo (Jackson 1982).[8]

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[8] The shape shifting rebel hero is by no means a unique character for this particular region of Africa. Quite the contrary, similar thoroughly mythologised characters are found in a wide variety of settings (see e.g. the contributions in Crummey 1986; as well as De Boeck 2000).

Whilst the myth of Gbentoworo conforms well to the Sunjata epic,[9] Boya Manjbe and Musa Wo remain amoral to the very end. As Cosentino notes "the hallmark of all Musa Wo's actions is volition unrestrained by social consideration" (1989:30). While Sunjata-like epic heroes "are transformed from abused and wilful miscreants into beneficent rulers, Musa Wo begins as an *enfant terrible* and descends to the level of a relentless, obscene, and amoral monster" (ibid. 22). Having an impressive criminal record Musa Wo, the deposed royal aspirant, descends into an "entropy of pornographic violence" (ibid. 28). In Hobsbawm's typology of social bandits the most extreme category is located in the archetypal 'avenger': "in romances of the oppressed…..to assert power, any power, is itself a triumph", thus "killing and torture is the most primitive and personal assertion of ultimate power, and the weaker the rebel feels himself to be at the bottom, the greater, we may suppose, the temptation to assert it" (Hobsbawm [1969] 2000:71). This is the essence of Musa Wo. I argue that it is a logic trajectory that has been appropriated by many of the young rebel soldiers in the Liberian Civil War—in this case violence is an expression of power of the powerless. However, one ought not to forget that a moral ideal is maintained simultaneously, as "the moral world to which they belong contains the values of the 'noble robber' as well as those of the monster" (ibid. 64).

The trickster character that the Liberian *grona* boy embodies, not only draws upon longstanding ideals of shape-shifting, but thoroughly links these more 'traditional' images with quite recent encounters of

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[9] Still the Kuranko version differs from the grand Mande version. Bird (1999) says that Sunjata is promoted to epic among the Mande and demoted to a folk story among the Kuranko.

western rap[10] and reggae icons as well as movie characters. Paul Richards argues that the Vietnam war veteran outsider character of John Rambo is a classic trickster figure close in spirit to Musa Wo (1996:59; see also 1994), but Bruce Lee and the often hidden faces of ninja fighters on the screen evoke much the same connotations.[11] Such ubiquitous youth icons "make their appearance in juxtaposition with images of age and authority, suggesting the persistence of the primal struggle between the overbearing father and the rebellious son that is at the heart of the travails of Musa Wo, Mande myth, and *Totem and Taboo*" (Cosentino 1989:34).

> *Musa Wo is an archetypal expression of that unresolved conflict: the wild longing for free expression in a tightly constructed society. Neither his performers nor his audience knows where he is going. His myth has no ending, and cannot be ended. But his persistence on the road may express what Samuel Beckett has called mankind's pernicious optimism (the dark hope for a happy, if unknowable, end to the adventure. (Cosentino 1989:36)*

[10] In Sierra Leone a rebel unit was named after the late American rap musician Tupac Shakur and it is reported that in early October 1998 more than hundred rebels attacked the northern town of Kukuna sporting t-shirts bearing Tupac's picture (Lansana Fofana—BBC correspondent), Electronic Mail and Guardian, Johannesburg, October 7, 1998—http://www.chico.mweb.co.za/mg/news/98oct1/7oc-sierra_rap.html).

[11] As is also common in other conflicts special forces of the various Liberian rebel armies were called ninjas. In the reconstructed (post 1997 election) Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) a unit of especially hardened soldiers is also called ninjas.

## Proto-Sunjata leadership

Liberian leadership is strongly hierarchic and based upon gerontocratic ideals (this is less the case of the Southern part which is more egalitarian or even featuring a 'democratic tradition', or an 'indigenous democracy' as Mary Moran (2002a; 2002b) has pointed out). Local hierarchies interconnect with each other as well as with state hierarchies. Some are apparent, others well hidden, some remain over time, others are temporal. The power of patron figures is by no mean permanent, but is constantly being contested and the patron must use skill, wit and magic to remain in position. The patron figure (big person) can be "a chief, landlord, teacher, parent, senior wife or older sibling" (Bledsoe 1990a:75). "Capacity to perform mediative and protective functions" (ibid.) are of great importance for patrons. As in the case of fosterage, people are 'for somebody' and they rarely seek the "dangerous autonomy but…. attachment to a kingroup, to a patron, to power—an attachment that occurred within a well-defined hierarchical framework" (Kopytoff & Miers 1977:17). Thus there is a clear tendency to seek ever-more powerful mediators.[12]

Rising to leadership implies using all means of power, including violence and magic. Fending off contestants to remain in a leading position requires even more skills, and close ties with magic practitioners are central. Leadership inside the 'traditional' secret societies relies heavily on the practices and functions of these societies. However, alternative leaders have an urgent need to establish

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[12] Without being apologetic for the current state of affairs in West African politics it should be noted, as Mamdani has pointed out (1996), that patrimonialism of the African states is not authentically 'African', "but merely the unreformed means by which urban elites maintain their colonially wrought power over the rural masses" (Fanthorpe 2001:368).

themselves by alternative means. They often involve themselves with a set of magic practitioners seen as immoral, as well as relying upon more violent practices. Indeed, leaders of the Liberian State—presidents and ministers—were often members, and at times symbolic leaders for 'traditional' secret societies, although they could only partly rely on those societies as a power base. Instead, they have commonly sought power in loose alliances with another set of diviners and ritual specialists, locally referred to as 'magicians', 'sorcerers', 'fortune-tellers', 'witch-doctors', 'herbalists' or 'medicine men' (Shaw 1996). This has been a well-established practice for a long time. Human leopard societies for example made themselves known in Sierra Leone in the 1860s (Beatty 1915; Jackson 1989)—also being a widespread phenomenon elsewhere in Africa (Lindskog 1954). In Liberia, leopard societies were banned in 1912 along with other more indigenous secret societies (Ellis 1999:238). Ritual specialists from remote places are believed to possess more powerful magic and are thus preferred. The late President Doe is said to have had a preference for Togolese magic practitioners. Likewise, warlords in the civil war often engaged practitioners from Burkina Faso and Senegal (as well as fighters, or a combination of the two) because of their perceived extraordinary powers. The tragicomic character Yacouba in Ahmadou Kourouma's novel *Allah n'est pas obligé* (2000) who left his business in the Ivory Coast to travel around in the war zones of Liberia and Sierra Leone, hooking up with military leaders and providing them magical charms and amulets, is indeed a bit twisted, but does have a clear connection with reality.

The rampant rumours of heart doctors roaming the streets of Monrovia in normal day (pre-war) Liberia supplying political leaders

and top business men with human body-parts, including hearts as their name indicates, point towards an individual engagement of magic practitioners. Heart doctors, or heartmen, "functioned as independent commercial entrepreneurs who obtained human organs and sold them for monetary gain to those who believed that they could acquire wealth and power by their ritual use and even consumption" (Ellis 1999:266). Discussing this topic, it is easy to construct images of exotic 'others' engaged in barbaric if not primordial behaviour, as is in Stephen Ellis book *The mask of anarchy* (1999).[13] Newspapers in Monrovia, a central source used by Ellis to extract knowledge on the matter, will print forms of oral lore more than actual substantiated news, but as communicator of magic power, newspapers are of importance. To a limited extent human body parts were used for ritual matters, more so during the war. However the rumour that a particular patron took part in such rituals, and thus possessed the powers that they are believed to produce, is what is of primary interest for him/her. The very employment of a ritual specialist and the resultant public knowledge about it is a power-boost in itself. Thus the ritual violence of engaging a heart doctor is a writing surface for communication in the same category as the visual statement of the Butt-naked brigade, who fought entirely naked in the streets of Monrovia during the April 6 war of 1996. Playing on people's ideas of magic, functions as a symbolic membrane of power.

In my effort to understand the position of patrons I will discuss the idea of national leadership. To enhance a basic understanding I believe

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[13] Ellis' analysis lacks a historical perspective of cultural change. That is obvious in his treatment of heart-men and leopard societies as part and parcel of more indigenous secret societies.

that it is important to account for the pre-war leadership's relationship to the military, and to see the military essentially as agents of governmental violence directed towards its own citizens. The leadership of the Liberian State has been using violence rather freely. Liberia has been a thoroughly militarised society from its inception in the Americo-Liberian colonial conquest. First the LFF (Liberian Frontier Force) and subsequently the AFL (Armed Forces of Liberia) functioned as violent agents of the Liberian government. In the territories and in the hinterland of Liberia, the army relied on a high proportion of violence to keep people in place. Tax collection usually went hand in hand with practices of private looting. The rape of women, flogging, and at times tortures, disappearances and death, all appear to have been part of their technique. Myths of cannibalistic practices also formed part of their reputation in many regions.

In an attempt to quell governmental opposition in Nimba County after the failed 1985 coup attempt, AFL troupes loyal to President Doe went on the rampage, killing civilians and instilling fear in the entire county.[14] Even so, at present many Nimbadians are still talking about Samuel Doe as a great leader. One of the things they emphasise, in particular, is that he was a strong leader and that he was not afraid of loosing his power to get his will through. Even if people were tortured and/or lost family and friends during the process, numerous people believe in retrospect, that his 'rule by fear' was correct. Thus rule through violent domination is customary to leadership. Prince Johnson and his rebel group, INPFL, eventually vanquished Doe's power and killed him early in the civil war. Prince Johnson came from

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[14] Sources have estimated the number of dead to around 3000 (Cain 1999).

Nimba County and thus saw the civil war as a revenge on Doe.

During his time as leader for the INPFL, Johnson built up a reputation of being an extremely powerful, thus potent, leader. How he time after time tricked the Liberian army is something that every child in Nimba County can recount. Johnson was also known for his random violence: whenever he felt the urge, he would slay his own soldiers, something excombatants under his command are quick to point out. However, a strong leader also has many enemies. One of his ex-soldiers pinpoints that by saying that if Prince Johnson would return to Liberia, there would be many people who would like to 'eat' him, to gain his powers. For a Liberian leader it is immaterial to be 'a man of the people' (Achebe 1966); the predominant feature of a good leader is the fact that he is ruthless and omnipotent like a God.

### Morally neutral powers

In a Sunjata-like fashion, power is obtained through magic powers gathered in distant lands. The potency of these magical powers generally grows with geographical and social distance. The methods to gain power do not necessarily have to fit with a set of moral ideals, as the power of patrons and big men is based on a concept of the morally neutral hero. At a first glance, there is little similarity between the current presidents Ahmad Tejan Kabbah in Sierra Leone and Charles McArthur Taylor in Liberia. In fact their paths to state power appear to be quite each other's antithesis. One made a successful career within the UN system, whilst the other, although a US college graduate, was suspected of fraud and was imprisoned in the US. He later became the main rebel leader of the Liberian Civil War. I will argue nevertheless that part of their success is connected to their appearances as proto-

Sunjatas. Their struggle in and then mastery of far away places, herald their successful return.[15] Taylor and Kabbah returned as a masterful leader should do, equipped with their western university degrees as mythico-medicinal power. Power in their case, as well as Sunjata's, is established on merits from abroad. "Individuals who travel to, or learn about, far away lands have privileged access to powerful, mysterious knowledge" (Bledsoe 1990a:77). Kabbah's return is crowned by the fact that a contingent of Western governments offer him support, and the aid money that he brings shows in a symbolic way his mastery of that system. Taylor's return, on the other hand, is even more Sunjata-like. He returns as a warrior,[16] employing magical skills as well as wit. In his effort to gain ultimate power he is fearless and he uses all means of power available to get all the way, thus complying with the ideal of the morally neutral hero. But does he promise to transform his leadership into a more morally recognisable authority (in relative terms— following the argument of leadership/patrons above) by becoming a Sunjata? Or is he inclined to follow the ever descending path of the trickster heroes of Boya Manjbe and Musa Wo?

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[15] They are not scorned upon as others. Monrovians often use the expression JJC (*Johnny-Just-Come*) to describe the category of people who went abroad but came back without the normative cultural capital and economic wealth expected in popular myth. JJC is generally an expression used by African immigrants to Europe or the USA to describe recent arrived immigrants who do not know their way around in their new environment. In Nigeria the term is also used to describe rural people moving to cities.

[16] Part of his legitimacy, even after the 1997 election rests on his warrior identity. This is obvious as he is keen to be presented with his honorary titles *Gankay* (strong man in Gola), *Dahkpanah* (chief medicine man in Kpelle), and less often *Okatakyie* (brave warrior—title given by the Ghanian business community), but also Dr. (a honorary title received from Taiwan).

## VIOLENT PATHS

I have so far argued that violence carried out by young Liberians in the civil war to a certain degree mimicked violence of the pre-war years. In the process of socialisation, violent measures were often present. Violent forms of punishment followed a specific socialisation logic, but were considerably modified according to the circumstances. When focusing on leadership, I have argued that we find the concept of a morally neutral hero in the region. The hero does not have to be good, per se. Leadership is to a certain extent seen as amoral, and to seize a leading position one has to go through moral badlands. The concept of power itself is a consequence of the morally neutral hero concept. Mythical persons of Sunjata-like character guide young people on their paths towards adulthood whilst the mimicking of patrons and leaders is also socialising young people into violent behaviour. In this last part of the chapter I intend to discuss the function of violence for young people who fought in the civil war itself.

Mary Kaldor points out that the greater the sense of insecurity in a society, the greater is the polarisation of social groups: "Nothing is more polarizing than violence" (Kaldor 1999:89). "Conflict itself generates a frantic search for moral community. A frightened and disoriented populace, we are told, tends to seek refuge in ethnicities and/or religious sodalities that offer to take on the burden of their alienation and represent it as a struggle for cultural rights" (Fanthorpe 2001:367-368). This is indeed often the case but other primary identities, such as participation in a fighting faction, often appear to overrule primordial attachments such as ethnic identity. In the Liberian Civil War, the various militant factions or rebel armies were comprised of soldiers with different ethnic backgrounds. Soldiers

shifting to another faction to enter the ranks of former enemy units was a common occurrence. Some combinations, as for instance Krahn personnel in the NPFL line were rare, but far from impossible. The Ivorian child soldier Birahima, the main character of Kourouma's *Allah n'est pas obligé* (2000), served in several Liberian rebel forces and then left for Sierra Leone and joined first the rebels and then the government side. Several of my informants have had similar experiences. Thus, to most youth combatants, youth identity—of being excluded from society—appears to have been a 'touchstone of fraternity' (Scott 1990:39), or a common ground for fomenting a 'moral community' irrespective of ethnic attachment.

## Violence and the rationality of the irrational

Anthropologists often try to rationalise violence by explaining its functionality in local cosmologies, as integral elements of ritual systems (Richards 1996; Taylor 1999). It is important, however, not to overemphasise the functionality or rationality of violence. On the contrary, I believe that the very component of irrational violence is crucially efficient in times of armed conflict. Violence is a kind of communication that often follows, as well as uses, a certain cultural logic. By breaking with certain cultural conventions, and by applying novel techniques on the battlefield, armies or individual soldiers sought to gain the upper hand. Launching an unexpected attack is a typical example. War is a time for experimentation and for the invention of new forms of violence, borrowing, in a bricolage fashion, from available models. As war is so much about controlling fear, there must be techniques for diminishing fear among one's own group whilst instilling fear in the enemy. A good example is General Butt-naked.

During the April 6 war in 1996 which ravaged much of Monrovia, 'the peanut butter brigade' instilled limited fear in the minds of Monrovians. In fact, they soon fell into oblivion. Their epithet was established because some of the boys in this irregular force found special pleasure in looting jars of peanut butter from the shelves of the downtown supermarkets. Quite in contrast to 'the peanut butter brigade', another group of irregulars graphically carved their presence into the minds and memories of the entire Liberian populace: 'the butt naked brigade'. The 'butt naked brigade' formed part of United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia (ULIMO-J) and was established under the leadership of General Butt-naked, alias Joshua Milton Blayee. Butt-naked made use of his super powers in the battles. As the name suggests, Butt-naked and his fighters were fighting naked. Prior to a fight, Butt-naked would turn his rear towards the enemy and fart—but before doing this he had to remove a small goat horn containing 'medicine' from his anus.[17] Butt-naked then connected all his fighters with a rope and warned against cutting themselves loose. As long as they were connected to him they were under protection of his powerful 'medicine'. Due to the medicine, Butt-naked was extremely hard to kill. He could not be shot in any ordinary way. The secret was that he was standing on top of the image of his body. That is, to kill him you had to shoot above what appeared to be his head. In post-war Monrovia, Butt-naked, who is quite a handsome young man, has left the war business behind and has become a religious leader in the Soul Winning Evangelist Ministry.

[17] Ex-president Samuel Doe (1980-90) had the same kind of 'medicine'. The 'medicine' is believed to give the user the ability to disappear.

Undressing entirely like General Butt-naked also plays on the irrational, as it is generally seen as a sign of mental disorder. But in extreme situations, like a civil war, this kind of irrationality communicates both an atmosphere of control to one's own soldiers and bewilderment to the enemy. The myths around his behaviour spread rapidly among friends and foe. The more or less immediate mythologisation of his behaviour establishes him in a superior position in relation to other magic interlocutors, not unlike the way a new dress style enters the fashion market.

## Magic and dangers

There is always a danger that those unaccustomed to dealing with highly potent magic, will try to use magic powers that exceed their capacity as human beings. There is a basic idea that people's capacity for magic varies greatly from person to person. The outcome of exceeding one's capacity is either death or mental illness. In popular discourse, mental illness among excombatants may be explained by saying that he/she consumed too much magic power or human flesh. You ought not to play with the devil. Overuse/abuse of magic powers can also make strongmen lose their connection with real life and thus open a window of opportunity for someone to take revenge or to get rid of them altogether. High commanders of the different rebel factions in the civil war were quite often very young. Casual Jacobs was a young NPFL commander, born in the early 1970s, who built up a reputation around himself. He was feared and respected for his brutality as well as his possession of magic powers. Even Charles Taylor, the rebel leader himself, feared him and avoided visiting his headquarters. Casual Jacobs took special pleasure in cutting peoples

throats in a way that made them slow to die; he worked up a technique carefully avoiding cutting the carotid and damaging the cervical vertebra. He was also renowned for pulling out eyeballs, cutting off tongues and ears of his victims. According to the myth, he was not torturing people for the reason of getting information, but for sheer pleasure. "He just wanted to be wicked" explains one of my informants. Another person who worked within his bodyguard, stated that he was 'carried away' by his use of magic powers:

> *They promoted him and carried him high up. Then when it starts with you it will make you live a good life—a good life! But soon it reaches a certain round and then things get tense for you. You can go to any other African scientist (ritual specialist) and he can make it, but you can end up dying. (excombatant in Ganta)*

As we can see, the use of violence and of magic is intimately connected. In fact, to be able to carry out requisite violent acts, and indeed to become a good fighter, one needs to have access to magical powers. Magic is also a means of protecting the individual from prolonged mental suffering, provided that the user abides by premeditated taboos. Seeking power outside of the ordinary structure, one will have to associate with "skilled, secretive, and dangerous practitioners of the occult, the hunters' societies, the epitome of antisocial behaviour" (Johnson 1999:19). It is not only a direct cutting in on power that is at stake; even the mere manifestation of ties with some practitioners may have important implications, as "the ability to cause others to believe that one has a great stockpile of occult power is a key element in the acquisition of power" (ibid. 17).

