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WEST-AFRICAN WARSCAPES

War as Smoke and Mirrors: Sierra Leone 1991-2, 1994-5, 1995-6

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Abstract
The present paper assesses the implications of various observations of war in Sierra Leone—cross-border operations of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in 1991-2, an RUF attack on Bo in December-January 1994-5, and disruptions by private security companies of the 1995-6 peace process. The material supports the view that a basic mechanism of war is ritual action. But the scope of war-as-ritual must be properly specified. Events involved rites in the air as well as on the ground. The paper draws military agents of private security companies more fully into the picture. The strategic impact of these mercenary elements upon the course of the war was probably less than claimed. On the other hand, impact upon its ritual aspects may have been underestimated. A focus upon ritual dynamics helps make sense of a war that seems inexplicable in terms of its material incentives or ideological motives.

Few anthropologists adopt the vantage point of the war correspondent, but some are caught up in events. Part of the discipline's comparative advantage lies in a capacity to analyze and understand war as ritual. The present paper integrates a series of circumstantial observations of war in Sierra Leone into such an analysis. An aim is to demonstrate that a focus upon ritual aspects is as applicable to the analysis of war fought with sophisticated modern weapons as with knives and cutlasses.

Rites and Riots

Anthropology has often approached ritual as the enactment of a program (Collins 2004). Emile Durkheim (1856-1917) initiated a radically different approach; ritual intensifies emotions generated by group activity. There is no program. Ritual does not convey meanings, but creates them. Enduring symbols and shared values (collective representations) are forged in the heat of ritual excitement.

Durkheim's standpoint is close to that of the composer Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971), for whom the significance of music was contained in its sounds alone.[2] His ballet, *The Rite of Spring* (originally entitled "The Great Sacrifice") is contemporary with Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. At its premiere in Paris in 1913, the *Rite* provoked a riot. The French intelligentsia were equally shocked by *Elementary Forms* (first published in Paris in 1912). Right-wing students sought Durkheim's dismissal, complaining his analyses of Aboriginal and Iroquois religion had introduced "savages into the Sorbonne" and were a threat to the literary traditions upon which French culture was based (Richman 2001).

A source for the idea that ritual action creates its own logic and meaning can be found in Schopenhauer's distinction between will and idea. Stravinsky openly espoused Schopenhauer (Joseph 2001). Durkheim was well versed in 19th century German social thought, and Mestrovic (1999) considers Schopenhauer a major influence (if mainly mediated through his French followers in the 1870s and 1880s). Schopenhauer understood music as non-representational. It engages our attention not because it alludes to a program but because it expresses the will. If the *Rite* established (at a stroke) a modern music to be assessed on its own psycho-dynamic terms, *Elementary Forms* was a knife cutting through encrusted and stultifying traditions to ritual as a source of social renewal.

Drumming Up a Storm

My own intellectual formation drew upon environmental studies, anthropology, and ethnomusicology. I first encountered the Durkheimian tradition through the work of Marcel Mauss on seasonal variations in social life. I became interested in farming seasons as a stimulus to labor cooperation and agricultural innovation. After a decade spent studying small-scale farming practices in Nigeria, I moved to Sierra Leone (at the other extremity of the West African forest belt) seeking comparisons. In 1982-3, I started a long-term study of farming as seasonal performance in Mogbuama, a Mende-speaking village in central Sierra Leone. Here, there were few tree crops, and farmers mainly grew rice for both subsistence and cash. Rice is strongly seasonal. Grown on rain-fed uplands during the wettest months, the crop takes only about four months from planting to the harvest and must last a household for a year. Joining in farming activities, I began to understand that a key input into agriculture was skill in the timing, sequencing, and stage-management of the necessary operations. Farming was a performance (Richards 1986, 1993).

I was particularly interested in the performances of farm labor gangs. Every group, however ephemeral, had its rite. Libations were poured before major operations commenced. Latecomers were “tried” on the spot. The slow or lazy were mocked in humiliating songs. A gang “doctor” pronounced on the quality of the food before it was shared out. Daily work closed with the singing of the gang anthem. Rule breakers endured token whippings. I paid special attention to the drumming that accompanied the “ploughing” of rice. Measurements revealed that music “drummed up” superior collective effort. More output derived from work accompanied by drumming than without. The music of rice farming was pure Stravinsky—organized sound with no meaning beyond the bodily movements it shaped. It is true that drummers also played at harvest feasts, when satisfied workers doubtless recollected emotion in (relative) tranquility. But in the first instance, rice farmers were moved *by* music because they moved *to* it. The music of farming in Mogbuama was a true “rite of spring” (cf. Agawu 1995).

I returned to Sierra Leone at the end of the 1980s to work on a rainforest conservation project. The field site was adjacent to the Liberian border, over which the insurgents of the Revolutionary United Front (henceforth RUF) were to pass in March-April 1991. The RUF was a Libyan-backed movement linked to Charles Taylor’s faction in the Liberian civil war (commenced 1989). It built its ideas from a student-led debate on the Green Book begun in the 1970s. Ideologues soon withdrew (Abdullah 1997). Yet the movement continued to

spread. Its cadres were dubbed “rebels without a cause.” It was impossible to continue research without taking account of the war. Shaped by its forest environment, the conflict in Sierra Leone began to appear (to me) as a set of unfolding practices with a ritual and performative logic of its own, around which new social meanings were emerging. I anticipated that continued fighting would consolidate these values. Negotiation would need to take account of meanings the war itself had begun to fix (Richards 1996). Such an approach proved provocative. It was a challenge to explain how it was possible to admit “causes” that arose from events.

I struggled to elaborate a theoretical basis for such a stance. What seemed merely an intellectual game when applied to the music of farming now became a matter of life-and-death. Via Mary Douglas I returned to Durkheim (Douglas 1993, Richards 1996). Too readily had I accepted mainstream anthropological dismissal of Durkheim’s focus on ritual as “all-purpose social glue” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). Recent scholarship radically challenges such views (Mestrovic 1992, Richman 2002, Smith and Alexander 2004, Stedman Jones 2001). Durkheim’s work on ritual sustains a far-reaching micro-sociological theory of the will (Collins 2004).

The key analytical shift is to abandon the view of ritual as a celebration of established values and to move to the “Stravinskian” view that performance creates its own rules. As an example of a practice creating belief, Durkheim cites Australian ceremonies to stop famine or sickness. These have no prior structure of ideas to sustain them (for example an apparatus of spirits or ancestors to whom pleas are addressed, as might be the case in a funeral rite). “Abstinences and blood-letting stop famines and cure sicknesses, *acting on their own*” (Durkheim 1995 [1912]:410, my emphasis). “It is always the cult that is efficacious…we must act, and we…must repeat the necessary acts as often as is necessary to renew their effects” (Durkheim 1995 [1912]:420).