In this vein it is advantageous for a warrior/soldier to promote a reputation for being a cannibal, for having taken the extreme magical measure of eating human body parts, transforming it to personal powers. Casual Jacobs and another young Gio fighter, Nelson Gaye, constructed their power base on myths of cannibalistic rituals. It is highly likely that both took part in cannibalistic rites, but it is also quite clear that part of their reputation was staged, in order to acquire formal power over other NPFL soldiers and to instil fear in enemy groups. The power of staged reputation is obvious in sequences such as this one, commenting on the late President Samuel Doe:

> *Samuel Doe was widely credited with the power not only to be impervious to bullets, but also of disappearing in the face of danger, including plane crashes. He had a coterie of juju men from all over Africa, notably Togo. And some of the rituals he was rumored to be practising in order to maintain potency of his powers including drinking the blood and/or eating the fetuses of pregnant young girls. (Enoanyi, Behold Uncle Sam's Step Child, cited in Ellis 1999).*

Likewise Stephen Ellis states that Charles Taylor "according to some who know him well" had been drinking the blood of sacrificial victims (Ellis 1995:192). A local newspaper had also been stating that "Taylor and his closest aides form an elite society known as the Top Twenty, which practices a cult of cannibalism" (ibid.).[18] Occultism, or magic,

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[18] Ellis appears to be obsessed with the occult, cannibalism in particular. His otherwise thorough reading of the Liberian Civil War is somewhat blackened by his lack of in-depth understanding of local ritual and cosmology.

may thus be used as a shortcut to power and/or a technique to remain in power. As a technique it is used by patrons/big men in differing sets of hierarchies as well as at different levels in these hierarchies. As such it is utilised as a tool for politicians, businessmen, military commanders and soldiers of rank and file alike.

## Masculinity and militarism

The construction of masculinity is of great importance in the understanding of the aptitude by male youth for violent expression. Cross-culturally, violent manifestations shape social formations of masculinity (Gow & Harvey 1994; Bowker 1998), but as Robert Connell has pointed out "in any cultural setting, violent and aggressive masculinity will rarely be the only form of masculinity present" (2000:216). Every society has 'multiple definitions of masculinity', but "there is generally a hegemonic form of masculinity, the centre of the system of gendered power" (ibid. 216-17). Thus Connell speaks of a 'hierarchy of masculinities'. In the Liberian case, we ought to look at a militarised masculinity which is learned by men from a young age. The militarisation is twofold, first it stems from warrior ideals of pre-Liberian times, and secondly it emanates from violent confrontations with the state through the national army. I argue that this form of violence is not something masculine per se, but that it operates as a hegemonic mode within a militarised masculinity. Even within the rebel armies, violent masculinity manifests itself differently to Generals and foot soldiers (Connell 2000:224).

"Rape and sexual violence appear to be a universal and widespread characteristic of warfare" (Byrne 1996:37). A clear picture of the number of women who were raped and sexually assaulted during the

Liberian Civil War does not exist, and the issue of men raped has not even been discussed. Studies of a relatively small sample of displaced women who had taken refuge in IDP camps around Monrovia indicate that around 33 percent of these had been raped (Cain 1999:274).[19] It should be observed that the ethnic dimension of rape assaults is quite weak. Women from ethnic groups in direct conflict could at times be raped because of their ethnic background. Men who were captured and were believed to support enemies, on the other hand, were generally tortured, often to death. However, the material I have collected shows that women, or girls, who have an ethnic background to match with the rebel's core identity, were preyed upon and raped to a similar extent. Thus one cannot talk about rape as an ethnocidal technique, as is done in for instance Rwanda (Taylor 1999), or former Yugoslavia (Korac 1994; Meznaric 1993; Stiglmayer 1994). Instead I suggest that we must understand military rape as part of a hyper-masculine institution.

Rape as a hyper-masculine phenomenon is not solely a military activity, but is found in other environments comprising of mainly men (military, prison, street gangs, fraternities, etc.). In that sense it bears resemblance to male violence directed towards other men, as it is not

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[19] Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) are quite probably in the most exposed position to rape assaults and other forms of militarily gendered violence. One might argue that if we included figures of refugees and women living in the relative safe of Monrovia and Buchanan the figure would be considerably lower. On the other hand there is also the possibility that many women did not reveal this type of information to the survey team. A resent study carried out on female IDPs in neighbouring Sierra Leone states that the rate of women assaulted by conflict related sexual violence was about 9% (Human Rights Watch 2003). There is no natural explanation why sexual assault would be much more prevalent in Liberia than Sierra Leone.

hidden, but on the contrary it is often staged. It is carried out as friendship-centred group activities in an environment where there is competition over 'outrageous' behaviour, such as antisocial acts to establish a valued identity—fearless or fearsome (O'Sullivan 1998:85). As O'Sullivan concludes in a study on the issue of gang rapes carried out by 'frat boys' in the US:

> *Gang rape is "about" the relationship among the men doing it rather than their relationship to the woman they are abusing. It is also "fun." It is a way of cooperating and competing with male friends through a shared risky and risqué, socially sanctioned (in the sense that it's something to brag about among men, although not something to write home to mother about), behavior. (O'Sullivan 1998:105)*

It is in this light we should see the practices of Liberian soldiers assaulting and raping young women among the very people they have set out to protect, and indeed this behavoiur forms part of getting initiated into an exclusive group of soldiers.

## Violence as initiation to manhood

Violent measures and the acquisition of occult power is the Sunjata path to overcoming his 'symbolic castration'. In this fashion, Sunjata is "transformed from a crippled youth to a strong man" (Johnson 1999:20). The sense of being socially crippled, or castrated, is basic for the understanding of the motives of young Liberians who joined the rebel factions in the civil war. Framing the war as 'youth revolution', as many young combatants prefer to do, makes it possible to talk about civil war participation as the most brutal kind of armoury among the

arsenal of the 'weapons of the weak' (Scott 1985), and of the civil war itself as a technique of turning power relations upside down. However it appears relevant to see 'youth revolution' not as a collective measure, but ultimately as an individual endeavour. Illicit violence is the medium of turning power relations upside down as in the tradition of Musa Wo, Boja Manjbe and other trickster heroes. Violence is a maelstrom, sucking down youth and turning them into pernicious warriors. But, as the warrior is symbolically masked, once he leaves this path he has the opportunity to leave his violent past behind. Writing about the thoroughly militarised society in Israel, Eyal Ben-Ari points out:

> *In warrior societies around the world, rites of passage usually involve the dramatic enactment of trials on public stage. These trials give youngsters an opportunity to display (before their community) their courage when faced with pain and mortifications. In the army, soldiers must display qualities of fortitude, tenacity and endurance through practices publicly enacted before their superiors, equals and (later) underlings. (Ben-Ari & Dardashti forth.:4)*

The ultimate test of manhood is combat:

> *In military organizations around the world combat is seen as the core of masculinity. The prime trial of men—the chief ordeal for achieving manhood—is that of mastering the harsh and stressful conditions of battle. (Ben-Ari & Dardashti forth.: 6)*

In Juliet Peteet's work (2002), dealing with young Palestinian males of the intifada, the rite of passage is also central. Stone throwing and

other forms of active resistance are seen as entry points in the process of becoming a man. The fulfilment is in imprisonment and its endurance. If we compare these two examples with the situation of Liberian youth, we find a combination of the two. First there is the violent initiation into resistance. This ordeal is followed by an equally violent phase, initiating youth into the battle-zone way of life. Thus both situations form a militarised ideal of masculinity which eventually transforms young boys into men (mainly in their own eyes). The use of violence in both situations appears therefore as integrated into the process. Ideally, and certainly valid in both cases as presented above, the violent masculinity of military initiation offers an individual identity within hegemonic masculinity. A historical case from Sierra Leone highlights this:

> *Like other Kuranko men of his generation, Mohammed regarded military service as a kind of initiatory ordeal, a way to manhood directly comparable to the traditional rites of initiation which were already in wane. As he put it, "The army gave discipline, made you a man, made you real force. In those days a soldier was like a white man in the villages; he commanded great respect". (Jackson 1989:108)*

Participation in the Liberian Civil War commanded respect during the war process itself but few excombatants were able to exchange their violent rite of passages into tickets to post-war hegemonic masculinity, being often relegated to the back alleys of society. At that point, many dreamt of a return to war and the somewhat more horizontal power structures which existed, where their combatant identity secured them a position on the boulevards.

## Horizontal power structures

In sharp contrast to the hierarchical image of military organisation, is the often-neglected feature of the rebel armies as flat structures. The possibility to become *one of the boys* was indeed an opportunity for many young people with pasts in the margin. Many ex-NPFL soldiers remember with affection some of the incidents of equality with their ex-leader Charles Taylor. For example, when he joined them around the camp fire one day to share a joint, or when he threw away his flak jacket, uttering "to hell with it" and ran with the rank and file soldiers to save his life during a *dudu-boy* (jet bomber) attack. But also at the time that he showed human qualities, not expected by a great warrior, and cried during an NPFL attack on Kakata because of all the civilians that would die. The *one of the boys* ideal was of course exploited to a large extent and used to maintain loyalty. It is generally agreed among combatants that Prince Johnson, the leader of the INPFL, was the one that was closest to his men, something that is maintained in the manifesto published by Johnson himself. Introducing Prince Johnson we find the following, highly romanticised, observations:

> *While rocket prepared grenades (R.P.G.s) missiles,[20] and other auto-matic weapons were being fired he lead his men always in the fore-front fighting, feeding the hungry, medicating the sick and wounded, and sharing clothes and money to all those who he came in contact with. (Johnson 1991:9)*

[20] The acronym RPG is wrongly translated. Originally in Russian it could be translated to English as hand managed anti-tank grenade.

*By nature, General Johnson is an introvert. One may only see a different Prince Johnson on the battlefield. He is the soldier's man. The type of leader who is always with his men, never feeling too proud to identify with them. He eats their "G.I. boogie" along with them, while talking and sharing their beers. Notwithstanding, they all refer to him as "Papa, C.O., or Fieldmarshall", not one day losing their respect for him. (Johnson 1991:11)*

If Taylor displayed more of the Sunjata qualities, Prince Johnson was much more the trickster hero type. His men would often account for his extreme and at randomly directed violence, and also for his trickster character, as many battles INPFL fought with AFL and NPFL were won due to his ability to simply outsmart these groups' superior armoury. In fact, some of the stories told about him involve him in shape shifting in the sense of wearing a uniform of other groups, thus tricking them into various traps.

One expression of the horizontal ideal was that everyone was starting from zero in military rank and was subsequently promoted. It was often bravery and violent acts that would be rewarded by an increase in rank. An upsurge in violent acts was an outcome of this. As pointed out for instance by UNOMIL's Chief Operations Officer, Colonel Winkler:

*It's a children's war. Kids get promoted in rank for committing an atrocity; they can cut off someone's head without thinking. (Fleischman & Whitman 1994:32)*

In my effort to collect visual images (pictures and videos), I

encountered a batch of pictures that stood out from other ordinary styles of representing war. It was a few images of various rebel groups who posed as a regular football team, with the significant modification that the customary ball had been replaced by a severed head. I was reassured that the images were from neighbouring Sierra Leone. True or not, I believe that the images symbolise the egalitarianism (the football team) and the brutal violence (the head) that lies at the very root of this particular trait of the egalitarian military system.

### The rebel and the mask

*Many times it's like a game. A game of learning how to deal with it. There is a certain problem and you have to give a solution. You—I think—cut yourself off from all sorts of thought about what you're doing, and how and what's happening here. It's a game like a crossword puzzle, of technique, of how you deal with a problem. (Israeli soldier in Ben-Ari 1989:378)*

*In my interviews with those who were in the thick of battle, they remarked again and again how much they felt like they were in a movie, and had to remind themselves that this horror, the blood, the deaths, was real. (Mark Bowden, Black Hawk Down: a story of modern war, cited by Fuchs 2002)*

In his attempt to come to grips with Israeli soldiers' action on the battlefield, Eyal Ben-Ari says "they become other to themselves—real but not really real".[21] Israeli soldiers comprehend gearing themselves in uniform the first day of duty "as the donning of disguises" or "as the

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[21] Lecture at the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology, Uppsala University, October 4, 2002

bearing of masks" (Ben-Ari 1989:378). The sense of masking evokes an alternative behaviour, something that is different to civilian life and in a sense also non-normative. It creates space or "a legitimate license to behave in ways that they would not normally…..associate with themselves" (ibid. 379). One can suggest that they enter a mode of pseudo-reality where reality appears as 'a game', or 'as a movie' as the citations above suggests. My informants often made similar references to the feeling of being not 'real' and indeed many descriptions of a specific battle convey the same sense of pseudo-reality. After describing a particular fierce battle, one informant concluded—in a tone of sincere affection, "being in the battlefield is so sweet. Nothing is as thrilling as fighting when it is going fine". Just as Ben-Ari (1989; 1998) has proposed, I too believe that the hyper-reality of experiencing 'flow' during 'deep play' (Geertz 1973a) as developed by Csikszentmihalyi ([1973] 2000) is very important in any effort to understand this type of situation. Flow in combination with fear and direct danger, shuts off streams of consciousness, making it possible to focus on only a few tasks. In this process, the enemy is dehumanised as the very goal of the mission is to take them out of action. In this manner, it is quite conceivable that assaults of extreme violence are taking place. As a 'moral boost',[22] a variety of drugs, taken prior to a battle, further focuses the soldier and increases the experience of flow, masking every experience of normality.

During the first years of the Liberian Civil War, rebel fighters wearing wigs, wedding gowns and other female paraphernalia caught international media attention as something truly bizarre (Daniels

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[22] Expression used by the Sierra Leonean Army (SLA).

1991; Jameson 1991; Johnson 1990). The cross-dressing phenomenon is explained by placing it in its proper context in a very interesting article by Mary Moran (1995; 1997). It forms part of a regional preoccupation with masking and masquerading (Cannizzo 1983; Nunley 1987; Ottenberg 1989).[23] In Liberia, the utilisation of a mask and other regalia is a highly visual way of pointing out that you have entered a morally different role. Certainly the use of magic power functions in a similar way. When you enter the battlefield and commit atrocities behind a mask and under the influence of magic power, then it is the spirits who are responsible for your actions, and not you personally.

Elizabeth Tonkin has written about the power of the mask. According to her, "the mask is the exponent of power manifested in all its action" and "power is believed to be generated through the act of masking, the mask itself, the transformer, will often be revered as the repository of power" (1979:243, 246). The use of mask and/or magic protection, follows exactly this logic as objects of concentrated symbolism, communicating with both the self and the other. The lack of ordinary personality, not only if masked, but also if one changes one's ordinary behaviour, frightens the other and in the mask-on mode, the self can act with alternate powers, i.e. a spirit etc. However, once the mask is off, or the magic charms are removed, or the behavioural patterns restored, the powers in both the eyes of the self and the other is gone. The video sequence of the torture of President Doe is instructive, because as soon as his captors have removed his magical charms, it is understood that his super-powers have left him.

With a concept of the morally neutral hero, the mask-on/mask-off

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[23] Masking and cross-dressing is a universal trait of rebel heroes (Austen 1986:94).

concept becomes crucial. One and same person can be, and behave, both morally correct and be immoral. This makes it possible to leave the warrior identity behind without personal guilt, indeed making it easier for both the person and the surroundings to re-enter moral society without too many repercussions. However, a morally neutral hero is a shape-shifter: "his power to shape-shift thus condemns him to the very marginality he struggles to escape" (Jackson 1989:112), and shape-shifting is thus a tactical, rather than a long-term strategic response to larger society (Certeau 1984). In the process of the Liberian Civil War, Charles Taylor takes control over, and learns to master, the various powers at his disposal in the same fashion as Sunjata. However, most of his soldiers were just taken for a ride by the same powers, using their individual destructiveness as Musa Wo or Boya Manjbe. They never managed to curb the power, and thus were condemned to the very marginality from which they struggled to escape.

## TO DO BAD AND GOOD

Young combatants in the Liberian Civil War took upon themselves images of a rebel-hero character. Just as Sunjata gained some of his legitimacy as a warrior, so too did young Liberians. Joining the rebel forces they found a path similar to other migrant patterns. Turning the moral upside-down, linking to myths of extreme egotistical individualism can be effective in the short-turn, but eventually one will have to repent and turn morally virtuous again. Such was the case of my good friend Alex, a die-hard fighter during the civil war in the INPFL, and later the NPFL. In the war, his distinguishing-mark had

been to cut the ears of his enemies. This is in stark contrast to his current life, where he spends most of his time in church, even acting as accountant for a local Pentecostal parish. Upon asking him about this apparent paradox, he shrugs his shoulders and points out that there are times when you have to do bad, and times you have to do good—A typical response from a morally neutral war hero.

# YOUNG WOMEN IN THE WAR

*In downtown Monrovia a taxi is pulling over picking up a male passenger. As we are squeezing together (or 'dressing' as Liberians would say) in the back to make place for the newcomer, a woman on the front seat turns to him and bluntly states that he does not respect her. Nothing indicates any relationship between the two. The man—identified by another passenger as a police officer (most possibly indicating that he is a former fighter)—starts to brag about how brave he was during the war. The woman retorts by stating that men were the real cowards during the civil war: "we were out there when you men were hiding under your beds". "Some men don't even dare to pull the trigger; I have seen it myself" she continues and finally ends by saying (boldly) "please—don't call me a civilian". The man continues to brag but the woman pretends not to listen any more. The man, now with an uncertainty in his voice, states that "there were only female fighters in Nimba". She looks at him and signals to the driver that she is getting off, without another word to the man as she exits the cab. (Monrovia/fieldnotes)*

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter deals with young women's (or girls') lived experiences of the Liberian Civil War.[1] I would argue that if the actions of young

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[1] As the war lasted for seven years, girls grew up and became young women. Consequently it has not been possible to be consistent in separating a category of girls from one consisting of young women. As such girls and young women in the text below are interchangeable with each other.

women in war were to be categorised as 'victim dynamics'—we may in essence not only rule out women, children, refugees and civilians as victims, but also most of the fighters in the Liberian Civil War. Therefore there is an evident need to re-operationalise the inimical opposition of victim/perpetrator, civilian/soldier (Keen 1996; 1999) and rely on more complex explanations of war realities (Macek 2001), as well as establish alternative configurations of gender (Butler 1990:142ff) in war zones.[2]

Most of the material in this chapter stems from the second part of my fieldwork, in Ganta.[3] To study a field such as women's war experiences as a male, and above all a *Qwi plu* (denoting white, or rather civilised, in Mano, the dominant vernacular in the Ganta area), was a delicate matter. Liberian women rarely spoke about these issues to outsiders. Stereotypes of female victimisation tend to be cemented when (even female) social scientists or other researchers make interviews with refugees or communities going through a war experience. What made this part of the study possible was the presence of my wife—a woman from neighbouring Sierra Leone, who has been through similar scenarios as my informants and who was not much older than my target group. Even so, a certain amount of distrust is noticeable in the text of these interviews. This stemmed mainly from the uncertainty factor of the tape recorder. Active roles in looting, fighting etc., which were openly discussed in the informal setting, were often left out or downplayed when recording was in progress. Consequently, my wife had often been informed of matters during

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[2] It is noted that gender categories are be no means exclusive and that "cultures do not have a single model of gender or a gender system, but rather a multiplicity of discourses on gender which can vary both contextually and biographically" (Moore 1994a:142).

[3] For a discussion in young women in Monrovia see (Utas 1999).

informal discussions rather than during taped interviews.[4]

A majority of my informants were aged between 10 and 18 at the onset of the civil war. They had not been under parental guidance during most of the conflict, for reasons that are different in each case. Many lived in loosely structured youth collectives on which adults only had a peripheral impact. In Monrovia for instance, most of my informants lived footloose lives, and were out of touch with the larger society. To a lesser extent, this was also the case for my informants in Ganta who generally were more incorporated into society through interaction with neighbours, work places, churches etc. (see chapter 6). To enhance the accessibility, I have chosen to base this chapter on the accounts of three key narrators: Bintu, Hawa and Masa.[5] I value these three voices as I believe they are representative of young women's war-stories/scenarios in Liberia as a whole. These voices are used here both as accounts of what took place during the war, and as sources for a narrative analysis. To make the description 'thicker', I have added the voices of other young women,[6] of men relating to this subject, as well as personal observations. Though a description of young women's lives in the Liberian war zone my contribution aims, on a more theoretical level, to take issue with prevailing views on agency and gender stereotypes in war.[7]

[4] As noted by Henrietta Moore (1994a:141), individuals take up different positions within different discourses, resulting in subject positions that will contradict or be in direct conflict with other.

[5] The names of the young women have been changed to protect the identity of the informants. The interviews were made in English. However as Liberian English is rather difficult in syntax the quotations have been adapted to a slightly more standard form of English.

[6] In particular in the section on female combatants I have added material from an additional interview with a female ex-combatant.

[7] People fall in love even during times of war. Due to the focus on agency and young women's tactics in the civil war issues of love and passion have been largely put aside in this text. Indeed, even if most young women have downplayed such emotions, 'soft' relations still existed.

## A MIDDLE ROAD—APPEARING AS BOTH VICTIM AND PERPETRATOR

*Women became objective tragedy in wars from which they were excluded. (Virilio 1989:22)*

In her book Women and War, Jean Bethke Elshtain argues that people in the western world "are heirs of a tradition that assumes an affinity between women and peace" and "between men and war" (Elshtain 1987:4; see also Aretxaga 1997; Rolston 1989). The prototype is that "men fight as avatars of a nation's sanctioned violence" and that "women work and weep and sometimes protest" within a given framework (Elshtain 1987:3). In opposition to these simplified images, Elshtain furnishes women with agency in war: "Women have structured conflicts and collaborations, have crystallized and imploded what successive epochs imagine when the subject at hand is collective violence" (ibid. x). Another, more recent book on women activities in war edited by Turshen & Twagiramariya (1998) takes a similar stand. In the introduction, Meredeth Turshen argues that "the enduring wartime picture of 'man does, woman is' has depended on the invisibility of women's participation in the war effort, their unacknowledged, behind-the-lines contributions to the prosecution of war, and their hidden complicity in the construction of fighting forces (…) It is no longer possible to maintain the innocence of all women" (Turshen 1998:1). She further states that "women are also combatants; women resist and fight back; they take sides, spy, and fight among themselves; and even when they don't see active service, they often support war efforts in multiple ways, willingly or unwillingly" (ibid).

In fact Turshen's argument for the agency of women in war exposes a rift in feministic studies. Some chapters in the book take a 'traditionalist' stand, arguing that women are stuck within structural confines. Other contributors contend that women have agency in every situation and use deliberate strategies in the utilisation of it.[8] According to a thorough literature study done by Judith DiIorio (1992) this rift is very much apparent in literature on women in war in general.[9] I here argue that neither of these divergent theoretical standpoints has to be condemned as false. Individuals might simultaneously be seen as social agents, and victims in the structural sense. As I noted in the introduction (chapter 1) women are often believed to live on the fringes of war zones, in camps for internally displaced or as refugees in neighbouring countries (Ruiz 1992; Malkki 1995:10ff; 1996), but as Turshen points out, women and children are only slightly over-represented in refugee populations. Observing mainly women and children in a refugee camp, this is only to be expected as, 72 percent of the African population are either female or under 15 years of age (1998:15).

This text elucidates young women's activities in the war zone and more particularly the ways in which they oscillate between the positions of victim and perpetrator, of fighter and civilian. The agency of any human being is set within certain societal confines—it is not unique to womanhood. Rather, the amount of individual agency or the

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[8] However most of the contributions maintain the victim status of women in war (as noted in a review by Omaar & Sevenzo 1999).

[9] In a study considering historic accounts of women roles in Africa, Margaret Hay (1988) argues that the amount of agency authors furnish African women with rests heavily upon contemporary trends in the academic world.

amount of victimcy[10] changes from situation to situation, and from one social relation to another—whether a person is a man or woman. In war, men and women are situated on the same sliding scale between abundant agency and victimcy. Even most so-called perpetrators are severely limited in their agency: to survive, civilians are often forced to participate in war trade, while fighters are forced by their commanders to participate in atrocities. Likewise, commanders are forced to command so as to keep their men in place and the enemy terrified. Alcinda Honwana (1999b; 2000) has proposed a distinction between 'strategic agency' and 'tactical agency' following de Certeau's (1984) distinction between strategies and tactics. De Certeau 'sees strategies as having possible long term consequences or benefits, and tactics as means devised to cope with concrete circumstances, even though those means are likely to have deleterious long-term consequences' (Honwana 1999b:9). If we follow this distinction, most actors in the Liberian Civil War would be limited to 'tactical agency'. Indeed 'tactical agency' can be ascribed to rape victims on the one extreme and female combatants on the other. As the case studies below will demonstrate, the very same person can be both rape victim and combatant.

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[10] Victimcy being the most limited form of agency, that of depicting oneself as a victim, and thus reaping the benefits that other people's mercy might give. In the presence of foreign humanitarian aid victimcy can at times be a very fruitful mode.

## GIRLS IN THE WAR ZONE[11]

*All that time when the Freedom Fighters (NPFL) were here they could just grab you and force you: saying you are my woman now. (Young woman in Ganta, Nimba County)*

*I lived with the soldiers and they did not harm me. (Young woman in Greenville, Sinoe County)*

*At that time girls were floating—every fighter was entitled to four or five. (Young ex-combatant in Ganta who fought for INPFL and NPFL)*

*The soldiers caught us and put us in the attic (the granary on the farm) and lit fire under us. They also raped us. Even my smaller sister was raped by seven fighters and she later died. She was born in 1984. (Young woman in rural Sinoe County)*

It is difficult to imagine how daily life is experienced in a war zone. Personally I was caught in the crossfire in Monrovia for a only few days in the midst of the conflict in 1996, and I did witness some of the horrors of war. Even with such experience though, it is hard to imagine what it would be like to remain in a war zone for a longer time without being able to pull out.

The notion of a 'war zone' does not only connote the actual area of

[11] Issues of gender relations and ethnographic descriptions of life realms of women and young girls in pre-war Liberia have been discussed elsewhere see, Bledsoe (1976; 1980a; 1980b; 1980c), Fuest (1996), Moran (1988a; 1988b; 1990; 2000a; 2000b).

combat, but may also include a much larger area into which fighters, war traders and others, extend their activities (just as the Liberian war zone includes not only Liberia itself but also the border zones of Guinea, Ivory Coast and large parts of Sierra Leone where Liberian fighters have been active). The struggles of daily life in the war zone were an immense pressure for most young women. The years of conflict were a constant battle for protection—under the wings of the right commando. Young women in the war zone had no choice but to cling to a fighter with enough power to protect them. Without such protection, young women ran the very real risk of being forced to provide sexual services, or they underwent rape, forced labour and abduction.[12] Even if protectors were 'big men'—commanders or other key actors—in the rebel armies, they were quite often just young boys. When your protector was out on a mission, it would be best for you to go into hiding. Further, in case the young woman's protector was either killed, moved to another location, or simply became unbearable, it was advisable beforehand to find another protector, in order to avoid the risk of going through a rather turbulent period during the time-gap between men. To try to team up with a new man before leaving the previous one, however, was a hazardous game that, if detected by the jealous boyfriend, might even endanger the girl's life.

Having a relationship with at least one fighter was crucial for the survival not only of the woman herself, but of her entire family. Looted goods for example would be delivered by boyfriends returning

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[12] Rape and sexual abuse in war is a much-discussed topic. On Liberia see e.g. Lucas (1997), elsewhere and theoretic approaches see e.g. Stiglmayer (1994), Card (1996), Littlewood (1997), Omar & de Waal (1995). As well as sections in numerous monographic accounts on war and violence.

from the war front and would help to support the family network. Furthermore, it was important for the family to have a 'big man' in the rebel movement around so that their estate and property would not be looted and ravaged. It was therefore good to have at least one son join the military, or at least to be related to people with important posts in a particular rebel movement. It was even better if one of the daughters was having a relationship with a local commando. My ex-fighter informants described to me how they entered and raided villages in the countryside during the war. Sometimes they caught young girls and women whom they brought along as girlfriends. Sometimes villagers also left young girls, or sent them back from their hiding places in the bush, so that they could befriend the fighters and establish a relationship in the hope of protecting their property this way. This daring move could even make it possible for the relatives of the girl to return to the village. Some girls were dumped as fighters left, but a good proportion of them were taken to the front, or back to base. Later, these girls might leave or be abandoned in another location. Clearly visible all over the war zone was an abundance of displaced young girls with a total lack of social ties in their new setting. In Nimba County for example, there are many young Sierra Leonean women living. As the NPFL fought in Sierra Leone, in the same pattern, many of the fighters brought girls back from the Sierra Leone front line to Liberia. One of my ex-fighter informants related how one fighter brought a new girl from the Sierra Leone front line every time he went home. Numerous similar accounts reported that fighters brought girls back with them to use them as unpaid labour on their farms—my informant used the term 'slave'.

The war has indeed uprooted many people. Many young women

left voluntarily, or were forced to leave their families, their towns and villages—their whole social context. This has made it possible to behave in ways that would not normally be tolerated. To survive, or out of self-interest, many young women in fact teamed up with fighters in looting actions. Sometimes this led to direct participation in the war; in other circumstances they just kept in the background. To enlist in the fighting forces was yet another alternative for young girls to protect themselves and their families, and to gain relative independence and power. Statistics from the demobilisation in 1997 point towards only moderate participation by women in the war. Part of the reason for this could be that only a few of the women who fought in the war were officially enlisted and therefore quite often did not have their own weapon. Even if all factions had their share of women fighters, young women were seldom trained as soldiers.[13] As in the case of Bintu, they often joined up with their boyfriends to fight. In addition, looting seems to have been a main incentive for participation. Breaking with accepted social norms has meant that many young women in the post-war era have not returned home but stayed in whatever setting they found themselves at the end of the conflict. In the process of war, many young women oscillated between a direct presence in war zones, residing in displaced camps in Liberia, and taking refuge in neighbouring countries (see Utas 1997). Camps for the displaced, however, often failed to provide even the most basic needs. As a consequence, many young women preferred to return to life in the war zone, even if such life was more hazardous.

[13] The issue of women fighters has been explored in several historic accounts (see e.g. Jones 1997; Goldman 1998; Newark & McBride 1989). Ethnographic accounts of the 'Ferocious Few' (Elshtain 1987:163-180) are regrettably few (see e.g. Schalk 1992; 1994).

## RAPED, TORTURED AND FORCED TO LABOUR

*They would just call you—say, 'come'. When you came they would say, "I will detain your time today". That night those girls slept with them. The next morning the girls became the 'wives' of the fighters and then they carried the girls away. (Masa)*

*Any commando who was ready to see a woman for free would come and rape me—with my sabou (shaved head – as done to prisoners). I did not have clothes on. They did not even want to know that I was a human being—they did not want to know. (Bintu)*

*"Anybody found raping or looting will face a firing squad." Charles Taylor*

*Like one of my friends, they called him 'Disregard', because he killed plenty people. He caught a girl in Ganta parking (car park where shared taxis heading for Ganta leave) when we captured the town of Gbarnga. He caught a girl and asked her to lie down on a table. As she was lying there he took a mortar pester and cut it into half and nailed her with it. (Young ex-fighter in Ganta)*

Women who failed to team up with any of the local 'big men' became the worst victims of the war. One of the most dangerous moments for any young woman was the point at which rebels entered an area for the first time and the young women did not have any first hand experience of how to deal with these men (boys). This is the situation that Masa describes in the first quotation above. The fighters would

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arrive and just pick their choice among the village girls. This activity was a way of demonstrating their power.

Hawa was fifteen years old when the war reached her region in southern Liberia. After escaping from a rebel attack on her hometown in Grand Gedeh, Hawa and her brother fled north hiding in the bush, living on what they could find in the forest or steal from farms. Eventually the NPFL caught Hawa in the vicinity of Buchanan and she was put into detention not knowing what would happen to her. She spent two months in jail; a stay lined with physical abuse, rape, mental torture and humiliation, until one of the rebel soldiers came to her aid:

> *It did not take long time before I started seeing a rebel boy. He just came my way. He said that he wanted me. I said I did not want him, but then I started hearing from other people that he was the com-mander of the town. That's why I started going with the boy. When I started seeing him I found out that he had a lot of other women. Now when I moved in with the boy I was still facing problems. It was no longer from the rebels but from the other women in the house. The man was having five women and I made it six. I was the youngest of them all.*

Even when not in prison, Hawa still faced a lot of problems—mainly originating from the other women in the household. As the youngest, and as an 'ethnic outcast'—a Krahn, she had to carry out most chores in the household. When the boy later died on a patrolling mission, she was categorised as belonging to the enemy, and was thus blamed for his death.

*The man was not there when we had the last palaver. He had gone on patrol in the Firestone area. That's where the enemy captured and killed him. When the news hit us saying, "oh—they kill your husband" then all the other women in the house turned against me. They started making palaver with me. They said, "but how come this new girl that our husband brought didn't stay long before they captured and killed our husband—that means that the girl killed our husband". So they set for me. The women called the soldiers that were close to the house to show them the place where I was. I was trying to hide myself. They caught me and arrested me. Once again they carried me back to the soldier barracks. I did not really want to hide myself in the first place but one woman, who did not like my business in the house, was saying she would call the soldiers so they could come and kill me. That's why I hid. So, anyway, the soldier people arrested me and put me back in jail. They said it was because I was a Krahn so I must have been the one who sold out the man.*

*This time jail was even worse. They used to do bad, bad things to me. They would come in a group. They turned me around, put me under the hot sun and then they would start beating me for the whole day. They would also tie me behind the car and drag me around. There were two jails. They kept me in the dark one. That was the place they used to have me. When they were done eating they threw the balance food (the leftovers) for me. When they pee-pee (urinated), they poured the pee-pee water on me. During that time I was sixteen years old.*

Yet again another young fighter picked her up and brought her with him to Gbarnga and then Ganta. In Ganta she moved between young

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fighters and even tried to manage life on her own by helping people in their daily housework. Eventually she teamed up with a rebel soldier again. When the boy decided to leave one of his other girlfriends, that girl started to run *bisa* (to gossip) to the high commandos that she was of Krahn origin. So she was taken to the neighbouring town Saglepie and imprisoned and once again she was severely abused.

*The commandos came for me when my boyfriend was away and they carried me to Saglepie. I spent one month and two weeks there under punishment. They started beating me every morning. They stripped me naked and left me in the sun. They poured (chili)pepper water all over me and let me lie in the sun. I was 'duck fowled' (elbows tied together on the back—generally called 'tabave') lying there in the baking sun, my eyes felt like bursting. Sometimes they pointed a gun at me or they would put a knife to my throat pretending to cut it. That's what they were doing to me—kicking me to the left and to the right. Every night different commandos used to come for me. They would carry me to their base and then they would have sex with me. They used to force me, and I knew if I did not agree doing it they would kill me. No, I did not agree, but they used to force me. I did not want to go myself so the people would tie me on the car and then they would drag me there. They tied my hands and were forcing me to have sex with them. I got pregnant from that. When I got pregnant every one of them disowned the belly (implying that no one took the responsibility for the child). After they disowned the belly God fixed the belly to move (she miscarried).*

The sad story of Hawa parallels the account of Bintu. Both girls faced

extraordinary problems because they moved out of their own confines and crossed into 'enemy country'. Hawa as a Krahn and Bintu as Mandingo, were caught in 'Taylor Land', NPFL territory. In the NPFL's political rhetoric, the Krahn and Mandingo peoples were often depicted as main violators of the Liberian people. In this climate, Bintu left her safe haven in Monrovia and took a risky drive through the heart of NPFL territory to aid her mother who at the time had sought refuge in Guinea.

*(M)y mother wrote me that she was suffering a lot as a refugee in Guinea. I had a (mini)bus and I was making business with it in Monrovia.[14] But I decided to carry this bus to my mother. To get the bus to Guinea I had to pass through Gbarnga (during that time Gbarnga was HQ for NPFL). It was during the first cease-fire in 1992. February 11 I left from Monrovia to Gbarnga. When I reached Gbarnga I was arrested by Charles Taylor's commandos and raped. They beat me and scraped my hair to sabou (skinhead) with a snail shell and then they put me in jail. The man that looted my car was called Johnson.[15] They raped me. I suffered a lot. For eight months I was in jail. They beat me, and raped me—more than more—and I lost everything I had.*

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[14] During the war years there was nothing strange in seeing underage persons driving. Looted cars often ended up in the hands of young fighters—at times also in the hands of their girlfriends. When driving the car through NPFL territory Bintu most probably caught attention as someone having military connections on the enemy side.

[15] All names in the text are fictitious.

In jail, Bintu denied that she was Mandingo, even under torture and this denial most probably saved her life. In prison she was held with six other girls. All of them were executed on suspicion of collaborating with enemy groups.

> *We were seven and those other girls confessed; they said they were reconnaissance girls and then they killed them right on the spot. They said ULIMO had sent them to come and observe and go tell them how the NPFL fought—how they did things and what so ever—that's why they were killed.*

Eventually, the girlfriend of an important NPFL commander, today a minister of the NPP government, felt sympathy for her plight. In addition to this, a civilian man with family connections to another important NPFL commander (Tom King), took an interest in her and advocated her release.

> *At that time they were not raping me again because I was in the hand of one person now, Tom King's brother. So they were not raping me again.*

Bintu was released from prison after eight months of ordeal. At that time she was pregnant. The baby's father was one of the numerous unknown soldiers that had passed through her prison cell. Even after her release, she was not free to leave Gbarnga town and had to go into hiding when Tom King was out of town.