At its root, the cult is coordinated movement, often triggered by sounds (e.g. the church bell tolling as I write). Benjamin Mweri (personal communication) remembers from his Kenyan childhood that, during periods of famine, women would continue to cook even when there was no food. They would boil stones instead; the sounds evoked sentiments of sharing associated with a meal. On this reckoning, the rite is to be understood not in terms of the “nutrition” it delivers (in the hidden truths to which it points) but in the emotions evoked through being in step with a group. Meaning lies in the performance itself. Ritual is no more (or less) than a mechanism. Like a fibrillator, it kicks-start the heart beat of collective feeling.

Rumors of War (April 1991)

A biologist colleague (Glyn Davies) and I chose the Gola North forest reserve as our specific research site. The geography of the web of forests to which Gola North belongs was crucial to the spread of fighting. Three contiguous Gola reserves constitute a boundary wilderness occupying the middle one-third of the international border with Liberia. This connects to the Kambui reserves, which run northwards through eastern Sierra Leone along a low ridge, interrupted only by a pass that gives access to the town of Kenema. At its northern extremity the Kambui forests connect with the Kangari Hills, a forested upland traversed by the main road linking the northern provincial towns and the Kono diamond fields. Kambui North reserve directly overlooks a second important alluvial diamond mining area known as Tongo Field. The Sierra Leonean forest reserves thus constitute a set of hilly, unpopulated "corridors" leading from Liberia into the diamondiferous heart of the country, connected by forest paths known only to specialist hunters. The forests offered a medium for the subsequent spread of the RUF and shaped eventual counter-insurgency responses.

The RUF had been formed in the early 1980s, to overthrow the All Peoples Congress regimes of Siaka Stevens and Joseph Momoh (1968-1985, 1985-1991). At first it attempted to train fighters in grasslands near Yele—not far from my Mogbuama field site—but this proved too risky, and a small group later went to Libya, where they trained alongside Liberians including Charles Taylor. RUF fighters first gained battle experience fighting alongside Taylor in Liberia. The Liberian insurgency began in December 1989, and most of the country succumbed to the Taylor forces over the following months.

Several fieldwork encounters in 1989-90 hinted that Sierra Leone might soon be affected by the Liberian war. Davies and I discovered that the border was completely open. Villagers seeking special supplies—shot-gun cartridges, for example—crossed the forest (a day's trip) to the Moro River (the international border) and then took a bush taxi to Monrovia from a lumber camp on the Liberian side. The Moro, running through thick forest in both countries, was rocky and un-navigable, but also entirely unguarded. In the dry season, it could be crossed on foot, and its sandy shoals and river terraces hosted much diamond mining activity. The pits were private ventures by senior government officials or the police and army personnel. The digging was done by youthful clients, resentful at being sent to sweat in the bush and not to school, like more favored "cousins." Our report suggested making road connections to villages along the Moro (Davies and Richards 1991), but conservation groups were concerned this

would affect elephant migration routes. The diamond *nomenklatura* was even less enthused by the thought of opening its money box to the scrutiny of a road.

An open border was not the only indicator of trouble ahead. In W., a tiny farming enclave deep in the forest, on a track to nowhere, a silent, well-dressed young man sat close to the chief, apparently in an advisory role and deeply suspicious of our activities. Had W. been a diamond village we would have concluded he represented the sponsors of mining activities. But W. had no diamonds. What was the young man's role? Was he supervising hunting operations (trade in monkey meat to Monrovia was brisk)? The conversation, when it began, was tense and political. The British and French had conspired to defraud the independent but weak Liberian state in a boundary re-definition in 1911 (a claim we found later to be broadly true). The White Man always cheats the Black. Even now, Africans are defrauded of their resources. The chief tried to lighten the mood and engage in polite exchanges, but there was no mistaking the young man's anger or Pan-Africanist sentiments.

The conversation had many marks of RUF ideology (as I subsequently discovered). The Libyans had for some years espoused the Pan Africanist cause (Gaddafi saw himself as a successor to Nkrumah). The local appeal of the Green Book was heightened by a sense that young people from cross-border families had lost a birthright, not least diamonds, now controlled by government elites from distant parts of the country. The young man spoke with a Liberian accent. Several RUF leaders shared a background as children of parents driven into Liberia during Siaka Steven's oppression of the border region. It was a tactic of the RUF to place "spies" in villages, long before attacks commenced, to assess levels of dissociation from the regime and identify potentially sympathetic groups or factions. It seems possible the young man belonged to an advance guard.

The actual incursion (begun March 23rd, 1991) was a two-pronged operation, launched north and south of the Gola reserves. Two small battle groups included some experienced Liberian "special forces" assigned by Charles Taylor. The campaign involved locally-specific performative cues (getting villagers to wave palm fronds—the political symbol of the banned Sierra Leone People's Party), violence against government agents and merchant traders of Guinean Mandingo origin (seen in Liberia as an alien trading diaspora, though historically more fully integrated in eastern Sierra Leone), and generalized insurgency tactics as taught at the al-Mathabh al-Thauriya al-Alamiya ("World Revolutionary Headquarters") of the Libyan secret services (Ellis 1999). The RUF took over border villages and towns largely unopposed.

Many local young people were inducted into the movement. In Kailahun District, in particular, the RUF was at times seen as a liberator, after decades of government oppression. Chiefdom courts were replaced by popular moots, and attempts were made to redistribute (looted) wealth to the poor. But it was hard for the RUF to move beyond the military strong point at Daru. In the south, the RUF entered upon a region with a complex history of enmity between local slave-owning chiefs (and Fula and Mandingo trading partners) and farming "commoners" traceable as far back as mid-19th century. Jones (1983) characterises the Zawo rebellion in the 1850s as a revolt of domestic slaves, perhaps stirred by a cadre of Muslim students, resulting in a section of the Vai population decamping east of the Mano river to Liberia (Jones 1983). Pujehun District experienced a resurgence of communal violence in the 1980s, when anti-smuggling patrols destroyed the villages of the opponents of a powerful government minister, displacing parts of the population along the border into Liberia (in effect recapitulating aspects of the Zawo rebellion). From among the ranks of the displaced, the RUF recruited some of its more enthusiastic cadres.

A complicating factor in the fighting was the deployment by the RUF (and later by the government army) of Liberian "special forces." The RUF contingent was mainly from Nimba County in the North-east, and government-allied Liberian irregulars were from groups in the South-east loyal to President Doe and opposed to Charles Taylor.[2] Both groups were hardened fighters, steeped in terror tactics, and lacking local links. Their unrestrained violence undermined civilian support for both the RUF and army, and caused the conflict to bog down long before the RUF was able to reach its first major target, Bo—provincial capital of the south, and a major centre of diamonds and education—where it had hoped to establish a command headquarters, expound its message to the world, and regroup for an assault on the capital, Freetown.

Much early RUF advance was based not on fighting but on rumor. Internal communications in Sierra Leone were especially weak (this was a pre-telephone age, in the provinces, at least, and even government radio was too weak to reach most parts of the country). People relied on nightly broadcasts from the BBC in London. In the aftermath of the Cold War, news gathering at Bush House (BBC World Service Head-quarters) had begun to change. With a greater diversity of "small" stories to cover, much of the work was now done by telephone from London. The Taylor faction in Liberia understood this and had acquired effective mobile telecommunications. Taylor was often able to pitch his case directly to the senior Africa journalist at the BBC, Robin White.

The RUF also used the same link. Exaggerated claims about advances became the order of the day. Entire populations would flee an area on hearing such reports, opening terrain up to rebel advance. Battle was no longer a matter of military tactics, but a rush to first sound the alarm over the airwaves.

I arrived in Sierra Leone at the beginning g of April 1991 for the wind-up phase of the Gola project, only to find a capital city awash with wild rumors, fanned by expatriate gossip concerning RUF strength and rate of advance. With some difficulty I was able to hitch a ride in an aid agency vehicle, travelling to Bo to assess conditions. We made slow progress, as it was necessary to stop repeatedly to allow the chief of party to contact her colleagues (some in neighboring countries!) on a radio link to enquire about conditions on the road ahead. Translating this information into a decision to proceed was complicated (as I soon realized) due to the fact that the driver and I were the only ones who knew the names of the places we were about to pass. We arrived in the late afternoon, and I was dropped at my house, but the group had no time for a thank-you drink. It had been decided (presumably on the basis of the radio chats) that Bo was too dangerous to remain overnight. I declined an offer to be returned to Freetown forthwith.

The rumors proved groundless, and the aid workers re-appeared—rather sheepishly—a couple of days later, only to be followed by a second panic evacuation (this time accompanied by the police and army) upon rumors of an attack scheduled for April 25th. The RUF had sent a letter. It was a standard tactic to get villagers to flee, and it secured accommodation without waste of ammunition (always in short supply). Enough refugees had arrived in Bo to convince the authorities their own letter meant what it said.

If the RUF hoped to take Bo without fighting, its minuscule forces would have had little chance to overcome a large town had the population decided to resist. Bo citizens sat tight. In gathering gloom, they tuned portable radios to BBC's *Focus on Africa*. A Freetown stringer interviewed a truck driver who claimed Bo was now in rebel hands, provoking an exodus of Guinean diamond traders. A heavily-overloaded vehicle, speeding by night, overturned on a badly-maintained dirt road, killing some passengers—the only casualties of the alleged "attack." Such is the power of media report over observable reality. Bo citizens stayed put. There was nowhere to go, nor (by now) any means to travel (all vehicles avoided the town for several days on the grounds that it had been reported in rebel hands).

Nothing happened. I discovered a prudent bar owner had acquired a stand-by generator to cool some beer, in case the anticipated invaders were

thirsty. Making some inroads into his stock, I was joined by a Liberian fighter, who was checking the welfare of his sister, a refugee in Bo. We discussed the security situation around Joru, where he was based. It was the chiefdom headquarters for our Gola survey, and he explained it was not a good time to visit. The commander soon took his leave, gathering his body-guards, none over the age of fifteen, to complete some shopping. He needed to be back at its post by nightfall to "lock the gates against the rebels," as he put it.

Despite an apparent greater degree of acceptance in Kailahun District than elsewhere, RUF fighters advancing from the Liberian border in the north first had to pass Daru. The British had chosen the site of their main garrison in the east well, on a bluff overlooking the Moa River, guarding a narrow bridge. A British journalist (Mark Huband), observing the Guineans moving sheep and goats into Daru base, correctly predicted a long war. Essentially, the Guinean mission was to block further RUF advance and await political developments. Over the next few months, unable to pass Daru, and increasingly bogged down in the south, the RUF suffered internal splits, some ideologues gave up the struggle, and the war changed course.

Government troops (especially officers with family roots in the war-affected regions of the east and south) and civilian activists (including an historian from the university, Dr. Alpha Lavalie) were beginning to recruit and train irregulars as a counter-insurgency force, in some cases using the language and symbolism of Poro, the male sodality common in most Sierra Leonean villages. The government continued to arm Liberian irregulars from among (especially) Vai, Mandingo, and Krahn refugees in Sierra Leone opposed, on ethnic grounds, to the mainly Mano and Gio forces of Charles Taylor. Atrocities committed by this Freetown-based force—ULIMO—as it fought its way back to Liberia laid a foundation of bitterness and instability that made eventual peace harder to secure in areas with civilian support for the RUF. But such abuses were not restricted to ULIMO. Government troops—often from the north of the country—treated border-zone populations as alien. Amnesty International documented cases in which young people suspected of RUF membership were summarily executed, setting in motion a divergence of sodalities that sustained itself throughout the war (Amnesty International 1992).

Opposed Sodalities (July-September 1992)

I revisited the Gola region in 1992, in a gap in fighting, funding the trip by means of a small consultancy for a humanitarian organization involved in

food security. From late 1991, government forces controlled areas south of Kenema and Bo, though the RUF retained control of Kailahun District. Travelling to Bagbo, Malen, and Barri chiefdoms, and Pujehun town, in the south-east, as well as visiting old field sites on the edge of the forest, I began to piece together a war-induced social jigsaw.

In Jimi (Bagbo Chiefdom), our vehicle bogged down, and we passed the time awaiting rescue with a friendly sergeant-major. As he regaled us with stories of life with a truck-mounted heavy machine gun, I noticed a line of about forty children quietly forming on the veranda, bowls and plates in hand. War orphans, they were lining up for their evening meal from the only person with the resources to feed them. Later, a squad of local lads in army-surplus fatigues drew to attention. They had arrived for instructions on guarding our vehicle for the night. All were irregulars apprenticed to our host, who never knew which troops arriving from the factionalized army HQ in Freetown he could trust. Prudently, he was training and arming his own bodyguards. He also showed us a large farm, from which he fed both the irregulars and the orphan children. The work was done by nine war-widows he had taken under his wing. The lesson was that war rapidly reshapes family groups.

Not only did family arrangements change, but the socialization associated with the sodalities was also transformed by war. In Malen chiefdom, I was shown a large mound by the road where it was said 17 children were buried. Abducted by the rebels, they had been summarily executed by government forces on escaping the RUF. The chief was protecting a further ten abducted children in his house. It was too risky for them to leave the compound. The explanation seemed quite shocking. They had managed to free themselves from the RUF when ULIMO arrived, but had been disowned by parents or care givers (child fosterage is very common among the Mende). In some cases, the execution of rebel children by the soldiers was at the request of local people. The reasoning was that the RUF was a sodality. It seized children for initiation. The children had been reshaped by the movement's rituals. RUF medicine was so powerful that abductees would forever remain committed to their movement. If re-admitted to local society, they would behave like enemies and spies.