Joint forces of the NPFL and RUF (Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone) abducted Masa, the third of my key narrators, from her hometown in south-eastern Sierra Leone during an attack. One of the

NPFL commanders then brought her back with him to Lofa County in northern Liberia.

*We were hiding in the bush when the rebels were running behind us. So one man captured me and held me by force. He brought me to Liberia here. There we stayed in Lofa. The man that held me in the bush was treating me bad. Every morning he used to beat us. When the people asked him why he was beating the children, the man said, because he was the one who brought us. He was the one that saved our lives so if he wanted to beat us he had the right to do so.*

The man forced Masa, and two other girls that he also brought from Sierra Leone, to work for him on his farm. Masa was not used to labour on the farm and had a hard time adjusting to her new life.

*We were stuck over there. The people told us that we had to make a farm. So I told him that I was not able to make a farm, that I did not do that at home in Sierra Leone. But the man told us that we were forced to make the farm. If we would refuse he would beat us. We were making that farm for a long period of time so I really got tired from it. My body was spoiling now. 'Kro-kro' (rashes that develop into small black scars—word of Sierra Leonean origin) was coming on my body. So I told him: "this farm business I'm not able to do it". So then the man said that if I did not make the farm he would beat me. In fact, the reason why he was beating us every morning, he said, was because we were not able to make the farm. He used to beat us bad so in the end I complained to his C.O. (Commanding Officer).*

In this case Masa was successful in using the existing military structure. The Commanding Officer in the area ordered the man to release her from working on his farm and she managed to move to stay with another family. Eventually, she initiated a relationship with one of the boys in the family who was also a soldier. During a relatively peaceful time in 1992, they moved down to Nimba County were she was left once again on a sugarcane farm.

*No, the boy was not fighting now. But I was in that bush—he was in town and I was in the bush suffering. When I was not busy planting sugarcane I was cutting it, or I would cook it. I was always busy and I would not even wear slippers (seen as the ultimate sign of poverty). His father didn't like me and neither did the other people in the sur-roundings. So the last time when he told me to go back in the bush again I simply said no "since me and you come 92 I make my cane, I take the money and give it to you. When you go you can spoil it (waste it on liquor and girls in the town)". I could be telling him that we must look for money because we had a child. But when I got money he just went and spoilt it.*

Towards the end of 1998, she subsequently ran away from her man and took refuge with a Sierra Leonean family in Ganta. Apart from lacking money to survive, she was suffering most of all from the fact that she was not able to bring the child with her when she had run away from the farm.[16]

[16] The yearning for her child was too strong. When I returned to Ganta in early 2000 her Sierra Leonean hosts told me that she had left to visit her child several months earlier and had not yet returned.

These three stories—accounts of severe suffering, are instructive in several ways. Prison experiences, torture and crude coercion were all part and parcel of the war experience. But that is only one level of these accounts. As we will see, it is also possible to discover accounts of personal agendas and agency within the same narratives. In them, there is a clear ambiguity between victimhood and agency.

## BOYFRIENDS—BULWARK

*You mean that you were seeing him only because he was a comman-do?*
*Yes. That was the only way I could be safe. (Hawa)*

*But for some women, the military represent security……….. women fled villages to seek security next to armed military camps. (Turshen, 1998:15)*

Bintu was released from jail after the intervention of several people. For her protection she had teamed up with a high rank officer. Her boyfriend was not a fighter himself, but she benefited from the protection that his cousin who was a commando, provided her with.

*The eyes were on me (the NPFL administration kept her under sur-veillance). I had to remain in Bong County. I was pregnant when they freed me. The chief of the protocol came and that guy Camara also. They talked for me and I was free now. But at that time I was already pregnant. This boy (the boy that helped her out of jail and*

*took care of her) was not a soldier. Because of that he could only go around with me if his cousin was in town. The cousin sometimes came from the bush. His name was Tom King and he was a guerrilla fighter. When Tom King came he would be free to take me around in town. The three of us would get in the soldier car. We would then drive around a little bit and it made me feel a little better. And then when Tom King left I would have to hide myself again. If not, other commandos would be hunting for me and force me to have sex even though they could see that I was pregnant. They would have fucked me on top of that belly again—just because they did not see any other free woman. So that was how it was. I did not even dare to go outside if Tom King was not in Gbarnga.*

Bintu was out of prison now. However, she still had to be very careful. In the lawlessness of 'Taylor land' she certainly had to play smart— Tom King was her shield, protecting her from all evil perpetrators. In this case, the enemy was dwelling within her confines. This was made clear to her when King left her before the birth of her child:

*So when I gave birth to this baby—it was a boy child—I asked Tom King if he could assist me before I could give birth to this baby. Tom King was going to Lofa. They sent him to Lofa again to go and fight, and he never had cash to give to me. So he gave me a solar system to sell to get cash if I gave birth when he was gone. But one of the generals, named Junior Rambo, came and harassed me. He took the solar system from me. So when I gave birth the boy that claimed the belly (her boyfriend) never had any money.*

After King left, other officers started to harass Bintu. Unfortunately, her civilian boyfriend lacked the power to protect her (when Bintu says that he 'claimed the belly' it means that he had agreed upon being the social father of the child). As King was a fighter, she was fully aware of the fragile situation. She could not afford to put all her eggs in the one basket. For that reason, she soon started to see another fighter. When King was out of town she was in dire need of other protection and support.

> Q: But you told me you were having a relationship with yet another commando when you were with Tom King's cousin?
> A: Yes that was also in Gbarnga and that one too always liked to carry me at the front. But you know I was picking chance, I never used to like him too much.

> Q: But how did you manage when you were also seeing the civilian. How were you managing to escape and go and meet the fighter?
> A: Because when Tom King was not in town the civilian boy had no power. When Tom King was out of town the girl that helped me out of jail (that is the cousin of Bintu's boyfriend—the civilian) was the one that covered up for me and gave me the chance to go to the other one. Sometimes Tom King used to go for two-three months at the time.

Bintu had understood quite correctly the need to master the game, and was therefore prepared, when King was killed during a battle in Lofa County. In a related story, Bintu recounts an incident that occurred with another girl who likewise tried to master this hazardous situation.

*This story happened once upon a time in one club in Gbarnga. We went to the club and there was this girl who used to go out with one commando. Later she left him because she was very jealous—you hear. This commando used to love around a whole lot so she decided to leave him. And you know, if you told these commandos that you didn't want them—just like when you are fed up with somebody—that meant serious problem. When you retreated from them and they saw you with somebody new, might God bless you that your new boyfriend would have a higher rank than the old one. If your new boyfriend's rank was lower than the old one's then he would definitely go and disturb you. You would be forced to love to (have a relationship/have sex with) him again. So this girl she wanted to act 'kwii' ('civilised' in Liberian English). She left her old boyfriend for a new one.*

*So we all went out that night—Tom King was in town. You know when Tom King was in town that was the time I could boil. When we went to the club this girl I am talking about was sitting down there with her new boyfriend. She was two months pregnant for this boyfriend and her new boyfriend had given her money to plait her hair. She had her hair plaited with attachment (synthetic hair). So her old boyfriend came and met her sitting with the new one. Now this new boyfriend was boasting too much. So it hurt her old boyfriend too much. It wasn't easy; the old boyfriend went and commanded her saying "get your ass out—let's go". She said "no I'm not going, you and me are not loving any longer and in fact I'm pregnant with this man's child. So you don't have any right to command me and carry me home". He replied "I will command you and carry you home because*

*this man just feels that he is all and all. So for that reason I'm carry-ing you home".*

*A fight broke out in the club—it was not easy that night. They fought until they had rooted up the whole hair of the girl. Her old boyfriend grabbed her one way and the new one another. They tore her skirt open. It was not an easy fight. I myself joined in that night. The boy that I used to sneak out to meet was fighting on the side of the new boyfriend and Tom King was taking the other side. I don't know where the grudge came from. They tore off my own skirt too. It was not an easy thing that night. In the end they had to carry us to the Task Force Office for investigation. I had to explain how I got involved in other people's confusion.*

*Those were some of the experiences that girls would have if they were having a relationship with a fighter and got tired of their problems. You could not just get rid of them by saying, "I don't want you". They wouldn't understand—they would just force you. They could have more than fifty women, but as long as they saw you and their heart would cut for you again they would force you. They would only leave you alone if your new boyfriend had a higher rank than the old one. Then, maybe, they would respect that person but not you—because they would never respect a woman.*

This narrative pinpoints some of the difficulties experienced by young women in choosing someone who might offer them security. Not only did they need a fighter to protect them, but also their choice to select this man was very limited. The young woman needed to find someone

of higher rank in order to be able to leave the old 'boyfriend' behind without being harassed, or forced to hand out sexual favours. A woman who had left a high ranking officer, risked remaining without a man, because junior fighters knew the dangers of having an affair with a high rank officer's ex-girlfriend. Such a woman would thus become likely prey for occasional sexual endeavours by men of any rank and file. Masa recounts another incident that had a deadly outcome.

> One man by the name of Johnson killed his own girlfriend because of money. The girl had a relationship with Johnson's 'big man' and she got some money from him. Johnson told the girl that she must give him the money, but the girl refused. So Johnson grabbed his gun and killed the girl.

In their accounts, Masa, Bintu and Hawa depict the structural trap of women during the civil war. To have a boyfriend or another protector in the right position in the war machine, was of extreme importance. In Hawa's case it was her boyfriend's cousin who protected her. A civilian protector was of no use at all when the military strongman was out of town. Thus the ideal arrangement, despite its dangers, was to have several boyfriends simultaneously. As it was expected that fighters would eventually be killed, it was appropriate to have some kind of pre-arrangement with other fighters. The difficulty of rank among boyfriends has further to be stressed: to get a new boyfriend with a lower rank than the previous, generally equalled trouble. Likewise, to leave a high-ranking officer might invite its own trouble, because junior officers did not often dare to approach such a girl.

Instead, she might fall prey to occasional sexual endeavours. The story of Johnson's girlfriend stands as a reminder of the maliciousness of the war system. Even when playing this game with great care, and according to the 'rules', the fate of individuals within the system remained quite unpredictable, where the smallest of movements could even threaten one's life.

## BOYFRIENDS—BONUS

*You should make use of what you have (your sexual organ)—because when you die the bocabo (termites) will eat it. (Young woman in Ganta)*

*Q: Did the girls send their boyfriends or husbands to the front to go and bring goods for them?*
*A: Yes, they would force them. You know all these soldier boys when they went most of them would go on looting missions—they did not usually go and fight war. (Masa)*

When the spaces of everyday life turned into battle zones and compatriot began to fight compatriot, social structures started to crumble. Many young girls were left to their own devices for extensive periods of time in often totally unfamiliar and unpredictable settings—as in the cases of Hawa, Bintu and Masa. Even if these young people became involuntary tossed into these situations, I would argue that without the enthusiasm of young men and women to get involved in war events, the war would never have kicked off in the first place.

Just as a vast number of young men took up arms, many young women participated in ways expected of them. Bintu was already flirting with the war before it brutally intruded into her life as she was already in a relationship with a high ranking official at the ministry of defence. She saw this as a path towards independence from her parents who in her eyes were too 'traditional'.

> *Milton Toe was the one that was supporting me. He took the whole initiative: I mean everything I wanted he was doing it for me. My parents never liked the idea. You know how Mandingo people are. I was just living that life because I wanted to live it. Do you under-stand? It was he and myself who were together until the war came.*

A system of sponsoring young girls might be viewed as traditional in Liberia, where older men often patron young girls in the hope that they might become future wives. Important men have a wide assortment of young girls whom they provide for in varying degrees, in exchange for sexual favours, or social activities in the present or the future (Bledsoe 1980a; 1980c; Fuest 1996; Utas 1999). Especially after the war, these boyfriends have become the most important source of paying school fees for young girls.[17]

Many young girls teamed up with fighters in the same way as they would have teamed up with older men—the difference in this case though was that they teamed up with 'the homeboys' whom they

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[17] In Monrovian schools, according to an expatriate aid-worker with experience in education, there are only slight differences between girls in the street and those residing with their families. Both categories totally depend on boyfriends for paying their school fees.

would earlier have viewed as possibly attractive but too poor to be considered of any help. Without second thoughts, most girls jumped into a tumultuous process with potentially horrific consequences. They teamed up with a novel, but treacherous form of power. The new boyfriends were in general not used to money. They felt so affluent that they could wash their cars in beer—a beverage most could not even afford to drink prior to the war—and that they could drive a car until it got out of gasoline and then just dump it for another one. Likewise the young girlfriends would get hold of commodities that they had only dreamt of before. Here we move to the topic of looting. Some young girls deny that they ever looted at all or that they ever acquired any looted goods. Instead they talk about the actions of other young women in order not to appear immoral in the post-war setting. However, large numbers of young women did enter war relations with fighters for privilege and the reaching out for 'the bonus of war'. As Bintu notes:

> *Some of them really enjoyed being with commandos because they used to encourage the commandos to go and loot and because of that some of them have got money up till this day. Some of them looted to the extreme. They went to Bomi Hills and looted diamonds, gold and other things. But some of them suffered through the war like me. Some of them suffered a lot. But then again some of them were lucky to have a commando who understood. If not, they were beaten every-day. As soon as you finished cooking them food—as soon as their bellies were full they would start beating you. They smoked jamba (marijuana) and then they would flog you—I mean most of us girls were living a mix-up-box-up life.*

It is clear from Bintu's case however, that to be with a fighter also had its disadvantages. Nevertheless young girls teamed up with high-ranking officers, even if these had more than five other girlfriends to cater for. In the case of Bintu, she behaved differently with different men. In the first case she seems to have been rather reluctant to join in the looting. She stated that the reason for this was that she was feeling bad because her pre-war sponsor was killed—in fact, her new boyfriend was amongst those who killed him. However, she explained how her 'mates'—his other girlfriends—used to pressure him to take part in the looting.

*I never forced him to loot but those other girls (Bintu's 'mates') they used to force him to loot. Even when I was with him I used to hear them arguing when they were going on mission. They would tell him "you must bring this, oh—you must bring that, oh". These girls had not owned such things before and now they wanted to get rich over night—do you understand? So I used to hear them telling the man to bring such and such things for them and indeed he used to do so. He used to ask me why I didn't tell him to bring things for me, but then I said that his life was more important. I used to make him feel good by saying, "if you just bring your life back it is alright".*

*That man used to like me too much. For the looting business in Freeport (the commercial harbour in Monrovia) he always gave us arms. He would give us uniforms so that we could go and loot, but during that time I did not like the idea too much because my heart was spoiled (because of the recent killing of her ex-boyfriend). But the other girlfriends always joined him in fatigues. They used to return*

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*with looted videos, freezers, and all those other things. All good, good things you can think about. They looted the whole Freeport area. But for me I never used to like the looting too much during my time in Monrovia.*

However, after her experiences in Gbarnga she changed her attitude and joined the looting missions herself. She stated that it made her both feel fine and that it was necessary for her survival.

*Q: But you used to like looting with Charles Taylor's men?*
*A: Yes I used to like the looting with Charles Taylor's men, because during that time in the Gbarnga area if you didn't loot you didn't eat.*

She also framed her friends' activities similarly:

*Q: But were your friends forcing their boyfriends to loot?*
*A: Some of them forced them to loot because they wanted to survive, do you understand. They would tell them, " if you go bring this for me" or "I want this because you see your friends' women have got it. They can wear this, I myself I want to be like them now". If the fighter was fond of the woman and did not want to loose her to another fighter then he would have to do what his girlfriend wanted him to do—if you want someon,e you need to satisfy her.*

Hawa explained how she worked hard to stay out of the looting economy—how she took casual jobs for other people. Even so, it was with money from the war that she managed to start a business. She began making and selling cookies and also had a small market table

where she sold miscellaneous merchandise. She admitted that she sold looted commodities, appropriated by the same boy that gave her money to start her business.

> *In Ganta, now, I was struggling on my own. Working for people. The whole day I would work for them. When I worked for them I would get food. When they helped me with the food then I ate. After I finished with the job I was doing in Ganta I was working for different people going from place to place helping them with their water and such things. I did it for my own survival—that was how I was living in Ganta. After struggling this way for some time I met up with one other boy. The boy started helping me.*

> *The boy gave me one hundred dollars (JJ)[18] to start my own business. I started fixing cookies now. And I had a small business. I used to sell 'wallah' (having a small market table). I got my goods from the front. My husband and his friends used to go to the front. When they returned he could bring market goods for me. When he went to the front and they captured a place they busted people's stores. When they busted the stores they took the goods and put it in their car and brought it for me. But my business never improved because it was based on 'blood money'.*

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[18] During most of the war Liberia had two currencies. The JJ (nicknamed so since the late President JJ Roberts face appeared on the note) was the existing currency when the war started and was used throughout the war in the 'greater Liberia'. The Liberty (showing the national emblem of Liberia including the text 'The love of Liberty brought us here' appeared on the note) was issued by the first interim government and used mainly in Monrovia. In early 2000 new notes have replaced the old ones.

The fact that Hawa connected her failure in business with her sale of looted goods—she was dealing in *blood money*, and that this remained the reason why her business never prospered—clearly points towards her moral consciousness, even if it might actually be a post-war rationalisation. She also stated that she was trying to convince her boyfriend to change his looting behaviour. Clearly she did not connect her business failure with the fact that most people lacked both money and items to barter.

> *When he brought looted things home I used to tell him: "Oh, that thing you are doing is no good". Going around bursting other people's stores open, or going around putting people under gunpoint taking their money from them. But the boy never listened to me. After some time I decided to move my hands from his market business. When he sold his looted things he bought liquor for the money and got drunk. Then they bought beer and started washing their car with the beer. They said they were rich so they would only use beer for washing the car.*

Even if Hawa condemned the looting, she was still active in the selling the looted goods. Initially she was putting all the blame on her boyfriend and his friends, protesting her innocence, but, by saying that she later took her hands away from the business, clearly shows that she was aware of her own participation and thus her own guilt. The fact that young soldier boys were washing their cars in beer, gives a glimpse of the looting euphoria of those days.

Looting and the commandeering of goods was one of the key features of the Liberian Civil War. Young boys, as well as girls, were

active agents in these actions as in most wars. Instead of teaming up with one fighter who supported his young women with looted goods, some preferred or were obliged to relate to several men. This would either be done in the form of direct prostitution—in a direct exchange of sexual favours, or, in some more subtle form. Sexual favours might for instance be exchanged for food, house rent, goods or a market table. When Bintu got out of prison, she was forced to see other men to meet the needs, demands and requirements of the people she went to live with. Initially it was because the girl who had helped her out of prison lost her boyfriend because of her commitment to Bintu. Bintu as a result acquired a debt to pay back.