This was the first inkling I had that, in the extreme dislocation of war, children can be seen as threat as well as blessing. The issue of "witch children" in African zones of adversity is not confined to Sierra Leone (de Boeck 2005), but this encounter made clear that many of those abducted into the RUF would become determined fighters on its behalf, whether they had initial sympathy for the movement or not. The movement's success was their only hope of stay-

ing alive. By reacting to the RUF as if it were a sodality, local opinion was turning the movement into a sodality. Already the Poro rite was invoked to make irregulars on the government side. Henceforth, it seemed the war would become a struggle between armed sodalities.

This possibility was confirmed by an elderly sergeant of the Republic of Sierra Leone Military Forces (RSLMF) interviewed in Pujehun. A grizzled veteran of UN Congo peace-keeping operations, he knew his trade. But he could no longer cope. The RUF deployed children in battle, and children did not know the rules of war. Particularly, they had no idea of surrender. They fought like devils in a lost cause. Unsure whether the movement had "turned" them by magic or drugs, he lacked stomach or training to shoot dead teenage fighters with no sense of tactics, driven by blind courage. The only way forward, he thought, was to fight fire with fire. The RUF could be opposed by turning village young people into irregular recruits, much as the RUF reshaped its own recruits as dedicated enthusiasts through the training it gave.

In Potoru, I met the RSLMF major commanding the sector. He knew my name, having studied one of my books in college, and rather bizarrely, we discussed academic matters while he directed the afternoon's operations with one ear to a set of headphones from a field radio set. The RUF were based east of the Moa, he explained. Troops had just taken a vehicle—a pick-up equipped with a launcher for rocket-propelled grenades—for an afternoon sortie. I was about to discover that war often consists in making impressive, demoralizing noises with no particular target in view. The RPG-7 was favored by both sides for its sonic signature. Distant dull thumps indicated firing had commenced. We asked if it would be safe to travel some distance in that direction. Earlier, the youths manning the gate had refused us access. A large sign stated that beyond lay "the killing zone." The gate itself was decorated with a collection of skulls and bones. The officer's answer was revealing. Yes, it was safe enough, but we could not go, since he could not countermand the gatekeepers. They were not "his" boys. In effect, he commanded very little. His role was to broker army supplies to irregulars operating on behalf of more shadowy agents of war. Whose "boys" the lads on the gate were, I never discovered.

Shortly thereafter, the well-supplied ammunition stores in Potoru were emptied in an RUF raid. Evidently, the regular afternoon dose of RPG noise had little effect. The RUF plausibly claims to have acquired most of its weaponry from the enemy (RUF/SL 1995). A few months earlier army mutineers had pushed aside the moribund one-party regime of President Momoh. One of their grievances was lack of supplies for forward commanders. The

position in Potoru improved, but the result was to strengthen the enemy. After the war, an RUF cadre pointed out to me a passage in his copy of the biography of Kim Il Sung. He had been trained in the RUF ideology unit, and the text had been marked by the RUF for study in the bush. It described how the Korean communist guerrilla was to fight the Japanese invader by retreating into the hills and forests, and lay ambushes which would yield the resources to fight the enemy with his own guns.

Finally I arrived in Lalehun, our base in the Gola Forest, and the last piece of a jigsaw fell into place. My friend L., a skilled Fula hunter, came to greet me. I was told the story of an attack on the village in June 1991. A small RUF column approached from the forest, using the trail from the Moro River, firing shots in the air to scare away the villagers. L. recognised the leader as J., a young man who had been at primary school in Lalehun. He observed the group carefully, knowing it would be tired and hungry after the long trek across the Gendema Hills. The fighters were seeking lighted cooking pots behind the houses. With dusk settling, L. followed them from house to house, attacking once they had sat down to eat. He killed one RUF fighter at close range with his shot gun, and in the pandemonium re-loaded and wounded another. As dark closed in, the group withdrew. It was unsafe to sleep in Lalehun with L. on the loose. The demoralized column sought cover in the forest. L. had shown how a hunter, equipped with a shot gun and knowledge of terrain, could overcome a lightly-armed raiding party (the column had only one or two working rifles). And so it became clear that the skills of hunters would be a powerful factor in counter-insurgency against the RUF. The equation of war in Sierra Leone was henceforth sodality versus sodality, plus hunter tactics.

War as Masquerade (December 1994-January 1995)

The RUF was driven out of its redoubts in Kailahun in November 1993. Foday Sankoh, now the movement's undisputed leader, had occupied a place called "the White House," in Sandeyalu, a village on the border of Luawa and Kissi Teng Chiefdoms, in the Kailahun "pan handle," a tongue of land between Guinea and Liberia. The White House was on a slight hill at the edge of the settlement, and vulnerable to attack by Alpha jets of the Nigerian air force.[3] As in the Battle of Lalehun, the RUF leadership decided to seek better cover in the forest itself. Any attempt to provide civil administration in Kailahun District was ended. The movement abandoned its vehicles and heavy weapons and took to forest tracks (RUF/SL 1995). Captives carried the loads. Sankoh

himself went south to the Gola forest, eventually to establish a large camp (The Zogoda) at the southern extremity of the Kambui Hills.[4] Other war leaders were despatched to set up various camps in the forest patchwork spreading out from the Gola complex towards the center of the country. These camps became core assets in the RUF's Phase Two campaign. Country-wide raids, from November 1994, advertized the movement's undiminished ambitions.

In 1994, my wife and I planned a private visit to Bo at Christmas 1994. We arrived in Freetown to find the road unsafe. A friend in government had a vehicle with an assigned army driver, and he insisted his driver take us up-country. The journey was uneventful apart from an AK47, propped by the driver's window, falling under the brake pedal as we bounced through a pothole in the road, after which I spent some time closely observing the gun to work out which bit was the safety catch. After receiving food and thanks, the driver returned to Freetown that night. The next day (December 23rd) there was a serious attack on Mile 91, a major road junction on the Freetown road. The road was cut, and no more vehicles arrived in Bo. Christmas preparations were muted.

Refugees were arriving from villages to the north. They had a strange tale to tell. The RUF had attacked and burnt their villages, but the movement (they reported) "no longer kills." In some cases, cadres had helped villagers find a path to safety before torching their houses. In other instances, victims reported preachy combatants more interested in putting over a political message than fighting.

Bo decided the threat this time was real, and the populace made it clear it did not welcome the RUF, whatever its message. But it was equally clear that the town could not rely upon the army garrison. Only a minority of soldiers seemed willing to fight. Youth organizations came together as a volunteer civil defense. In the 1977 election the politician S. I. Koroma had tried to divide the town along ethnic lines. Bo, a Mende settlement, is home to many northerners, strongly represented in the artisan and trading classes. Mende and Temne youth had been counselled by leaders opposed to Koroma to resist ethnic fighting. One of the mobilizers of street level civil defense against the RUF in 1994, a motor mechanic, had learnt organizational skills in this earlier resistence. His message was again not to allow the town to be divided. A factor in maintaining youth solidarity was a masquerade society popular among Mende and Temne youth known as Paddle. Young people manned road blocks and caught RUF infiltrators.

The direction of attack became clear over the next few days. On Christmas Eve, the Nigerian detachment guarding the Sewa bridge escorted into town a large group of refugees from the Gondama camp, to enjoy a cultural show at

the football stadium. In the absence of troops, Gondama camp was taken over by a group of young people, saying they intended to spend Christmas with their relatives. They unpacked guns and fatigues—causing a panic in the camp—collected rations and disappeared into the bush, westwards. Over the next two days this RUF column attacked villages around Tikonko, eventually gaining an approach to Bo—the old railway line through Mattru.

The Nigerian howitzer battery at Gondama opened up in the middle of the night. It seems unlikely that there was any particular target. Superior fire power, as evidenced by loud noise, was intended to demoralize the sleeping enemy. Instead, it temporarily demoralized the sleep-deprived citizens of Bo. But listeners quickly learned to figure out the difference in aural signature between incoming and outgoing shells. On subsequent nights, the firing at 02.00 was used to check the time or swat a few mosquitoes.

By day there was a new element—a bright yellow Antonov biplane spent long periods circling the town, paying special attention to its southern and eastern approaches. The plane was based at Hastings airfield in Freetown, apparently used in mineral prospecting. Its spotting sorties above Bo were the first tangible evidence of a coalition involving security and mining interests (and ex-Soviet machinery) moving in upon the war. This coalition was to be a dominant factor in the later stages.

Neither the midnight noises of the Nigerians nor the attentions of the Antonov deterred the RUF attackers from their purpose. Dressed in fake RSLMF uniforms and armed only with handful of AK47s, supplemented by wooden carved and painted RPGs, a group of about 100 fighters approached the Bo suburb of New London from Mattru-on-the-Rails as dawn broke on the morning of December 27th, 1994. Our house was at the opposite end of town, and I only became aware of trouble upon seeing columns of smoke arising from burning buildings at New London about 8am. I packed a bag with a few essential items—bush knife, water, medicines, mosquito nets, and so forth. Later, I found my boy-scout items had been discarded in favor of decent clothes; if we were to die at the hands of the RUF at least we would be wearing clean underwear. But our escape plan—to cross north of Bo to Dambara, where my wife had been raised, strike across bush paths I knew fairly well as far as Mogbuama, and then south to Njala and beyond, would have been futile. All the interior villages behind Dambara as far as Mogbuama were now in RUF hands. Fortunately, we decided to sit it out.

About mid-morning, my field assistant arrived at the house. He came from New London (the source of the smoke) and reported an amazing story. The

RUF had come apparently fully armed, setting fire to a few houses at the junction of the old railway line and Freetown road, but they did not open fire. Their concern was to explain to people the nature of their movement and its political message. A crowd gathered, but the mood turned ugly. Youths armed with nothing more than sticks and machetes, ignoring the danger from the guns, rushed the rebel force, causing casualties and confusion. At some point Guinean troops arrived in an armored car, which apparently stalled or lost a tire. As its crew were trying to fix it, a "bomb" (probably a Molotov cocktail) was lobbed into the open cab, and the machine caught fire. The crew fled in the direction of brigade HQ further down the Freetown road, seeking reinforcements. But by now the youths had scattered the RUF contingent into adjacent rice swamps, where several were ruthlessly hunted down and beaten to death. One was a young female fighter (Alice) who identified herself as a former school pupil from Bo. People wondered at the trouble she had taken to braid her hair for the attack. Vigilante groups combed the rice swamps looking for renegades. They visited the swamp behind our house in mid-afternoon, armed mainly with long roughly carved sticks through which had been driven ugly (and now blood-stained) six-inch nails, but found nothing. For years I have been haunted by a photograph that subsequently appeared in a London newspaper of the bloated, distorted face of a young RUF fighter beaten to death by civilian vigilantes.

After I finished writing some notes on my research assistant's account, I moved over to kick a rag ball with some youngsters, anxious to get them talking about football and their perceptions of referees, a topic on which my colleague, the anthropologist of international soccer, Gary Armstrong, had asked me to write an article. My interviews with a woman organizer of the Bo town girl's soccer league the previous day had been interrupted by the same arguments about packing that had caused my wife and I so much laughter an hour or two previously, and I was keen to get back on track. Life goes on (until it stops).

A few minutes later we thought it had. The town was overwhelmed by a huge rushing sound, a flash, and then a tremendous bang. Even the footballers momentarily lost concentration, and we sat on the grass to chat. It took us an hour or two to find out what was happening. It was the Guinean reinforcements. Technicians were testing a new weapons system. It was a performance. The riotous town's people (now disdainful of military bravado, having taken their defense successfully into their own hands) were as much the intended audience as any rebel remnant. The Guinean armored car still

blazed unattended. The noise from the rocket drowned that small disaster to military pride. By far the biggest bang of the day, this new explosion was intended to convey psycho-dynamic superiority in a way that might have drawn applause even from the composer of *The Rite of Spring*.

The rebel attack failed. The soldiers had failed to defend the town. Bo youths were cock-a-hoop. They even insisted the garrison confine itself to barracks. For several nights, the civilians placed the military under curfew. The garrison commander was later forced to intervene. On December 30th, young men sat out on the street to watch the army re-impose its own curfew. At 11 pm, a Landrover driven at high speed did a hand-brake turn on the edge of the swamp bordering our street and exited fast. Uniformed occupants behind scrolled-up glass reassured each other "all clear, all clear." Laughing bystanders shouted "clear off" behind a fast disappearing ball of dust.

The immediate pressure had eased, and I had a ceremony to arrange. The man who was to lead the event was away. He had gone to Tikonko to attend to goats, worried that they might not have been watered for some days. While waiting, I talked to several old men displaced from Potoru. From them I gained my first clear insight into the structure and location of the Zogoda, the RUF headquarters camp in the Kambui hills north of Potoru. One of the men had even visited an outer section to deliver supplies. He stressed the Zogoda was an extensive complex, not a single site. RUF commanders never allowed villagers to visit the inner sanctum.

On January 2nd, a vehicle—the first in several days—arrived in Bo and offered to take us to Freetown. It had been sent by a colleague who ran a humanitarian operation in Kambia. His children were supposed to return to Bo for schooling, and he had asked his driver to prospect the road, deliver the children if he could, and collect us on return. I was due to visit Kambia District, to discuss work on food security with his agency and colleagues at the Rokupr Rice Research Station. The vehicle would first take my family to Freetown and then deliver me to Kambia. The driver had taken 17 hours for what was normally a five-hour trip to Bo. He had parked his vehicle ahead of every checkpoint to prospect the identity of those in charge. In each case, he negotiated a rate to be allowed to pass. The journey back to Freetown was smooth, earlier patience rewarded. I later discovered the RUF occupied every village north of the road, including my field site, Mogbuama, as far as Taiama, but were busy regrouping after the failed attack on Bo. The only difficulty was the army checkpoint at Mile 47, where we were detained for some time on suspicion of being rebel collaborators. The sector through which we had passed was deemed RUF-controlled.