> *Q: So you mean your boyfriend's cousin used to give you men to go out with?*
> *A: Yes. Because of my business she lost the contact with her boyfriend and he was the one that used to sustain her. Her man said she was too involved in my business. And if I was a 'reconnaissance' why then would she fight so hard to get me out of jail. Anyway, they then started accusing her too. That's how their relationship came to an end. The man told her that if she didn't take her mouth from my business it would be problem between them. She decided to take the problems in her relationship rather than leaving me. So she was facing problems because of me. And now I had the problem that men used to like me more than her. So that's why I stared to do 'crocrogy' (Liberian English: immoral activities—prostitution etc.). I did it for us to survive.*

Bintu's friend was now stuck with her reputation as girlfriend of a 'big man'. As a result she had problems in finding another man whom she

could rely on. Bintu became the solution. Although Bintu went out with other soldiers, it was also something that her boyfriend had to accept, because he was just another powerless civilian when his cousin Tom King, was not in town.

> *I feel like my boyfriend used to know that I was going out with other men, but he just had to bear it because he never had any money and it was only Tom King who could help us. When Tom King was gone for two-three months we did not even have money for toothpaste. These other 'small', 'small' boys and even other big men were afraid of going out with the girl (the one that had taken care of Bintu) because she had this relationship with a 'big man' earlier. So because of that I was the only person to 'mago-mago' (Krio: fighting for something by all means) at least to bring food home.*

> *I never really used to enjoy going out with these fighters. I was doing these things because I wanted to survive—do you understand? It was no enjoyment at all. I just wanted to survive, because the crime they put on me was very bad. Reconnaissance—if they caught you for that they would kill you. So I was forced to make life 'sweet' for myself. Besides that things were so difficult for the girl who had left her boyfriend because of me. So I just had to strain. You know strain—to the full meaning of the word. For me it was not really any problem because I knew the life I had been living, but for her; she lost her whole home for my business. So I used to strain myself to satisfy her.*

Bintu justifies her actions by saying it was necessary for her own survival and because she owed the person that saved her life a lot, and

this was a way to pay back some of the debt. Here we are at one end of a spectrum, between having several boyfriends and being a prostitute. During the war, many young girls went through various stages, especially so in Monrovia. Being the capital and the commercial axis of the country, as well as the locus for international humanitarian assistance, more hard cash was available in Monrovia and it had become a magnet for girls 'selling' sexual favours. The least paid form of prostitution barely offered the daily bread for the young girls involved—however fortunate they might be at times (see chapter 2). The best-paid forms, on the other hand, would take the girls to a life in financial prosperity, with the political and economical elite.

> Your ma is a hopo-jo (prostitute), don't cry baby. Your ma go look for food, don't cry baby. Your ma fucking for you, don't cry baby. Your pa is a useless man, don't cry baby. Your pa doesn't care for you, don't cry baby.
>
> *Liberian Lullaby*

## INFORMAL POLYGYNY

*To give you an example: I would go and love to (have a relationship with) this commando. He would take me from my home and bring me to another town. When bringing me to this new town he would take another girl from the street and bring her to our home. Then the girl and I would be sleeping in the same room and if I would com-*

*plain he would kill me. Of course I would agree with everything he is saying. And then the man would go and bring a third one—again you could not talk or they would shoot you. The only thing to do would be to take your hands from there. You would find your way. But if you would start to play jealousy they would kill you for nothing. (Masa)*

The experience of sharing a man with several other women was of course not unique to the war years. The extent of such informal polygyny however, appears to be unprecedented. Young boys of 14-15 years of age might have as many as five 'wives'/girlfriends or more. Older men who prior to the war did not have a single wife, now secured ten. Girls from urban areas, where polygyny was viewed as a rural, backward habit (Little 1973) were forced nevertheless to get along with several 'co-spouses'. Female stories from the war years commonly refer to 'mates' and their problematic relations to them. One of my male informants in Ganta who actually had two 'wives' himself, stated that during the war years, it was common among his friends to render two or three 'wives' pregnant simultaneously. To be 'entitled' to more than one 'wife' was a question of status and power. For young men and boys, the war created both the possibility and deepened the urge to demonstrate newly found power through setting up polygynous households. Bintu first experienced this when she became the girlfriend of the INPFL fighter.

*Q: So the first commando you were having a relationship with was a Prince Johnson fighter. How many girlfriends did he have?*
*A: We were seven. It wasn't easy to live with these girls because some of them had never been exposed to such a life, and lacked experience.*

*They felt that they had met the best of men, because of all the looted things they got. They did not know that these boys were just doing these things because they had not been with nice girls before. They just used the gun to get relations with nice girls. Some of my mates just wanted to start confusion—to make palaver. I just used to play low (keep a low profile) because I was just doing it to save my life. Some of them would abuse me because—I mean—the boy used to like me best. That was because I used to play low and he also knew who I was going out with before I met him. Sometimes when they were cursing me I would call them and try to advice them. I would say: "you stop cursing me" but I was not making a big issue out of it because these girls lacked experience and if I would talk too much they might have gone behind my back and told this man something. One wrong thing and he could have killed me. Rather I used to talk to them in a kind of petting way. Sometimes when I cooked food for the man, some of them would take the pot and waste it on the ground because they were jealous of me.*

Bintu learnt the importance of keeping a low profile. She was trying not to stand out too much. She stated that her boyfriend valued her highly. Because of that, one can assume that it made her unpopular in the eyes of the other girls. Later on during our interview, she returned to the same topic but from a slightly different angle:

*You had your family and they did not have any food. If you did not have a relationship with a commando how would your family survive? You had your mother, father, brother, sister, uncle. If you didn't love to a commando they would not get food. Any commando you*

*would see with more than two, three women you would know that they were commandos with rank. If you had a relationship with one of these high rank commandos you knew that they had their own boys who would go loot for them and bring it back to you. When they went looting then you knew that you would at least be able to send something small back to your family. The soldiers without rank had of course also power but it was not like the others.*

According to Bintu's experience it was preferable to stay with a commando that already had several 'wives' because this situation was proof enough that he could provide for them. Nevertheless, 'mates' also meant trouble, as Hawa's case has illustrated. It was because of these 'mates' that she ended up in prison and was severely tortured. When Hawa came out of jail, she still did not feel safe, with the danger actually coming from within her 'home'. It was her five 'mates' that later, when the man was killed, got her jailed. Likewise, when she was living in Ganta, it was her 'mate' who out of jealousy, informed other rebels of her ethnic status and thereby got her imprisoned again. At that time, her 'mate' was having a relationship with a man from the Special Forces whom she had persuaded to get Hawa out of the way, on his 'sweetheart's' account. Jealousy was at the base of a lot of infighting in these situations. The mere fact that a girl risked losing her protection if dumped by her commando, meant that the 'family' itself became a hostile environment where women fought each other and slandered each other behind each other's backs.

*Girls used to fight over men most of the time. They would fight like hell because sometimes the man did not even want to look their way.*

*You know how men commandos were: they just picked the one they liked most for the time being and the others they just ignored. So if one of the others had more strength than this favourite girl then she would beat the hell out of her when the man was out. When the man went on mission and returned with all those things he would give most of it to his favourite girl. But if she were weak the other girls would beat her and take every goddamn thing from her. That's how it used to be. (Bintu)*

The pattern of 'mates' fighting for a good position within the household was not unique to the war years (Bledsoe 1976; 1980a; 1980c). Anyone who arrives last is automatically the youngest, and if one comes from the 'wrong' ethnic group, she always had a hard time. Says Hawa:

*Being the youngest, I had to work hard for the others. Every morning I made sure to take the dirty clothes outside. I washed them. I cleaned up the place and then I had to cook. Sometimes I even went working on the farm. When the people were harvesting rice I had to go along. I used to do everything and after I arrived in the house the others did not do anything, but still they were against me. In all this my husband did not do anything to improve my situation.*

In some cases, women would use pregnancies as a means to get permanent access to powerful men.[19] In other cases, the fact that a young woman had a child meant that she had to find a fighter who

[19] Pregnancies might be one of the main powers women have over men. Such has been the case long before the civil war (Bledsoe 1980a).

could sustain her and her child. For men it was often proof of potency and power both to have many children, and to have children with many 'wives'. But for a young woman, a child is not always a successful way to secure a relationship to a man, as in the case of Hawa:

*When I was pregnant for the man I too seized the man's money. When I seized his money then he fell in love with another girl. After he had fallen in love with the girl he started treating me really bad. The man did not even look at me. So I suffered a lot during my pregnancy. When I had given birth to the child I really started to regret that I had left the boy I was with before I went to this one.*

Polygyny, both formal and informal, was far from a new phenomenon in Liberia. The novelty was that increasingly, young men have a whole entourage of 'wives' or girlfriends at their disposal. To a great extent, this was a mode of displaying their newly found powers. Girls originating from urban centres who viewed polygyny as a backward institution, were equally forced to submit to war polygyny. Capricious and often violent 'husbands' of limited maturity were clearly one obstacle, although in reality young women seem to have had as many difficulties in relation to other women within the house. Jealousy games seem to have been a daily problem between 'mates', and little stopped them from committing horrible crimes towards each other. With the war receding, many of the powerful and rich fighters have yet again become marginalised youth and young mothers now suffer severely.[20]

[20] UNICEF statistics reveal that Liberia has the highest rate of teenage pregnancies worldwide. It should be noted that teenage pregnancy rates were alarmingly high even in the pre-war setting (Bledsoe & Cohen 1993).

## IN FATIGUES

*She was having a relationship with one of the commandos that's how it started. Then she went with the man to the warfront and she saw how the man was fighting. Then the man gave her a gun. It was right there she became a fighter, but she never took any training on base. When the man gave her the gun he just said that "you do like this and your gun will fire and like this and the gun will stop". After that she always used to go to the front fighting along with her man. (Masa)*

*Their (the female combatants') aggression was mainly against women. They would strip you naked. They would show the grenade somewhere up your private parts. They would put their hands where they're not supposed to go, saying they were looking for grenades. People were more afraid of them than the men, because the female combatants' temper was very quick. (Liberian girl in Olonisakin 1995a:38)*

*'They are not just gun-toting women,' Taylor said as we walked out of the small house into the sunlight, and the two women sentries stood briskly to attention, clasping their Kalashnikovs to their breasts. 'They are highly trained, and have become an important part of our fighting force.' (Huband, 1998:76).*

A majority of the young women who fought in the civil war became involved through their boyfriends. Most of them never attended any formal training and many of them only went to the front with their boyfriends and were thus never part of a regular force. However, both the INPFL and the NPFL had special female units. According to

statistics taken during the disarmament process in 1996/97, less than two percent of the fighters in the civil war were female (UNDHA-HACO). During the conflict, women soldiers were known to be at least as fierce as their male counterparts; men and women alike committed atrocities.[21] A young ex-fighter noted that "it can be too fearful when you are fighting with a woman amongst you".

   Bintu's boyfriend was a civilian, but she joined her boyfriend's cousin on the frontline, and actually felt rather excited about being on the battlefield.

*Tom King was the rooster for us. Sometimes he would give me a gun and I would follow him to the front. I was just tired of all the talking and the raping in town so when King gave me a gun and said "let's go" I was relieved to get out of town. We went fighting—I used to join him in the bush. The first time we went all the way to Grand Gedeh. The second time we went there he got killed, but we went to so many other places before that. I remember when we fought in Kakata. During NPFL's first attack on Kakata I was there with him. This was when they attacked BWI (Booker Washington Institute). He gave me a gun and said, "today we will all go fight—do you understand". So we all went into the battlefield that day. I will tell you one thing about fighting: to fight, to meet your enemy and to exchange bullets with them is not hard, but to retreat, that is the real problem. And I was not a military woman. It was God and nobody else that saved me that day. To retreat from BWI all the way to four-teenth street that was problem. But God brought me out of that.*

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[21] The most ferocious atrocities during the war have often been ascribed to child and youth soldiers.

When in Monrovia with her INPFL boyfriend, she also wore fatigues. As noted earlier, Bintu was not too keen on the 'looting business' during that time. However, her boyfriend gave arms and uniforms to his other girlfriends, who took advantage of this. The girl that helped Bintu out of jail in Gbarnga also used to follow her man to the front, mainly for the purposes of looting:

> *When she was with her boyfriend she went to the front with him. He used to give her arms too. She had war experience. She used to join her boyfriend because she liked him. It was just because of me that she lost the man. But she really used to like the man, so when he said "let's go to the front", she would join him. (Bintu)*

Evelyn was 18 years old when the war started. She was in Monrovia the first time she heard about the rebels. As with many others, she did not even know what a rebel was; rumours held that they had tails or that they had wings and could fly. A few months later, Evelyn had her first encounter with the NPFL as they captured Bomi Hills, the area where her family were residing. A rapid course of events followed, turning her into a rebel. When she first met her boyfriend, a notorious commando nicknamed Bruce Lee, he accused her of hiding enemy soldiers. In front of her family he stabbed her with a knife and then started shooting at her. She survived the incident and later he demanded that she become a 'wife'. Evelyn accepted, being too afraid to say no. Then he wanted her to go to the front with him and again she was obliged to agree. She not only went to the battlefront but also remained armed in town where she earned the reputation for being a 'commando lady'. When Bruce Lee died, she continued in the same line of bargain with another fighter.

*He forced me to take up arms. He gave me a gun to hold—I used to be very scared. Sometimes he just sent his car up to my house to fetch me. Then we left for the warfront. He always took me along on his missions and let me carry his arms. I had no other choice but to follow. In town they used to see me as a commando lady. They used to like me. They welcomed me, took care of me and served me. They used to like my business. Sometimes when some of the commandos did bad in town I would try to assist in solving the problem. For instance when people were beating up other people who had been stealing things, I would go in between and tell the people to stop and to please forgive them. Sometimes when they wanted to kill somebody I would go there and convince them to forget about the issue. That was what I used to be doing, taking a responsibility behind the fighters. That was the reason why the civilians liked me.*

Evelyn tried to legitimise her seemingly immoral behaviour by claimimg that she was helping to solve conflicts in town. Armed and backed by one of the important commandos in the town, she possessed a certain power of jurisdiction. Whether people really believed her purported care for the community, it is of course questionable. In most cases they had to comply with whatever the military 'desperados' decided. After the war, Evelyn, like thousands of young women and men, chose not to return to her home, but to stay and live with a group of young people in a shared house in Ganta.

Even if they actively partook in the war, most women were still unable to compete favourably with their men, both in private, or publicly. Masa recalls a women fighter she used to know.

*She was a fighter and she found her boyfriend with a different woman and then she couldn't say anything. The man was above her—the man had a military degree. She didn't have a degree because she never went to base camp for training. Then the man went on training and then he (in his turn) trained her. She even used to call the man chief. But the chief thing is finished now (implying that now when the war is over he cannot continue to boss her around in the same fashion).*

However, some young women who fought the war, were able to turn it into a successful endeavour. These were most often fighting commandos, in some cases high ranking officers.[22] With looted wealth, they managed to build up business enterprises and with contacts in the NPFL/NPP establishment, they often had a plethora of 'big men' to back them. Naturally women who fought for other warring factions than NPFL did not have the same political advantages. Probably the most well known example was that of Julia Rambo, who fought for NPFL during the war and who in 1998 became the owner of one bar in central Monrovia, another on the beach, and a third in Buchanan. Women who were successful in the NPFL were often recruited into the civil service. For instance, a woman with a notorious reputation— Martina Johnson, a General in the NPFL artillery and one of the brains behind the launching of NPFL's Operation Octopus—became head of security at Robertsfield International Airport (RIA). Julia Rambo, Martina Johnson, Agnes Taylor (Charles Taylor's ex-wife), Ruth 'Attila' Milton of the Liberia Peace Council (LPC) and other

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[22] Paul Richards has noted that female participants in the NPFL seldom were as young as their male counterparts (1996:89). This observation contradicts UNDHA-HACO statistics.

female fighters, functioned as role-models for many young females during the war. The power and integrity they upheld was in sharp contrast to the fragile positions most girls found themselves in. The power potentially wielded through the barrel of a gun was certainly a tempting possibility.

## AGENCY OF VICTIMS

Liberian national and regional politics have to a rather large extent been a male playground. If war is politics by other means (to paraphrase Clausewitz), then it falls rather naturally that the strategic agency of the war is mainly the property of men. Some women also participated in the war: they commanded soldiers, and upheld the war economy by trading with loot. Further they influenced their husbands and their sons to fight, and certainly young girls motivated boys from their own age to join the fighting forces. Female participation was generally facilitated by men, but one has to remember that it was not by men as a category; a few political actors—persons often referred to as 'big men', 'boss-men' or warlords—were the ones who enrolled most both men and women into the war system.

I have described how young women moved from a passive to a more active role in the conflict. As we have seen, entering into the civil war meant that young girls became involved with fighters for several reasons. Whatever 'choiceless decisions'[23] introduced these young girls

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[23] The expression is used by Aretxaga (1997:61), arguing that women in Northern Ireland exhibit both individual agency and simultaneously are victims of the social setting.

into the war system, they all had one thing in common, namely that they soon got used to the system, and thus created different ways to cope with it. Boyfriends and looted goods came to have a central meaning in this complex. The struggles among the young women were often over access to important fighters, mastering one's 'mates', and the search for protection, etc. The wrong choice might in fact end one's life. Therefore, some women also induced men to continue their actions. A boyfriend who did not loot, or wanted to pull out of the fighting system altogether, was quickly deemed worthless and would be dropped promptly for another more powerful fighter. Intelligent and smart young women were often seen parading with the most powerful commanders. It was status among young girls to go out with high-ranking fighters. The war therefore created a category of 'war women' who skilfully mastered fighters and thus became economically prosperous. Many of these had the possibility to move out of the war zone, but quite frankly felt that they could manage their lives much better in the vicinity of the battlefield, despite the obvious dangers. When the fighting became too intense, they might follow their men to a safer location, or even take refuge in neighbouring countries.[24]

I have tried to dissolve the dichotomy of victim/perpetrator, not by creating a third grouping in-between, but rather by demonstrating that even in war, people are most likely to be both. I have suggested that the Liberian Civil War in some senses limited most peoples'

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[24] During the April 6th war in 1996 I was living across the border in the Ivory Coast and experienced how many of these young 'war women' crossed the border. They arrived to the border towns in decent cars and posh clothing only to continue down to Abidjan, or even further.

agency. People in general were limited to a 'tactical agency', using de Certeau's terminology. The minimal amount of a 'war agency' is what I have called victimcy, i.e. the agency of portraying one's actions as passive victimhood and reaping the benefit of other people's pity. Most young women in the Liberian Civil War have clearly had a much greater portion of 'tactical agency' than that—but even so, they were still victimised in the war. Tactical agency is the art of the weak, or the agency of the powerless. I have described different modes of mastering the confines of war, the daily tactics of living in the war zone as a young woman or girl. Primarily this has been about obtaining security for oneself, and secondarily to provide security for family and friends. The tactical agency of mastering the war zone from a young woman's perspective, anticipated close contact with potentially dangerous rebel fighters or army men. If unwisely dealt with, it could lead to sexual abuse, rape and in some instances loss of life. Basically their agency was about the manipulation of male combatants; about teaming up with the appropriate man, about secretly seeing other men, and having the right substitute prepared if, and usually when the current boyfriend got killed on the battlefield.