The journey to Kambia also passed off without major incident. When I arrived, I was greeted like a ghost. While I was on the road, the RUF spokesman in Ghana, Alimamy Sankoh, had been interviewed on BBC, to claim the RUF had taken the area around Mile 47 in preparation for an attack on Freetown. I then realized that an unexpected road block between the Rokel River and Rogbere junction, manned by unkempt irregulars wearing red bandanas, was probably an RUF advance party. But they were high-spirited and let me pass, demanding only a holiday tip. We returned to Freetown by another route.

Private Security Options: A Charade of War and Peace (1996)

In February 1995, I published a short interpretation of the war in Sierra Leone in the news magazine, *West Africa*. I argued the shadowy RUF remained a threat. Even though its original radical impetus had petered out it was taking on new life in the bush, reflecting the isolation of its leadership and the alienation of the rural youth upon which it preyed. I concluded it should be allowed to talk (or escape).

The military regime (1992-95) sought to deny the existence of the RUF. Officially, the movement had been driven back into Liberia in 1993, and Sankoh was presumed dead. Occasional raids (it was suggested) were the work of rogue army units, some loyal to the previous regime. My article was unwelcome, and I was quietly advised not to visit Sierra Leone for a time. But even as I wrote, the RUF had reached the verge of Freetown, forcing the military regime to consider desperate measures.

These included private security options. A group (Gurkha Security Guards, based in the Isle of Man, led by Robert McKenzie, an American Vietnam paratroop veteran who subsequently became a captain in the Rhodesian army) was hired to stem the rebel advance (Hooper 2003). Operatives encountered the RUF while prospecting an attack on the Malal Hills camp, where some of the hostages were held. McKenzie and a number of his fighters died in the engagement, and the company promptly withdrew.

Panic swept Freetown. It was rumored that the RUF had already established camps in the peninsula hills. Foday Sankoh would be carried to power on Easter Sunday along the former railway line (closed by the dictator Siaka Stevens in 1968, on advice from the World Bank). Development agencies began to withdraw foreign staff. Encountering the Angolan delegation at the annual conference of the Organization of African Unity, members of an

increasingly nervous junta were told about a company, Executive Outcomes (henceforth EO), partly based in UK and staffed mainly by former South African Defence Force operatives (white and black veterans of covert SADF operations in Mozambique and Angola). EO had been effective in securing mineral resources threatened by the Savimbi rebels and was willing to work in Sierra Leone. An undisclosed contract was worked out, which, in addition to cash payments, allegedly included mineral concessions.

Operations began in Sierra Leone in May 1995. The important rutile mining site in the south of the country, and a kimberlite concession in Kono, negotiated by a British-registered company, Branch Energy,[5] were quickly secured. EO turned its attention to driving out the RUF. In becoming a major player in the government's war (Abrahamsen and Williams 2004), it can be argued that private security crossed a fine line between legitimate activity and unwarranted interference in post-colonial African politics.

Analysis throws doubt upon claims that EO's (largely airborne) operations changed the course of the war through technical means. I shall argue they are better regarded as a type of ritual intervention intended to affect the will, not incomparable with the esoteric operations of the opposed sodalities fighting the war on the ground and resulting in an unanticipated ritualized response. The analysis draws its material from a recent account of the EO operations in Sierra Leone by a journalist, Jim Hooper, who followed the company and its operatives over a number of years (Hooper 2003).

Despite official reluctance to admit the existence of the RUF, or the challenge it posed politically, a number of agencies were at work in 1995 on the possibility of a peace process. This included the United Nations and a London-based conflict resolution agency, International Alert (IA). IA reached the Zogoda sometime in July 1995, arranging the release of international hostages, and at the same time provided publicity for the RUF through filming the camp and its leadership. This resolved doubts about the movement's existence (International Alert 1997).

Under strong pressure to return to barracks, the military regime decided to opt for a peace process, perhaps largely to fend off citizen and international demands for speedy elections (even if the talks were successful, it would obviously take some time before the RUF could demobilize and re-form as a political party). But the regime was divided, and after a palace coup, elections were conceded. These took place in February 1996. The RUF meanwhile had begun to engage with the nascent peace process. A provisional cease-fire agreed with the outgoing chairman of the military regime, Julius Maada Bio,

on March 15th, 1996, was made indefinite by a Joint Communiqué signed between President Kabbah and Foday Sankoh in Yamoussoukro, April 22nd-23rd, 1996. This mandated continued cessation of hostilities to create "a climate of confidence conducive to the conclusion of a peace accord" (International Alert 1997:17).

Peace with the RUF (perhaps involving some power-sharing arrangement) threatened the continuance of EO activities in Sierra Leone.[6] The company would prefer to be recognized as savior of the new democratic regime, with which it had negotiated business deals. Accordingly, the focus of private security shifted from guarding mine operations to eroding the forest camps where RUF civil society was sequestered, despite the ongoing peace process.

EO had access to reconnaissance planes, night vision equipment, satellite positioning systems, and a rented ex-Soviet Mi-24 gunship. Air raids rattled the RUF, but only extensive ground operations would root out the camps permanently. This proved to be a problem. There was never more than a handful of EO personnel in Sierra Leone. Initial operational strength was "56 black and white former Special Forces, 32 Battalion and Koetvoet operators" (Hooper 2003:219). EO estimated RUF fighting strength at "500 or so rebels" (Hooper 2003:218). My own interviews with captured fighters in 1996 suggested a figure between 3000 and 5000 (Richards et al. 1997). Over 24,000 RUF forces eventually demobilized in 2001. EO's low estimate of RUF numbers under arms served to convince sceptics in government and the international community that the company had the measure of the problem, despite limited resources.

Hooper (2003) describes two distinct sets of operations against RUF camps. One was against Camp Bokor in the Kangari Hills, a well defended complex guarding the route to the Kono diamond fields. Hooper claims a striking success for EO's airborne attack. "With only one wounded on our side and upwards of eighty rebels killed and many more wounded Kangari was one more in a string of very successful operations" (Hooper 2003:246). Unless this operation broke the cease-fire agreements, the attack must be dated before March 15th, 1996.

Local evidence throws doubt on Hooper's claims of success. In fact, Camp Bokor appears to have remained fully functional from the first signing of the cease-fire until at least the end of 1996. In July 1996, an RSLMF intelligence officer who had visited the site as a trader invited me to accompany him on another trip (I declined, not sure what disguise I might assume). Military sources interviewed in September 1996 (Richards et al. 1997) claimed to have blocked the main routes into Bokor (thus tacitly confirming the camp's con-

tinued existence). The manager of a small private radio station in Makeni reported in October 1996 that he continued to receive requests for songs and dedications from camp occupants, who also complained bitterly at being described as "rebels" (instead of "freedom fighters") in BBC news bulletins rebroadcast by the station. Sankoh himself visited the Kangari Hills camp complex by helicopter in November 1996 to explain the Abidjan deal (International Alert 1997). CDF veterans (interviewed July 2003) claimed to have attacked the site towards the end of 1996 and (significantly) denied any air support from EO during a two-pronged attack from Baomahun and Tungie. RUF informants (interviewed in 2001, in neighboring Tane Chiefdom) recalled that they abandoned Camp Bokor only after the military coup in May 1997 (when the RUF joined a power-sharing junta). Rather than the EO air operation against Camp Bokor being "one in a string of very successful operations," it seems more likely that it was a "demonstrative statement" serving not to destroy the camp but to test the will of a movement thought to comprise largely of abducted recruits.

As much is implied by a second account embedded within Hooper's material, the dates of which are rather carefully obscured (cease-fire breaches might come within the purview of the Special Court for war crimes in Sierra Leone). The account covers an operation against the RUF headquarters camp in the Kambui South forest reserve [i.e. the Zogoda] which (it is claimed) led to Sankoh requesting "a ceasefire so that negotiations with the government could begin" (Hooper 2003:249). In fact, the RUF first agreed to peace negotiations in July 1995 and (as noted above) signed an indefinite cease-fire in April 1996. What Hooper describes took place much later (during the Kabbah presidency) and sheds important light on the influence EO exercised over the government's security strategy, with important bearing on why the peace process failed.

Hooper's EO informants stress they worked at the behest of their successive employers, the National Provisional Ruling Council (from May 1995), and the democratic regime (from March 1996). But in effect, they controlled much government decision-making through management of military intelligence. In particular, it was at "at the South Africans' suggestions the new president implemented a weekly war council that met every Friday afternoon [from April 1996] at State House" (Hooper 2003:247). Decisions on these occasions were linked to intelligence assessments provided by EO. The South Africans did the radio intercepts and supervised interrogation of prisoners. EO's "PP" [Lt. Col. Pine Pienaar] argued consistently that Sankoh was not serious about peace, and it seems no one else had evidence, or interpretative skills, to argue against him.

Backed by the Nigerian commander of the West African peace-keeping forces, Pienaar (we are told) relentlessly pushed the line that "Sankoh wasn't finished until his headquarters and senior people were neutralised" (Hooper 2003:247). The South Africans "made such a nuisance of themselves in presenting the case that President Kabbah gave authorization to proceed with the operation" (Hooper 2003:247). The result was the attack on the Zogoda, which Hooper then describes as the first major ground offensive launched against the RUF commanded by EO.

It appears to have been more effective, militarily, than the air attack on Camp Bokor. Indeed, other information gathered at the time indicates the Zogoda was destroyed by joint EO-army-CDF operations during September or October 1996, in the run up to the signing of the Abidjan peace accord (Richards et al. 1997). The fighting was aimed at hitting the RUF at an especially sensitive juncture. Hooper's informants make no bones about the artillery barrage being "psychological" rather than tactical. ("After the first bombardment I started playing a psychological game: four rounds at 1500 hours, then eight at 2215, followed by ten more at 0300 and another six at 1100. Varying the times, I continued like this for three days."). The actual equipment and its operation was Nigerian ("the Nigerians gave me three 105 mm Howitzers and crews…and four Sierra Leonean companies to augment about forty of my South Africans"). "By the end of the third day the rebels started surrendering en mass [sic.]. One dishevelled and shell-shocked group of about 20 arrived in Blama and said they'd had enough. Another group of eighty gave themselves up in Potoru and 140 more pitched up in Kenema." The shelling killed 120 (all quotations from Hooper 2003:248).

An unguarded remark gives the game away: "EO's one disappointment was that Sankoh had been elsewhere" (Hooper 2003:248). Sankoh was, in fact, in Abidjan negotiating the final details of a peace deal, protected by the cease-fire agreements of April 1996. He had left the Zogoda for Abidjan, by helicopter, in the last quarter of 1995, several months before EO switched its attention to the attempted destruction of the RUF camps. EO's involvement in the sacking of the Zogoda suggests a basic reason the Abidjan agreement failed. The RUF lost its head-quarters in a cease-fire breach. Sankoh's signature was extracted under duress and perhaps mainly to protect his movement on the ground. He visited three camps (Kangari Hills, Bauya, and Balahun in Kailahun District) by helicopter to advocate the Abidjan deal (International Alert 1997), but there was no longer a head-quarters complex to visit, and the mood of the scattered survivors after their psychological battering was ugly. EO claims it won a small war, pretending a degree of control beyond its power

technically to achieve. In fact, it acted out a ritualized charade of military control, seeking to break a guerrilla movement's will through dramaturgical use of lethal force. In so doing, it triggered a ritualized response from scattered cadres that utterly overwhelmed a fragile peace. Atrocity multiplied.

Conclusion

War is not such that anthropologists can spread over it an adequate sample frame. We must always depend on snapshots, chance encounters, unplanned observations. A broad hypothesis is essential to hold such material together, to render it coherent. My own framework derives from performance studies and the Durkheimian approach to ritual in particular ("it is always the cult that is efficacious…we must act"). I view all war as dramaturgical. It is an arena in which humans engage in collective practices centered on killing in order to reshape minds and re-organize society. Representations and societal commitments are altered by collective action.

Durkheimian theory offers appropriate analytical constructs (the piacular rite, effervescence). The relevance of these constructs is explored elsewhere (cf. Richards 2005, Stone 2004). My focus in this paper has been to show how chance encounters came to be woven into an overall Durkheimian interpretation of war in Sierra Leone. This interpretation can, of course, be challenged. That is the point. We cannot argue with personal experiences, however thickly plastered. Social *science* is the ground upon which the anthropology of war needs to operate. Here I assert a preference for thin description over thick. Clarity is an essential analytical tool.

I hope, then, it is clear enough from my account that in my scattered encounters I saw very little "strategic" action, as it would be understood by those who devise battle plans. What I saw was a great deal of ritual inventiveness. War, as I experienced it, was a matter of acting together to forge strength, and acting against others to cause demoralization and fear. When guns were in short supply, the machetes took its place. The effects of demoralization achieved by gun and machetes are different, thus explaining the different physical signatures of atrocity in this war, when compared to other more "conventional" conflicts. Bodies were hacked to pieces, not burned and smashed by rocket attack. To describe the damage as "ritualized" killing is probably correct, but only if we recognize that *all* war is ritualized killing, because all war is intended to reshape minds and reconfigure collectivity. The opening salvos of the 2003 war in Iraq make this clear—"Operation Shock and Awe."