Fighters with high political and economic potential had numerous girlfriends or 'wives' and, as we have seen, one tactical aspect of life was to deal with jealous 'mates'—mastering the game was also to master one's 'mates'. Playing wrongly in the house, disclosing secrets to the wrong person etc. could have fatal outcomes. Tying up with fighters also implied achieving power. Many poor girls used the power of military fatigues and the barrel of the gun to lay hands on the commodities of modern society, something that they never would have been able to obtain during normal circumstances. Their power put

them in a position to rule communities and command individuals that had previously looked down on them or ignored them. Many young women turned this circumstance into a lifestyle. Enjoying their newfound power meant that even if they had the choice to leave and go into exile, they would choose to stay—to 'enjoy' the war. Likewise, girls in exile moved back to the Liberian war zone despite the obvious dangers inherent in such a move. In these instances, their agency could be viewed as exceeding that of tactical agency. Indeed the end of the war became a most brutal awakening for many of these young war-enterprising women, turning them in one blow into pariahs in society.

## CONTINUITY OR CHANGE?

*During the war, I used to be out there doing business. My husband used to be at home taking care of the cooking. But now he is out there again. (Ganta/fieldnotes)*

The relationship between men and women is strictly financial in Liberia now. If you don't have money you have no true love. We just believe in the barter system that started during the war. You get the pleasure of my body, and I get the pleasure of your pocket. (interview with high school graduate in Olonisakin 1995b:22)

As social norms ruptured during the war, behaviours earlier viewed as immoral, were now legitimised out of necessity. In two separate articles Funmi Olonisakin (1995a, b) argues that the war has caused young girls to care less for how the community conceives of them. In much the same fashion as urban youth cultures in the West,

this is a response to a perceived stigma in the post-war society. A young 'war-generation' has constructed a loosely knit sub-culture with clear markers of opposition to the broader society; created on construed markers of marginalisation by a dominant culture. A more marked existence of such a sub-culture can be seen in urban centres. In the quotation above, a high-school graduate proposed that gender relationships in the Liberian war zone became entirely commercial. According to her, love was one of the first war victims. Most women in pre-war Liberia would probably have reached the same conclusion, but would have blamed economic hardship. In war and post-war discourses, it is the war itself that is given the blame.

Gender antagonism had been highlighted during the war. The fact that men saw women as prostitutes and that women saw men as careless beings who only craved insouciant sexual relations, is all too often pointed out in popular discourse. The woman in the taxicab with whose account I started this chapter, stated that men were cowards during the conflict. Like her, women often claim that men were useless during the war. Quite often male family heads could not fulfil their commitments to their families, instead women would step up as main providers. To attach oneself to a fighter was one way of doing this—thereof follows the statement that men see women as prostitutes. Many families were broken up when women were forced to leave the domestic sphere, venturing out into the public. In Monrovia, the most prosperous relationship that a woman could engage in would be with ECOMOG personnel.[25] The crude wisdom related by these women to

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[25] ECOMOG was a West African peacekeeping force. Although their salaries were rather modest they often had access to other cash flows due to business with minerals, looted goods etc.

their husbands during the war years is said to have been "you will chop (eat) when the ECOMOG leaves". 'Eat' thus plays a double tenor by signifying both food and sex. The teaming up with an ECOMOG combatant, a rebel or a government soldier was also a technique to protect the very man they deceived. For many men this issue was, and still continues to be, hard to deal with. During the war it also led to decisions to join the warring factions out of despair over the loss of power and control over one's own wife, daughters and sisters. In some cases it also led to the expulsion of wives after they had been forced to have sex with soldiers or rebels.

Indeed many women were tragically excluded from their families and social networks due to being subjected to sexual abuse and rape, although it is important to emphasise that more often than not, husbands or parents chose to accept what occurred. Possibly they brought their wife or their children to spiritual healers for ritual cleansing ceremonies (Honwana 1999a; 1999b; Nordstrom 1997b). As rape was not an isolated occurrence during the war, but rather something that happened to all families and social networks, Liberians have generally chosen to accept it as a heritage of the conflict and thus something to deal with in the public process of reconciliation and healing in the nation. It is sometimes suggested that the large amount of girls raped during the war is a reason that individual women will be mentally able to leave a rape assault behind. An inclusive mode in society will largely help to purge the wounds of rape victims. My experience is that young girls can talk about rape. Several of my informants have been very up front with their experiences—however the pathos of trauma is more intricate to talk about. The fact that many girls do not hide their personal experiences of rape, suggests that rape is not as

stigmatised in war and post-war Liberia as it was in the pre-war setting.

What has happened to those girls who had intimate connections with people in the fighting sphere or who themselves fought the war? As stated above, many of them have chosen not to return to their pre-war setting, due to an experienced stigma. Cynthia Enloe talks about 'camp followers' in one of her books (1983).

The archetypal image of the camp follower is a woman outcast from society, poor but tenacious, eking out a livelihood by preying on unfortunate soldiers. She is a woman intruding in a 'man's world'. Skirts dragging in the battlefield mud, she tags along behind the troops, selling her wares or her body, probably at unfair prices. If by chance she falls in love with a soldier, she is destined to be abandoned or widowed. (Enloe, 1983:1-2)

The images I have brought forward in this text are not entirely different from those suggested by Enloe. Young Liberian women as well as 'camp followers' learned how to manage life under the difficult conditions of war. Some literally grew up in it and became dependent on the fabric of war. Just as a 'camp follower' who stated after the end of the Thirty Years War 'I was born in the war; I have no home, no country, no friends; war is all my wealth and now whither will I go?' (Enloe, 1983:4), so many young women knew little of life outside the reality of conflict. War shaped the realities of life for many, and during the hostilities, they ventured out into a public sphere, because their fathers, husbands and boyfriends were in greater danger of getting killed out there. They too were in danger, but cruel as it might sound, they had something to trade with.

The civil war was an ugly process for most Liberian women. However, war often implies periods of rapid change in both social and

political conditions (Elshtain, 1987). In addition, war has often been seen as a period where processes of female emancipation take place (Massey 1994; Stanton *et al*. 1985). As Meintjes et al put it:

It is a paradox that war offers opportunities for women to transform their lives in terms of their image of themselves, their behaviour towards men and towards their elders, and their ability to live independently. (Meintjes et al. 2001b:7)

Concerning Liberia, Stephen Ellis notes "a radical shift in the position of women" and he states that "some women travelled widely to trade, and the effect has been a remarkable emancipation of women from their pre-war position" (1999:43). How durable are such changes? Just as in the various contributions to the volume *The aftermath* (Meintjes *et al*. 2001a), I observed a general inability of Liberian women to consolidate wartime gains. If women came to occupy a part of the public space formerly unknown to them, I believe that the quotation at the onset of this section has an important message to relay. During the war the wife took care of her family's public matters, whilst her husband remained in the home, taking care of food preparation and other domestic concerns. Now in the post-war setting this scenario is yet again reversed: her husband is out in the public and she is taking care of the domestic life again. To a considerable extent this situation signifies the nature of post-war reality. Most women have moved back into the domestic sphere and certainly more young women than before the war live in polygynous relationships/marriages. Even if education is viewed as crucial, most young women do not stay in school for any longer period of time, if at all. According to statistics from 1999, available at UNDP, only 22 percent of Liberian women are literate compared to 54 percent of men.

Girls make up only 40 percent and 32 percent of enrolments in primary and secondary schools, respectively. Women also only occupy two percent of ministerial positions, five percent of legislative seats and only one percent of executive positions in the country.[26] These are possible indications of a future situation, similar to the pre-war reality for women in Liberia. The war may have exposed young women to new realities, but to state that their roles in society have changed drastically seems rather exaggerated.

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[26] Cf. http://reliefweb.int/IRIN/wa/countrystories/Liberia/19990917a.htm

# REINTEGRATION OR REMARGINALISATION?

*In this connection, we are faced with the responsibility of providing assistance to former combatants through the repair of schools, clinics, and the provision of jobs, in order that they will be gainfully employed. Excombatants from all former factions remain a serious concern of this government, and legislation will be introduced for the creations of a Nations Veterans Administration Agency, to attend to the needs of our injured young men and women nationally. This administration is going to work hard to solve the problem of getting our excombatants readjusted (President Charles Taylor's annual message to the National Legislature quoted in Daily Times, Monrovia, February 2/98, p. 2).*

## INTRODUCTION

Quite contrary to the President's speech, little or nothing was done by the Liberian government to accommodate young excombatants in the immediate aftermath of the war. As compared to many other excombatants worldwide, Liberian war veterans are far from viewed as heroes in post-war Liberia. Joe was fighting as a soldier in the NPFL when he was wounded in his foot by a grenade. After recovering at the Methodist hospital in Ganta, he found that he could not return to his previous trade due to his heavy limping. Even though he was a veteran in the victorious NPFL army, and despite promises

made by Charles Taylor, he did not receive any government aid—he simply had to take care of himself. Joe however, fought well for himself. Where many others would have failed, Joe managed to establish a small shop in a residential area of Ganta, thus eking out a living for himself and his girlfriend. In his small shed, candy, cigarettes, Maggie cubes (soup stock), chilli-pepper and at times cassava, were traded over the counter. By far the most attractive part of the shop however was the drinking booth. Here, a mixed clientele of unemployed youth, police, military, and night watchmen hid to drink bottles of gin (homebrew taking the detour around Monrovia for cleaning, bottling and labelling), or cane juice (homebrew straight from the sugarcane farms outside Ganta), smoke dope and to play checkers. The status as excombatant was what most of the clientele had in common.

In Joe's shop I met up with Adolphus who had lost a leg in combat, Georgie, Anthony, and a number of other people. Complaining about post-war society was a predominant pastime here, most especially when the police and military were absent. One day Georgie came and told us about a wartime friend who had chosen to return to his village right after the end of the war. The previous day, the friend had come to Ganta, and paid him a visit. Georgie said:

> *The man is talking about his cassava farm, his rice and palm-nuts. He is living with his two wives and has recently got a child, and all we are doing here in Ganta is just sitting and looking at the coal-tar road.*

Georgie expressed this with clear envy in his voice, hesitating about the sweetness of modernity.[1] Another time, Anthony explained to me about the problems he had with his family.

> *Me, my people rejected me because today I am a wounded man. They all believe that we (excombatants) have gunpowder in our heads. Today, the only man I depend on is Charles Taylor. If someone would give me 2500 USD to go fight in Zaire, I would go. I would leave the money with my family and if I die at least I would have helped them. I fought for Liberia and I died in the war.*

His statement is actually full of contradictions. It is apparent however that Anthony feels rejected by everyone, from family to the government of Liberia. His reference to Taylor is chiefly rhetorical, although it does hint at a frail hope that the president will live up to the promises he made to his men during the war. He is, like Georgie, dragging his feet up and down the tarmac road not knowing where to start or where to go. On the other hand, Georgie's friend back in 'the bush', and Joe in his small shop, arduously, through different means and positions in the local opportunity structures, work their way back into respected positions in society. In this chapter, I address some of the concerns associated with demobilisation and the social reintegration of

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[1] The tarmac road ends right after Ganta town and the continuing main roads leading either to the Guinea (via Yekepa), or to the Ivory Coast (via Kahnple) are dirt roads. The tarmac road bears heavy symbolism as the main connection between Ganta and the experience of cosmopolitan modernity of Monrovia. Ganta's connection to the larger world was completed by the construction of the road from Monrovia in 1945-46. During the first period it was only an American missionary, Dr. Harley, who had a vehicle to traffic the road with.

excombatant youth in the aftermath of the Liberian Civil War. What happens to the young combatants who fought the war in the post-war existence? How is the social reintegration of excombatants functioning? Bearing in mind that many of these young people committed terrible atrocities during the war years, even in their home settings, how are they received? Do excombatants at all have the possibilities to go home? Is there still a place to call 'home'? How are they perceived in the home setting? In this chapter I show that the social reintegration of excombatant youths differs considerably from setting to setting. In some situations, reintegration has hardly been taking place at all, whilst in other settings it is working remarkably well.

1998, the year of my fieldwork in Liberia, was a relative peaceful year, except for a few incidents (the September 18 fighting in Monrovia was the most serious). The prevailing view was that Liberia was heading towards peace. Taking an institutional perspective, the time after the election in mid-1997 is generally referred to as the post-war period. I have also chosen to refer to the period as post-war, but as peace in Liberia has remained fragile, and as a new rebel faction appeared in late 1999 in Lofa County, it could also be argued that 1997-1999 was just an intermediary period in a longer war. From a combatant perspective, reintegration was important to achieve as soon as possible, although there was also a kind of post-war standby mentality, where it became tactically important also *not* only to reintegrate, but to maintain contacts with commanders as well as rank and file within war-networks, just in case the war would start up all

over again.[2] So, when we talk about excombatants in the post-war setting, it has become natural to talk about reintegration. As I have argued in this dissertation, combatants were mainly youth who already experienced marginalisation, and in the concluding part of this chapter I shall argue that alongside a process of reintegration there also occurs a process of remarginalisation.

## LIBERIAN CIVIL WAR AS A CONTINUUM

Officially the Liberian Civil War started on Christmas Eve 1989 and ended with general elections in 1997. However, war ought to be seen as a continuum without a clear beginning or a clear end. For a small group of Liberians, the war started much earlier than 1989 as they were drafted for military training in Libya in the first half of the 1980s (Richards 1996; Ellis 1999). Certainly in the town of Butoe in Nimba County, the arrival of NPFL (National Patriotic Front of Liberia) rebels on Christmas Eve 1989 signalled the onset of the civil war. But in other areas, people were affected much later, or hardly at all. Even during the war, people in most areas experienced long periods of relative peace and normalcy, suddenly interrupted by fierce battles and fighting with newfound intensity. As Paul, one of the key informants noted "you know the war was just in some places while in other places people can be enjoying themselves". In 1998, Liberians tended to agree that the war had started in 1990 and ended in 1997, Although in the

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[2] The civil war has dragged on in a low intensity mode. Both the Liberian army, a plethora of pro-government militias and LURD (Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy) have recruited from among many excombatants willing to pick up arms again. In that sense the standby mode can be seen as a sound strategy.

midst of it, no one could tell whether a particular incident marked the end of the war or not. Such an uncertainty is understandable if one looks at Liberian refugees in the neighbouring countries of Ivory Coast, Guinea and Sierra Leone. Some refugees have stayed behind right up to the current day, simply because they are not sure whether the war has ended or not. Was 1998 therefore just another period of relative peace in the war continuum?

During the first half of 1996, when warlords, national and international experts called the war off, many refugees were heading home when the news of renewed fighting in Monrovia met them. Learning from such experiences, refugees have been reluctant to return home (the lack of clear opportunities in Liberia has further deterred refugees from going home).[3] The Liberian Civil War entered a new phase as the former warlord Charles Taylor was elected President in democratic elections of 19 July 1997. Even so, during 1998, parts of what we would generally call war activities continued. Renewed fighting took place in pockets of the country. During my stay in Liberia in 1998, I experienced a few battle-like incidents with dissident groups fighting against government soldiers in Monrovia. By far the worst fighting in Monrovia was the so-called September 18 battle that again turned Monrovia into a war zone and had nation-wide repercussions.

Liberians' continued war experience has been not only of war in its most obvious form. It has also been of the government's maintenance

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[3] Larger groups of Liberian refugees returned from Guinea and the Ivory Coast during 1999-2000 (Guinea) and 2002-03 (Ivory Coast). This is not because stability has returned to Liberia but rather because of political unrest in the host countries.

of a war bureaucracy with the transformation of the NPFL rebel army into a 'democratic party', the NPP (National Patriotic Party). For instance, the security apparatus is maintained by former NPFL commanders and as such it continues to harass the Liberian citizens. Furthermore, elements within the civil service on all levels of the hierarchy continue to loot private and state property in rebel-like fashion. For instance the SSS (Special Security Service), SSU (Special Security Unit) and SOD (Special Operations Division) are notoriously known to carry out 'go-by-chop' raids, emptying whole stores during night hours. Many excombatants are involved in these activities.

## YOUTH PARTICIPATION

*There is no more revolution except in resistance (Virilio & Lotringer 1997:83)*

It was to a very large extent the youth of Liberia which fought the civil war. In their minds, participation in the civil war was a revolution—fitting rather well with Paul Virilio's words above—a way of freeing themselves from a heavy workload and parental expectations (Richards 1995; 1996). It was also a response to the lack of opportunities in society (Chingono 1996; Cruise O'Brien 1996). The war served as a means for young people to wrestle power out of the hands of big men (Keen 1998) and do something about their own precarious economic situation—i.e. using their gun as a credit card

(Sesay 1996).[4] In reality however they became subjects of another set of other even more unscrupulous big men (Ellis 1998; Reno 1995; 1998).

A feature of Liberian society that has often been neglected in discussions about root causes of male youth participation in the civil war, is young men's limited access to girlfriends and potential wives, perhaps because this seems a rather mundane concern compared to the more dramatic aspects of the war. Indigent young men are relatively speaking excluded from the possibilities of establishing long term relationships with women. Passively they sit and watch older, wealthier men pick up their sisters, cousins as well as the girl next door whom they innocently played love games with just a few years earlier, and who is now totally ignoring them. The prospect of remaining a bachelor for one's entire life (quite normal in Liberia because of formal and more often informal conventions of polygyny)[5] might indeed serve as an important reason to join a rebel force. Obtaining power and wealth as a rebel fighter reverses the scenario, granting young men access to numerous girlfriends and the right to take 'wives' (as I discussed in the previous chapter). As the category of youth is constructed upon notions of social age, social markers such as marriage—or at least a stable relationship with a woman, such a relationship is a requirement for moving out of the youth category and into that of adulthood. Many of the older men (aged approx. 20-45) who participated in the civil war formed part of the social category

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[4] As youth in general only participated in very rudimentary forms of the Liberian economy, on the very bottom of economic transactions, the increased economic hardships that affected Liberia during the past three decades have hit this group the hardest (for similar argumentation see e.g. Ferguson 1999; Guyer 1995; MacGaffey 1991).

[5] See, Bledsoe 1980c.

youth; i.e. they were mature men, but lacked the necessary wealth and power required to cross the border between youth and adulthood.

Youth participation in the Liberian Civil War must be seen as means of strategic upward mobility, aiming at obtaining respect and status by turning society's power structure upside down (taking command, instead of being commanded). Rising from self-perceived (however, largely real) modes of victimcy—involving tactics such as foot-dragging and pilfering, dissimulation, i.e. the infrapolitics of the powerless (Scott 1990:xiii)—to the means of taking agency in their own hands goes through taking up arms. As wealth achievement also functions as a principal means of upward mobility, the massive possibilities of looting, further enticed youths to participate in the rebel trade. However taking up arms and getting involved in guerrilla warfare might also be regarded as examples of 'weapons of the weak' (Scott 1985), and thus as tactics (Certeau 1984), that only will pay off in the short term. Once the war is over, marginal souls are once again deported to the margins.