Thus, it seems to me a particularly important finding that private security operations in the war in Sierra Leone fit the hypothesized claim that expression of armed force is primarily ritual action. Given the actual resources at the disposal of the South Africans, their operational planning only made sense (as strategy) under the assumption that the RUF was a tiny, socially-insignificant group of bandits, easily rounded up by a handful of professional troops with a helicopter or two. Once we see the RUF as a social movement, feeding on years of rural neglect and despair, and inducting an entire class of young people in its infiltration of the countryside, the perspective changes. Private security, in such circumstances, could induce submission only by striking fear. The war was (as one of its South Africans practitioners admits) a psychological game.

Why the game was played is still under dispute. Was it the product of a collision between an old and a new Libyan strategy in the British intelligence services? (Since the advent of the War on Terror the signals have been much clearer—Gaddafi's networks are to be treated as an ally not a threat.) Did the sophisticated international civil servants elected to power in Sierra Leone in 1996 over-interpret British hints that "private security" fitted a larger anti-Libyan "game plan"? Was an indecisive president brow-beaten because the South Africans sought an extended contract, or had diamond-mining friends in the UK been likely to benefit from kimberlite concessions?

Whatever the case, the game went wrong. That the RUF was a sociological phenomenon there can now be no doubt. Over 24,000 armed combatants claiming its allegiance passed through demobilization, and standing behind every combatant there were several times as many dependents.[7] Calling these dependents war captives, sex slaves, and so forth may be correct, but it does not alter the fact that the RUF was a social movement (however unpleasant). Many of those who died in South African attacks will have been unarmed, and perhaps reluctant adherents. They became movement loyalists not because of conviction, but through the violence directed against them. Common threat created common bonds. Or as a woman leader, who joined the movement only after her husband was murdered by the army, explained to me, "I went where safety lay."

Hooper makes a startling claim. EO operatives were effective because they were [white] Africans "who understood [black] Africa, who had been the architects and practitioners of an immensely successful military doctrine throughout their [South African Defence Force] careers" (Hooper 2003:8). This can be taken as confirmation of one important part of the ritual hypothesis. As soldiers of an apartheid-era army, they knew how to use military power to strike

fear into subject races. Their skill was to orchestrate rituals of violence, based on a colonial anthropology in which ritual was understood to consolidate the existing social order. The radical Durkheim makes clear that ritual also creates new social worlds. Private violence did not end the war in Sierra Leone. It vastly stimulated the conflict, with social consequences yet fully to unfold.

ENDNOTES

[1]Stravinsky claimed that “Music is by its very nature powerless to express anything at all”; asked whether his ballets did not, in fact, contradict this claim, he elaborated (citing Schopenhauer) that “Music is nothing but an art of organization of sounds, and a faculty to express things outside of itself can not be considered a criterion of its value” (Joseph 2001:28). For assessments of the influence of Schopenhauer on Stravinsky and Durkheim respectively see Joseph (2001) and Mestrovic (1992).

[2]I have traced the identity of one of the Liberian group assisting the RUF in 1991. This was a Mano teenager, Nixon Gaye, who had joined the Taylor forces in Nimba County c. 1990. On his return from Sierra Leone, Gaye led a semi-independent force of fighting youths based in a German-owned rubber plantation east of Salala. He was implicated, according to some sources, in a major massacre of civilians at Harbel, blamed at the time on the Doe-loyalist soldiers of the Armed Forces of Liberia, and eventually eliminated by his own faction in 1994 as a threat to an emergent peace process. I am grateful for this information to my Liberian colleague Tornorlah Varpilah who accompanied me on a visit to Gaye’s former base in July 2004.

[3]I visited Sandeyalu in July 2003. The “White House” is still marked with RUF graffiti, and a scarred and splattered wall was where prisoners were executed. The deeply excavated foundations of a nearby unfinished building served as a temporary bunker for Sankoh during the Nigerian air raids. The “White House” was abandoned in November 1993, with government troops led by Lt. Tom Nyuma closing in. Among the young army officers deposing Joseph Momoh in April 1992, Nyuma was one of the keenest to overcome the RUF. The shrine of Nyuma’s grandfather stands in front of the house, and part of his determination to reach Sandeyalu was said to be his desire to protect the site from desecration.

[4]RUF informants say that the name means “sorcerer will die,” i.e. it was a threat aimed at initiators from village sodalities deployed to mobilize irregulars against the RUF (I thank Krijn Peters for this information, which will be presented in his forthcoming PhD thesis).

[5]Branch Energy was managed (in Sierra Leone) by Rupert Bowen, later named in the House of Commons as a former officer of British overseas military intelligence (MI6), retired from service in November 1993 upon completion of a posting to Angola. Also influential in the developments of 1995 were two senior Sierra Leoneans retired from the United Nations—James Jonah and Ahmad Tejan Kabbah. Jonah was appointed electoral commissioner in 1995 and later joined the elected government as a minister. Kabbah became president after a run-off election on March 15th, 1996. Jonah and Kabbah may have perceived a larger logic to Bowen’s interest in diamonds than financial advantage alone. The RUF was Libyan-sponsored, and the British had an interest in monitoring Libyan support for the war. Stakes in diamonds potentially funded terrorism (at one stage Libyan agents assisted the IRA in Northern Ireland). When (in 1998) it transpired Britain had committed breaches of international sanctions through tacit support for private security in Sierra Leone, one sceptical parliamentarian openly wondered whether any MI6 officer ever really retires. The official

enquiry concluded that the private security option in Sierra Leone had not been a British policy. The Arms to Africa scandal was blamed on middle-level civil servants acting without proper authorization.

[6]EO propaganda against the peace settlement was widely influential. Shearer (1997), for example, claims that the Abidjan accord (November 1996) was signed only as a result of EO "stick." In 1997, the South African government made it illegal for South Africans to engage in mercenary work, and EO subsequently disbanded. The Sierra Leone contract was terminated, in December 1996, with pressure from the American embassy. When the war resumed, a second London-based security company—Sandline International—filled the EO role. Some observers saw close connections between the two ventures. Sandline operated with former British army personnel. The introduction of Sandline coincided with the advent of a new British High Commissioner, Peter Penfold, positive about EO's role in the war (Hooper 2003).

[7]The actual figure recorded by the National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration for RUF fighters is 24,338 (33.1% of 70,871 ex-combatants from all factions passing through the disarmament process; see Humphreys and Weinstein 2004). Some caution should be exercised in interpreting figures. Although possession of a "weapon" (or ordnance) was strictly imposed by the United Nations peace-keepers as a criterion for being treated as an ex-combatant, rumors abound that not all those presenting with a weapon were in fact fighters. Weapons were redistributed by commanders, and in some cases appear to have been traded on the open market to parents seeking free schooling for "child soldiers." However, since there was considerable stigma in claiming membership of the RUF it may be that the demobilization figure under- rather than overestimates RUF numbers. Richards et al. (2003) suggest that some (perhaps many) RUF combatants and dependents were excluded from, or evaded, demobilization and are scattered throughout the West African region. Some were recently encountered in Liberia (Steven Archibald, personal communication).

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