## A NOTE ON THE MATERIAL

In this chapter I deal with three different cases that I have loosely categorised as urban, semi-urban and rural. My first case is from Monrovia, where I did fieldwork for six months during the first part of 1998. My second is taken from the rural areas of Sinoe County where I toured the countryside during a week in April 1998, with a team of local Red Cross volunteers, conducting 97 semi-structured interviews with youth for the Belgian Red Cross. The third case is from Ganta in Nimba County, NPFL heartland, where I spent an

additional 6 months during the autumn 1998. These three cases exhibit differing trajectories in the reintegration of youth in post-war Liberia. However we should bear in mind that urban, rural and semi-urban are only analytical categories constructed to organise the material. The borders are in reality blurred, local differences occur, and on an individual basis they are repeatedly transgressed. This fact becomes most clear in the focus on the semi-urban case, where it is easy to observe both urban and rural traits in a small enclosure as Joe's shop, presented in the vignette.

## URBAN—MONROVIA

For the sake of the argument in this chapter, it is necessary to reiterate some of the main issues of Palace life, already described in some detail in chapter 2. The Palace was situated right on the beach in central Monrovia. The location was quite pleasant, were it not for the fact that the beach was used as a public latrine, and that the plot next door was a garbage dump. Indeed, some of the houses in the near vicinity were inhabited by expatriate aid-workers and well-to-do Lebanese businessmen. The Palace was a deserted petrochemical factory with only the concrete structure remaining. In early 1998 more than a dozen excombatants had settled in the Palace. They originated from all over Liberia, but this was where the latest fighting had discharged them. Their war histories differed a lot, and it was something that many kept hidden due to their dangerous liaisons during the last part of the war. Thus instead of going into detail about their backgrounds (as in chapter 2) I here give a more general picture of the origins of excombatants currently living in Monrovia.

Those who originated from southern Liberia had primarily joined the NPFL (National Patriotic Front of Liberia) as they swept over the southern part of the country early in the war. Later, those who remained in the south would typically shift to the southern force of LPC (Liberia Peace Council)—see below for more details. Those who originated from eastern Liberia typically joined NPFL, or INPFL (Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia), and remained loyal up until the April 6 war, when some were incorporated into the ULIMO-J (United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia/Johnson-wing), or ULIMO-K (United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia/Koromah-wing).[6] Northerners could have been included among the ranks of NPFL, ULIMO-K, ULIMO-J, or the regional LDF (Lofa Defence Force). Additionally, some with roots in the south, or from the Mandingo diasporic minority, who were living in Monrovia when the war started, went into exile in Sierra Leone. There, they joined the ULIMO faction (that later split into two) during its creation in Freetown. Those who remained in Monrovia could have joined any of the factions, including the remnants of the AFL (Armed Forces of Liberia). Once inside the various rebel groups, they often shifted their allegiance between different factions, encountering little ethnic prejudice. During the April 6 war, Palace youths along with many others from urban Monrovia, joined the ULIMO-J forces, who at the time recruited heavily among urban footloose youth. Following the April 6 war, Palace youth laid down their arms, either spontaneously or as part of the demobilisation exercise instigated by the international community.

[6] During the April 6 war ULIMO-K fought alongside NPFL against ULIMO-J.

In the post-war setting, the youth in the Palace were making a living by securing day to day contracts in constructing work, making coal pots[7] out of scrap metal, selling sand from the nearby beach, or searching the garbage dump for copper and other valuables for resale. They were also highly involved in rough activities. Some of the youth in the Palace sold marijuana—all of them smoked it—and other drugs were also sold. Stolen gasoline, mainly from the generators sustaining the offices and staff housing the international NGOs, was traded in the Palace during night hours. Another nocturnal activity which involved Palace dwellers was petty thievery in various forms. A feature of post-war Liberia became crimes sanctioned by the security apparatus. It was particularly common as long as curfew was maintained, and only police and military in their various guises were allowed to pass in the streets during the night hours. Loyal youth operated in conjunction with these units. In this activity, Palace youth relied on their close connections with the army (AFL), yet others had connections and carried out missions in alliance with the police or other units of the security block.[8] Certainly the daily struggle of Palace youth and other marginal youth in Monrovia did not differ much in shape from others in similar settings elsewhere in urban Africa.[9]

[7] A small charcoal-fired cooking stove used by most urbanites.

[8] Palace youth's close contacts with AFL revealed the prevailing connections between part of the AFL and ULIMO-J fighters. Ex-fighters from NPFL lines largely occupied positions in police, special security forces and immigration, agencies that have been thoroughly restructured and reoccupied after Charles Taylor taking up office. Former NPFL fighters carried out mission together with these units.

[9] See, Abdullah 1997b; 1998; Abdullah et al. 1997; Cruise O'Brien 1996; El-kenz 1996; La Fontaine 1970; Jensen 2001; Kynoch 1999; Marks 2001; Momoh 1999; Ssewakiriyanga 1999. Resemblance is also observed with youth in similar settings in the western world, see Bourgois 1995; Bucholtz 2002; Hall & Montgomery 2000; Hazlehurst 1998; Panter-Brick 2002; Schneider 1999; and elsewhere: Bernat 1999; Rodgers forth.; Sykes 1999; Scheper-Hughes 1992.

There were few indications of Palace youth reintegration into the larger society. Palace, and other footloose youth were rather parts of a subculture, much at odds with the larger society. Even so, Palace youths at times participated in the plethora of reintegration and rehabilitation programs hosted by both international and national NGO's. Thus having obtained skills in mechanics at Don Bosco (Catholic Relief agency), carpentry at LOIC (The Liberian branch of the US based NGO: Opportunity and Industrialization Center), and then another go at a drama course held at Don Bosco, this was a fairly normal career among youth in the Palace.[10] Irrespective of what kind of skilled training they undertook, and whatever trainee position the NGO managed to arrange, very few students were actually able to obtain any stable work. Well aware of such limits, participation in reintegration and rehabilitation programs generally served as a means of getting away from the daily grind, to enjoy the logistic advantages of these programs.

From a perspective of reintegration and reconciliation, there were no indications that Palace youth were preparing to return to the communities from which they originated. Generally they had no idea if their parents had survived the war, or of their families' whereabouts. Neither were they in position to find out. The resettlement programs that some of the international organisations were offering were not utilised by Palace youth. In fact, even those who had parents or other relatives in Monrovia tended to avoid them. Family networks were instead replaced with informal structures of wartime friends and

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[10] For young females the programs were rather limited at the time, and the NGO community stated that they had a harder time to reach out to them.

commanders. Post-war livelihoods made little to change this, and it was clear that in the Palace, the military structure prevailed. The military structure was for instance used to maintain discipline. Senior Palace dwellers effectively punished theft inside the Palace, or crime outside of the Palace that lead to police raids, or roundups. Inhabitants were also punished if they broke other informal laws.

Palace youth also formed the lowest echelon in larger patron/client networks, mainly populated by former commanders but often reaching all the way up to government level. Through such vertical links, the Palace youth was exploited by big men in town for boosting up political rallies and to carry out illegal activities; such as busting the business of rivals' stores etc. (Momoh 1999; Rashid 1997, for similar activities in Nigeria and Sierra Leone). Another feature of life in the Palace was the chronic lack of young women, or girls. Of the fifteen or more people staying in the Palace—the population fluctuated considerably during my stay—only four were females, and male youths had few possibilities to obtain a girlfriend. Even short-term relationships were few. Of the four young women/girls in the Palace, two sustained themselves as prostitutes (see Utas 1999), the third was a substance abuser suffering from mental disorder. Even if I cannot confirm it, it is quite likely that she was given shelter, food, drugs etc. in exchange for sexual favours to the male Palace dwellers. The fourth was a young girl who was under protection of the informal leader of the Palace. It is hard to see how youths like those in the Palace would ever be reintegrated in the larger society. Even if they were not part of a footloose culture prior to the war, they were in any case placed at the margins of urban society permanently—they were there to stay. Youths also lived in the streets of Monrovia before the war, although

in post-war Monrovia, their numbers widely surpassed any of the pre-war figures.[11] Leaving individual tragedies aside, on a socio-structural level alone they formed a highly volatile and dangerous group, that would hesitate little if they would get the opportunity to pick up arms again.[12]

## RURAL—SINOE COUNTY

On the other extreme to the process of reintegration, we find excombatant youth in rural Sinoe County in southern Liberia. Mainly Sarpo and Kru peoples populate Sinoe County and the war had clearly drawn a wedge between the two populations. The first group of rebels that emerged in the area was the NPFL. Initially youth of both Sarpo and Kru origin joined their ranks. However, as time went by, the leaders of the NPFL started to view the Sarpos with increasing distrust. Sarpo peoples speak a language closely related to that of the Krahn, the group from which President Samuel Doe originated and which was favoured in both the civil service and the army during his 1980-1990 government. Krahn was thus envisioned as being the main enemies of the NPFL. The gradual expulsion of Sarpo soldiers within the NPFL was accompanied by atrocities against the Sarpo population

[11] To my knowledge there exists no quantitative studies substantiating this statement. However, Monrovian residents maintain that this is the case.

[12] As became apparent already during my fieldwork, when elements loyal to the ULIMO-J leader Roosevelt Johnson repeatedly created problems in town (partly provoked by the security forces). A few times it developed into shootouts and during the September 18 battle excombatant youth rearmed and again turned Monrovia into a battle zone. During that incident one among the Palace youth participated on R. Johnson's side and later escaped with him to Nigeria. In the aftermath of the battle another Palace dweller got picked up by security forces and tragically got executed.

who fled into the bush or into exile. Partly as a response, Sarpo peoples organised themselves into their own warring faction, the LPC. Initially, the creation of LPC led to more atrocities against civilian Sarpos.[13] Both the LPC and NPFL fought over power in the Sinoe County, and both carried out gruesome atrocities on civilians as a means of gaining control.

In post-war Sinoe County, excombatants, originating from all over Liberia, dwelled in the urban centre of Greenville. In rural areas, excombatant youths were mainly of Kru or Sarpo origin (and a few Bassa), originating in Sinoe County itself. In contrast to the youth hanging out in Greenville, most youths in the rural areas had already returned to their villages. The process of spontaneous social reintegration was remarkably rapid here. In many cases, excombatant youths had moved back to their home villages and often under the roofs of their families. Discourses of reconciliation prevailed among the adult generation. Indeed, their sons and daughters had committed crimes in the area, even direct assaults on family and kin, "but they are our sons and daughters, so we have to forgive them", was the common answer to how this was possible. Protection of self and family was a main incentive for youth as they joined with rebel forces in the first place, and this further enhanced the mode of forgiveness.

Reconciliation and reintegration programs implemented by the international aid community played only a marginal role in rural Sinoe. Reconciliation and reintegration were mainly taking place as a

[13] As such LPC was not a direct response of resisting NPFL rather LPC was a creation of people residing in Monrovia and Zwedru, the capital of Grand Gedeh County. Quite likely, a split between the citizens of Sinoe (Sarpo and Kru) was what the men behind LPC wished to obtain. A lasting outcome of the war has been that Sarpo peoples have been forced to harmonise with Krahn peoples.

spontaneous process. During 1998, the Belgian Red Cross (BRC) tried to establish programs to speed up social reintegration in rural areas. In several rural towns they created schools for skilled training, aimed at giving youth from the vicinity both theoretical and practical education. As part of the assessment team for this project, I toured rural Sinoe together with a team from BRC and interviewed inhabitants, trying to locate specific needs in each community. We concluded eventually that there was little need for the skilled training of carpenters, mechanics and electricians. In one town, we located three skilled carpenters, all three were unemployed. The need for mechanics was equally limited. Only three cars were registered in the entire county, and other needs for mechanics were marginal. Electricity was not available and even in Greenville town there was at the time only generators at the hospital and in three INGO compounds. Even under these limiting circumstances, half of all youth, girls included, we interviewed, wanted to become mechanics. Notwithstanding these preconditions, the BRC rushed the programme through, going against our recommendations and educating youths in just those trades.[14] In fact it is highly questionable whether a programme of any design was needed in the area, because social reintegration was proceeding so well. Educating youths in skills for which they have no use only forges a class of educated, but disgruntled individuals yet again deceived by the world. Even worse, it would be a further incentive for urbanisation, as

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[14] The director of the Belgian Red Cross did not have the slightest patience to understand the local sociology. That the project hired an anthropologist was a requirement from Brussels, and our report (Utas & Gbessagee 1998) was totally disregarded by him. Ignoring local officials, the local Red Cross administration and his own staff's advice he soon managed to make himself and his NGO remarkably unpopular. Within a year these circumstances forced the project to close down.

many of these semi-educated youths would leave the area to try their luck in Monrovia, or in any other overcrowded urban environment already filled to the brim by unemployed people of rural origin.

As noted above, many of the young excombatants in Sinoe County had already by mid-1998 returned to their families and villages. Many were resettling in the larger networks of extended families and beginning to reintegrate into village life. In most cases they had severed contact with other excombatants and were no longer enmeshed in the patron networks of the war years. Other vertical relationships had effectively cut off their dependency under rebel commanders. Even if it appeared that life was returning to the way it was during 'normal day', it should be observed that permanent changes had also taken place. For instance an upsurge in marriage involving quite young men, or of young couples living together in their own house was noted. There was also a tendency for young men and even boys (the youngest I heard of was 15) farming their own land. Prior to the war, it was rare to find men establishing themselves as individual farmers and family heads, before they had turned 25. They would normally work on the family farm or participate in communal farm activities, but seldom work for themselves. This suggests a push of the dividing line between childhood and adulthood further down in age. A fact fitting rather well with the 'traditional' idea of warriorhood as a path towards becoming a man, thus being rewarded with a farm and a wife.

### SEMI-URBAN—GANTA

Ganta, the largest town in Nimba County, was a temporary settlement for many excombatant soldiers. Characteristically, groups of

excombatants lived together, either squatting or paying symbolic rent to the owner of the house. At the beginning of my fieldwork in Ganta I targeted several groups of excombatants, but as I deepened my focus, I choose one particular group of people with which to work. Paul and his friends were living in a house together; the group consisted of several wartime friends, their girlfriends and children. Their house had also become a meeting-point for people of their own kind. It is in this socially extended form that I discuss 'Paul and his friends'. I knew Paul from my work in the Ivory Coast and our acquaintance proved instrumental in the process of building trust. I soon felt that we could talk openly about most issues, and they went out of their way to teach me about their post-war livelihoods as well as tell about their lives as combatants during the civil war years.

Paul and his friends originated mainly from Nimba and Bong Counties and had histories of fighting for the INPFL (Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia), NPFL, or both. Nimba County functioned as the primary recruitment area for the NPFL, with Bong County coming at a close second. As the NPFL entered Nimba, the population in general saw it as a Nimbadian revolution against a government which had persecuted them, in particular, due to political issues following the failed coup attempt in 1985 (Osaghae 1996; Ellis 1999; AfricaWatch 1990). To join the NPFL, or its sister movement the INPFL, was a natural step for most youth in Nimba. The NPFL split soon after they entered Liberia due to disagreements between Charles Taylor (NPFL) and Prince Y. Johnson (INPFL). Hailing from Nimba County, Johnson was the more popular of the two. After the split, Johnson maintained the command over most of the Libyan-trained soldiers (the core of the original NPFL) and further managed to enrol

a huge portion of local youth into his force. In this fashion, Johnson was more successful than Taylor during the initial phase of the war. In the longer term however, Taylor turned out to be the shrewder politician, and eventually outsmarted 'the soldier by profession' Johnson who left soon after he succeeded to catch and kill President Doe (Huband 1998; Ellis 1999; Van den Boom 1995).

After the war came to a halt in 1996, Paul and his friends, for various reasons, ended up in Ganta. Even if they had plans to go back to their own hometowns and villages in the rural areas, this had not happened by late 1998. To sustain themselves, Paul and some of the others started making mud bricks. The later part of 1998 was the starting point for a construction boom in Ganta, and there was a need for construction materials, primarily bricks. Making mud bricks on contract was a heavy and tedious job, but it paid quite well. Simultaneously with Paul and his friends, a number of others started off in the same line of business. The brick-making guild consisted predominantly of excombatant youth with close bonds to each other and with roots in the warring factions.

Three or four boys would generally work together on a contract basis. The building contractor was generally a private person, although work could also be carried out for churches, or schools. The contractor would first allocate a spot where the soil was feasible for extracting material for making bricks. He/she would also provide shovels and some food money in advance, alternatively rice, soup stock and a tin of sardines for a daily meal. The arrangements were simple enough; money was paid per brick after fulfilled work. Generally the price was agreed upon in advance and also how many bricks should be made. On location, the boys constructed a small hut, thatched with

palm leaves for shade and protection from the rain. To prevent theft, someone always slept on the site overnight. During the rainy season it was not possible to make the bricks, as they would not dry out. However as heavy showers were frequent, even towards the end of the dry season, banana leaves, and other leaves of similar size were used to cover the bricks, thus preventing them from getting wet and subsequently cracking in the sun. Another activity engaged in by some excombatants was rock breaking in small quarries (used in the foundation of houses, or when constructing roads). A few also worked on large-scale projects such as EU funded rice fields, earning a dollar a day.

On the domestic side, Paul and his friends were taking care of their backyard gardens mainly for subsistence, although their wives/girlfriends sometimes sold the surplus produce at the market table, wallah, they placed in front of their house. Excombatant youths were also involved in other forms of petty trade, such as buying hard liquor produced on sugarcane farms in the rural areas, and transporting it to Ganta, or even Monrovia. They would also buy cassava, rice, and bush-meat from the countryside, depending on what was available for the season, and sell it in the larger towns. Yet other excombatants engaged in petty trading activities such as money changing (indeed excombatants had close to a monopoly on that business—in general having some senior businessman backing them up), small scale diamond transporting etc. Learning to do business was one of the positive side effects of the war years as many young combatants, as well as their girlfriends, organised the selling of looted goods. Many continued to use the trade they had learnt in the post-war setting.

Earnest and hard work was a key aspect of social reintegration into

post-war society. Paul and most other excombatants around him worked hard towards achieving this goal. It was surprisingly seldom that other neighbours complained about ex-fighters misbehaving and creating problems. All members of Paul's house went to church on Sundays, and many spent surplus time in church doing Bible studies and other social activities. Even a renowned hard-core fighter like Alex was active in church life. He spent a lot of time doing 'church business' as he had been appointed accountant for a local parish. Religion, mainly in the form of Pentecostalism played a central role in Liberian society even during 'normal day' (Gifford 1993; Noonoo 1991). However, during the war years, churches became a central place to deal with war and exile experiences. Among Liberian refugees in the Ivory Coast, churches were the most important institutions organising refugee life (Utas 1997). From a different geographic setting, Marc Sommers (2001a; 2001b) has noted the immediate appeal which Pentecostalism has on young urbanites, creating bonds between people previously regarded as different. In that vein, I argue that the inclusiveness of Pentecostal churches makes it a primary tool for reintegration in post-war society. Joining a local church is an attempt to ask for forgiveness and therefore reacceptance from God and the local community.

Neighbours showed little direct contempt towards excombatants. Even if many still abused alcohol and other drugs and thus at times misbehaved, neighbours were also aware of the advantage of having them in the vicinity. During the war, civilians had learnt the benefits of maintaining good contacts with high-rank combatants in the neighbourhood, and to a certain extent such benefits prevailed. The mere presence of excombatants living nearby functioned as deterrent

for thieves. As thieves themselves where quite often also excombatants, they formed part of the many overlapping social networks, and as such, it was quite unlikely that they would target an area protected by their peers.

Although Paul and his friends did not live in their home communities, they were still trying to rely on the supporting capacity of old ties with their kin and home communities. However, a great uncertainty prevailed. What would happen to them when they returned home? Would kin and community members punish them? Would they be blamed and stigmatised for what they and others had done during the war years? Paul and a few of the others talked with confidence about their family ties. Others were bitter and blamed their parents for pushing them into the war in the first place. By this time, many had become acutely aware that their war endeavour had placed them in a much worse predicament than where they came from when they first joined the rebel forces.

In the lives of Paul and his friends it was the war-friend network that still dominated social ties. Many young excombatants in fact lived together with the very friends they fought with. They generally worked together and spent most of their leisure time in the company of other excombatants. Such living arrangements appeared to be representative in the semi-urban setting. In most cases the wartime families also remained intact. It was common to find a young man sharing a house with his friends, staying with one or two wives/girlfriends in a single room. Often these young ex-fighters had several children with different girlfriends. Another characteristic of this environment was the relative absence of adults. Except for the neighbours, who had limited authority over them, adults were largely

absent, with one exception: the presence of big men. Often big men were the very same men who had commanded them in the rebel armies. In some instances, other local patrons from outside of the military hierarchy had resumed such functions. One thing to bear in mind, however, is that many of the commanders during the war years were actually young boys in the same age range as the fighters themselves. These big men often maintained their standing within these war networks, although it was more unusual that they managed to maintain any position of power within the society at large.

In 1998, young excombatants in the semi-urban areas were slowly preparing to move back towards their home communities.[15] They were, however, not able to proceed too fast, as they had to assess their situation wisely lest they might get stuck in any untenable position. Further, they were delaying their return home until they could bring something with them to prove that they had managed well—that they had got something out of the experience. To return in rags was not a prospect.[16] Many of the young excombatants in Ganta, including most of Paul's friends, saw education as an opportunity to make things up with their families. Returning with an education could quite likely make up for some other losses, and thus provide an entry ticket to acceptance. Another path available at the time was to enter wage labour work. The plantation industry was slowly re-emerging as an

[15] As I returned to Ganta in early 2000 I found that all, with the exception of two young girls, had left Paul's house. This is a clear indication that the resettlement/reintegration process was proceeding. I was told that Paul had again left for Danane trying to get on a resettlement program to Canada. Later the same year I learned that he was back in Ganta.

[16] Cf. urban refugees: they are often prepared to wait for several years, so as they can return with some kind of wealth and pride.

employer. Alluvial mining was another business where young labour was sorely needed. Likewise, logging had become an important business in post-war Liberia. Cutting down the remaining rainforest might not be a good business for the country in the long-term, but for excombatant youth it was a job where they could get both a salary and renewed respect in society. To join the army was yet another path. In short, they were back to the opportunity structure of which youth were part prior to the war (Jackson 1977; Richards 1996).

## COMPARING THE CASES OF REINTEGRATION

As we have seen above, there were considerable differences in the opportunity structures for excombatants, depending on where, along the sliding scale between urban and rural they were situated in the post-war environment. In the Monrovian case we saw that youth were aided to get back into society by numerous international and national aid organisations. However, it seems that whatever education or skills were being taught to the excombatants they invariably remained jobless and footloose. In rural Sinoe the situation was quite the opposite. Social reintegration seemed to be working well, and with surprising speed. As I showed above, aid directed towards the reintegration of youth in this setting might even harm such a process in the long-term. Finally, in the semi-urban case, we followed a group of highly motivated excombatant youth who were arduously working to gain re-acceptance and integrate into their pre-war homes, or within a novel post-war environment. The international donor community, in their attempts to aid excombatants in reintegration, should really invest their efforts in these kinds of settings—in 1998

surprisingly few donors targeted excombatant youth in Ganta.

Parts of the military structure remained intact in excombatant networks, and organisational skills were maintained within these networks.[17] For example, the smooth operation and general success of the brick making guild in Ganta can be seen as resting on war networks. The boys who made up the brick-making guild were to a large extent excombatants, and when they structured their work they made use of organising skills learnt in the military framework of the rebel armies. Their former commander could work as a contractor or broker between them, as well as the buyer. Similar networks of excombatants were found in gold and diamond mining, smaller (as well as a few larger) logging projects, sugarcane farming and on rubber, coffee and cocoa plantations. In larger corporations, alternatively the wartime patrimonial structures were often broken down and replaced by civilian patron/client networks.

To have participated in the war, as opposed to not having done so, was clearly seen as a 'touchstone of fraternity' (Scott 1990:39). On the basis of war experience, excombatants remained part of a subculture with distinctive social codes and standards. Thus, such a comradeship, or military 'buddy system' (Ben-Ari 1998:101), was retained for means other than for fighting a war. I suggest that military structures and discipline could be regarded as positive, and if utilised with care, it can help speed up demobilisation and reintegration. Commanding skills transferred from the national military is often highly rewarded in

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[17] Aid projects could make efficient use of that. Already now many aid projects have ex-commanders high up in their organisations, who are making informal use of excombatants from their former military units. Many international organisations are either unaware of the employment of senior rebel commanders, or have chosen to ignore such facts.

private corporations as well as in the civil service in the western world. It could certainly be used as such in Liberia, too. I equally express fear over aid projects further enhancing urbanising tendencies, already strong in Liberia. During the first post-war years, too much effort seemed to be spent on educating excombatants in a few skills. Carpenters, mechanics or electricians were flooding Liberia. Every single young woman was educated in soap making and in the process of tie and dye. How would they benefit from such skills? The possibility would be that more and more Liberian youth would urbanise and, as a result, risk ending up in places like the Palace.

## REINTEGRATION OR REMARGINALISATION

As I briefly suggested at the beginning of this chapter, the data I have presented, points towards a complex picture of reintegration. Reintegration is a typical NGO buzzword that is not saying much about the social realities of a particular area. In the rural geography of Liberia, reintegration was a process that was clearly taking place. But in the other two settings, reintegration was a more difficult issue with which to grapple. One of the cornerstones in this dissertation has been that the Liberian Civil War partially was an outcome of the structural marginalisation of youth. Due to the economic crisis and increasing dependency on the central state in the 1980s, an ever-growing number of young people in urban and semi-urban environments were excluded even from the possibilities of becoming socially an adult. Possibilities to participate in the wage economy diminished and education ceased having any importance. With this crisis in view, many young men lost even the possibility of establishing themselves as

adults, through the building of a house, or getting married—however, they continued to become fathers but for children they could not provide for. Chronologically they outgrew the age of youth, but socially they remained 'youthmen' (Momoh 1999).

The rebel factions were specifically successful in recruiting from the category of already marginalised and highly dissatisfied young urbanites and semi-urbanites. Is it thus strange that in the post-war setting, we see little enthusiasm for the reintegration of youth in the urban case? Marginalisation appears to be the norm for a large proportion of young urbanites. Thus remarginalisation, and not reintegration, has become the natural outcome awaiting most excombatants. In the semi-urban case we see a tendency of both reintegration and remarginalisation. Young excombatants are working arduously to escape from the margin. They know very well that they risk ending up there, because that was where a large number of excombatants came from in the first place. In this sense, the initial enlistment in the rebel armies was envisaged as a move away from the margin and into the centre of society—a means of integrating right into society. But again, it is only natural that they will be remarginalised at the end of the war. Some however, strive hard and are successful in turning the tide. The war endeavour for them might actually have made the difference—it has clearly enabled the integration of some youth. But for a large part of Liberian excombatants remarginalisation not reintegration, is the reality.

# THE TACTIC TAYLOR

Promising both revenge and redress, warlords ruthlessly exploited the manifest or latent resentment that large numbers of marginalised Liberians felt towards the government. At the outset of the war, rebel movements appealed successfully to various ethnic groups from the interior by heightening their sense of marginality in national politics. NPFL largely directed people's wrath against the Samuel Doe government in Monrovia, but also against the Krahn and Mandingo peoples in general. The rebel forces gradually lost their control over the images of negative ethnic stereotypes, however, and they began terrorising the very peoples they had promised to protect. At this point, the growing resentment of many young Liberians, responding to their own blocked opportunities to become adults, became channelled towards the adult population in general. This became a reason in itself to fight in the civil war. As we have seen, the Liberian Civil War created new opportunities for earlier, otherwise marginalised peoples. Young men from marginal backgrounds became field commanders and strongmen of society. Young women too left their homes and ventured out into the public sphere. It was a high-risk game—an *illusio* of violence[1]—with high-risk stakes; but it also offered high-yield gains. Initially, young combatants experienced great flow and indeed found great gains. But as de Certeau has argued (1984), the agency of the weak, and the marginal, is tactical rather than strategic.

[1] Bourdieu uses the term *illusio* to connote a social game were people are aware of their bets (1998:77).

Most Liberian youth combatants found that their investment in the war was only temporarily rewarded. In the long term they were again exiled to marginality as the war waned.

As for the erstwhile warlord and current President of Liberia, Charles Taylor, can we establish his agency as long-term and thus view his participation in the war as being strategic? If we follow my earlier comparisons with the rebel hero and liberator Sunjata, this would certainly be the case. After gaining power through violence and magic, Sunjata—according to the epic—transformed himself into a 'just and respected leader of his people'. We should bear in mind, however, that the social environment looks quite different today from what it did during the time of Sunjata, and Taylor actually has little space for transforming himself into a national hero. International opinion is bothering him, with troublesome questions about his dubious human rights record, his support of rebel movements (RUF), and of terrorist groups (namely al-Qaida—see Global Witness 2003).[2] Taylor is concerned by the international community's refusal to forget his past deeds, and he is continuously forced to resort again to the rebel tactics he masters. In order to stay in place as the President of Liberia, Taylor has little choice but to negotiate clandestine deals with arms traders and looking for support from criminal networks. If he ever thought of going straight, how could he possibly do that? Like Doctor Faust, his deal with the devil is not easily rescinded. In addition, the international community is increasingly limiting his mobility, and forcing him to remain within Liberia itself. Inside the country too,

[2] See also Washington Post, November 2, 2001. *Al Qaeda cash tied to diamond trade: sale of gems from Sierra Leone rebels raised millions, sources say*, by Douglas Farah.

revenge-prone citizens now force him to spend most of his time within his fortress-style Monrovian home. Whenever he is en route, the security entourage surrounding his motorcade bears witness to the existence of a very scared man.

After the official end of the 1990-1997 war, Liberia experienced the further social exclusion of its citizens, with most excombatants becoming remarginalised, not reintegrated. The formal end to the war did not lead to reinvestment and rehabilitation in Liberia. The remnants of a pre-war economy did not yield a tangible income for young people, and thus it was only natural that deep-seated resentment resurfaced. Although 1997-1999 was mainly conflict free, some fighting did take place. Over this period, by far the worst incident was the September 18, 1998, fighting in Monrovia which brought the country back to the brink of war. In late 1999, however, a new rebel movement entered Lofa County from neighbouring Guinea. From then on, the rebel group, called LURD (Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy), has continued to attack locations in Liberia, and at times towns in the proximity of Monrovia. It appears to have been quite easy for both rebels and government forces (army and a variety of pro-government militias) to enlist new soldiers. With the intense marginalisation of youth, serious abjection and the flourishing of self-empowering *ressentiment*,[3] this is hardly surprising.

In my dissertation, I have sought to maintain a micro focus on some of the individual motives behind the actions of soldiers

[3] Nietzsche uses the term *ressentiment* to denote reactions towards 'the other' by those who have been "denied the proper response of action" and "who compensate for it only with imaginary revenge" (1994:21-37). It is thus a kind of empowered abjection, or an agency of the abject.

comprising the various rebel movements during the 1990-1997 part of the civil war. I have only given limited attention to the macro perspective. By doing so, my intention has not been to say that the reasons for war are primarily to be found in Liberian society or culture, but rather to point out the importance of understanding the perspectives of ordinary people, i.e. locating the motives of people who support, or directly join rebel movements. However, if we do see the Liberian Civil War from a macro perspective, we need not only to account for the tactics (and to some extent strategies) of a Liberian leadership, but also for the role of international politics. We should then pay attention to the fact that many among the Liberian leadership obtained their academic education in the United States; Charles Taylor is but one example. Many senior Liberian military officers received their training within the US military, while others have had both military and political training in Libya. Thus the perspectives and strategies of leadership are at least in part formed from experiences received outside of Liberia. There is also a very politically volatile diasporic Liberian community in the US—a brief glance at Liberian internet pages confirms that. Generally, political leaders maintain close ties to specific diasporic groups, as well as to political contacts such as high profile politicians, civil servants and the lobby groups of foreign states. Those who lack such connections certainly have difficulties in their political, as well as military activities.

On an international level, the different rebel movements have also received various forms of open as well as covert support from the governments of France and the United States. The longstanding interest in Liberia by the United States took a downturn at the end of the Cold War, but did not vanish altogether. During the 1990-1997

portion of the civil war, the US in fact supported the two ULIMO's, AFL and LPC, whilst France maintained close relations with the NPFL (see Ellis 1995; 1999; Reno 1996). Backing from nations in the region has varied a little over time, but generally one might say that Nigeria and Guinea have remained in support of the ULIMO's, AFL and LPC, whilst the Ivory Coast, up to the Laurent Gbagbo take-over (2000), as well as Burkina Faso and Libya, have supported the NPFL and later the democratically elected NPP (ibid.). In the renewed civil war (2000 and onwards) the Guinean government, despite its official denials, has been supporting and training LURD (see International Crisis Group 2003:10-12). There is little doubt that US support to the Guinean army has benefited LURD rebels (ibid. and Human Rights Watch 2002), and the US government stands firm in its wish to rid Liberia of Charles Taylor. Currently it would also appear that since March 2003, the Ivorian government supports the new rebel force MODEL (Movement for Democracy in Liberia), active in south-eastern Liberia (International Crisis Group 2003:20-24). Its presence is an outcome of an apparent split in the LURD leadership along old ULIMO-J/ULIMO-K lines.[4] By pointing to the involvement and intervention of other governments in Liberian affairs, I do not imply that Charles Taylor has been sitting idle and is now under attack. On the contrary, since the creation of the RUF (Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone) in Sierra Leone in 1991, Charles Taylor has been deeply involved in that movement. It is also quite clear that pro-Taylor militias have been very active in MPIGO (Movement Populaire

[4] MODEL has emerged as a separate movement from LURD only in April 2003, thus it is yet not clear what the objectives are. However see their Declaration of intent on T*he Perspective* homepage: http://www.theperspective.org/newrebelgroup.html.

Ivoirien du Grand Ouest)—the western based rebel force engaged in the civic struggle in which the Ivory Coast is now involved (International Crisis Group 2003:15-20). The MPIGO is based in Danane, the one-time Ivorian stronghold of the NPFL.

As I write this epilogue (in April 2003), LURD and MODEL are engaged in fighting in large parts of Liberia. Taylor's troops are in control of less territory than they have been at any time since the election, and LURD and MODEL are closing in on Monrovia. MODEL's strength is much dependent on what is happening in the Ivory Coast, and a qualified guess is that LURD's future will depend on US support to Guinea. In the shadow of the 'US led war against terrorism' and the 2003 Iraqi conflict, it is quite likely that the US have again opened up a direct supply line to LURD. However, there is a question whether the Americans will proceed further, once the international media and human rights groups divert their focus from Iraq. Since 2000, rebel pressures on Monrovia have waxed and waned. With the opening of a southern frontier, and MODEL now in control of large parts of Grand Gedeh County[5] as well as maintaining a keen presence in Sinoe County,[6] the situation has become all the more serious for the Liberian government. At the same time, LURD troops have established themselves in Grand Cape Mount County for the first time (reportedly aided by ex-Kamajor militia from Sierra Leone—

[5] see e.g. ReliefWeb: *Liberia: Defence minister reports fresh fighting in the southeast*, April 14, 2003. http://www.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf/6686f45896f15dbc852567ae00530132/aadabad258c7e60849256d09 00087d46?OpenDocument.

[6] See e.g. ReliefWeb: *Thousands flee Liberian town in fear of rebel attacks*, April 21, 2003. http://www.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf/d2fc8ae9db883867852567cb0083a028/0bdb3133dff0cf6f49256bb80 01937c0?OpenDocument. And IRINnews.org: *New rebel group pushes closer to capital*, April 28, 2003. http://www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=33739&SelectRegion=West_Africa&SelectCountry=Liberia.

International Crisis Group 2003:12-13).[7] LURD overran government forces in the strategic stronghold of Gbarnga, in Bong County—the third largest town in Liberia—and maintained command for a week. They are also currently in control of Ganta, Nimba County partly due to armed support from Guinea. This action could be viewed as a joint strategic operation by Guinea/Ivory Coast as it effectively cuts off the Liberian supply routes to MPIGO. Simultaneously, efforts are being made to oust Liberian soldiers from the Ivory Coast and MPIGO, by both the larger Ivorian MPCI (Mouvement Patriotique de la Côte d'Ivoire) and Ivorian government forces as the Ivorian peace agreement is implemented.[8]

When we look at this larger picture, we can clearly see that other, major national and international players have no intention of letting Charles Taylor transform himself into a Sunjata-style leader. Quite the contrary, they are inevitably going to make life difficult for him. So, not even Charles Taylor's war endeavour turned out to be strategic agency, but rather a tactic response if studied from this perspective. His current political situation is actually a result of his own complicity, something which has turned the game to one in which he perpetually loses his assets. In the Liberian Civil Wars there were, and are no lasting winners, only bidders. If we can talk about any long-term winners at all, then surely, in reality, these must be the international businessmen and covert investors who deal in arms for Liberia's rich

[7] See also allAfrica.com: *Sierra Leonean Kamajors fighting with Lurd, government says*. February 14, 2003. http://allafrica.com/stories/2003022140524.html.

[8] See, ReliefWeb, *Ivorian rebels clash with former Liberian Allies*. April 25, 2003. http://www.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf/480fa8736b88bbc3c12564f6004c8ad5/1de089ca9502e541c1256d13 004df105?OpenDocument.

resources of diamonds, gold, timber, coffee and cocoa. Trading far below market prices, and dealing only in the "shadows", they too help to sustain the unending cycle of violence and bloodshed in Liberia.

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Stephen Hlophe dedicated his book *Class, ethnicity and politics in Liberia* (1979) to the youth of that country, calling them "the Precious Jewels of Liberia". Few others saw Liberian youths as either 'precious' or 'jewels', and in the years following his book, young Liberians became marginalised to the point where they became abject to society. In this light, my dissertation is a tribute to the young abject heroes who fought in the Liberian Civil War.

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