Like beasts in the bush: synonyms of childhood and youth in Sierra Leone

Danny Hoffman

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Figure 1
The crowd outside the gates to the disarmament center, pushing to enter

No one made it to the table except through General Joe. Joe was the point man representing the local *kamajor* militia to UN monitors, the guy with whom the New Zealanders, Canadians, Kenyans and Croats negotiated details. He was also gatekeeper for the local big men, making sure that fighters paid their tributes for permission to pass through the UN’s disarmament process and achieve the perks of an ‘ex-combatant’. So when Colonel Rhodes, the New Zealander, spotted two militiamen clearly younger than the 22 and 23 years old they claimed to be, he turned to Joe for an explanation. Joe shrugged. ‘Here in Africa,’ he said, ‘we don’t grow much.’

Over the course of a week in late October and early November 2001 a peculiar drama took place in the football stadium at Bo in southeastern Sierra Leone. After a decade of civil war in the West African nation all sides had agreed to
lay down arms. Under the supervision of international peacekeepers, members of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels, the pro-government Civil Defense Forces (CDF), and former Sierra Leone military personnel headed to disarmament centers around the country to turn over their guns, grenades, mortars and ammunition in exchange for a few useful commodities—blankets, buckets, slippers, soap—a small cash payment, and registration for future jobs training. Bo was a regional stronghold for the predominantly Mende kamajor militia, a division of the CDF, and so a delegation was sent from the capital Freetown to collect weapons and register combatants as official participants in the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) campaign.1 What appeared on paper to be a straightforward process (literally on paper, since the UN and the factional leadership had produced a carefully worded document specifying exactly how the DDR was to proceed) became, in practice, a much more complex drama, one animated in part by multiple and conflicted meanings of childhood and youth. The forces intersecting in this space highlight the differences and contradictions which constitute childhood and youth in an African postcolony. From the physical layout of the disarmament center to efforts to pass children as adult combatants, the proceedings depended on constructions of youth and childhood cobbled together from local and global understandings of violence and power. These narratives of specific moments I offer here to illustrate youth as, and in, a state of crisis—the war-time habitus of Sierra Leone. And, as such, these accounts reflect and explore the properties that become synonymous with youth in that context—its exteriority, its dependence on networks of patronage, and the threatening unfinished quality that makes children such effective combatants.

Outside the gates

The scene unfolding at the Bo disarmament center began outside a locked gate. Hours before and well after the proceedings started each morning, young men arrived from Bo town or the surrounding communities to present themselves and their weapons for disarmament. Coming singly or with their commanders, most had little idea what to expect from the process. The high cement wall of the stadium allowed only one access point. Those who arrived early could see through the bars to a wall of Guinean peacekeepers. Those who came later could see nothing but an increasingly agitated mob.

In every respect, this gathering of hundreds of male youth was the quintessence of what the war in Sierra Leone was purported to be about.2 Overwhelmingly young, heavily armed, angry and idle, they embodied crisis. Whatever conclusions they draw from it, and regardless of what they posit as its original cause, observers of the Sierra Leone war—from academics to journalists to the combatants themselves—are nearly unanimous in discerning within it a crisis of youth precipitated by their marginalization. For some, these were society’s ‘loose molecules’, unmoored from any civilizing social networks, drug-crazed, diseased and criminal.3 For others, they were Marx’s lumpenproletariat, an underclass of thugs and thieves at the margins of the economy and easily
manipulated by a corrupt leadership. In any case, youth constitutes a demo-
graphic of those excluded, a populace in which childhood and alienation become
synonymous. Outside the proletarianized labor force, precariously marginal to
the networks of patronage and patrimonialism that characterize governance in
the African postcolony, youth in Sierra Leone is cast as a state of crisis marked
by its externality to something. If we are to reduce the cause of this rebel war
to one phrase,’ writes Gordon in the Freetown daily For Di People, ‘that phrase
would be “Youth Unemployment”’. Similarly, youth’s ‘outsider’ ontology was
considered a critical force in the RUF gaining recruits; they made an ‘effort
towards mobilization of border-zone, diamond-digging youth’, according to
Richards, ‘... based on the perhaps correct calculation that this alienated group
could be more readily detached from existing structures of state and civil society
than other target groups in the countryside of eastern Sierra Leone’. At the
disarmament center in Bo, youth was marked first by its externality to the
disarmament center itself.

Ali, a force commander and discotheque operator, described the process. To
disarm, a combatant needed to present a weapon or a large amount of ammu-
nition; alternatively he could present himself as part of a team of operators
working a ‘group weapon’—a tank or anti-aircraft gun, for example, which took
multiple hands to operate. The problem, however, was that the government
provided few armaments to the militia, and the majority of kamajors possessed
no weapon other than a machete or cutlass. Despite the ubiquity of firearms in
the country, few irregulars possessed their own. If they carried one at all, it
belonged to the unit or to the commander. So, as Ali told me, if a commander
held four or five firearms, maybe he would ask for a little something in return
for giving them out to a few of his men. After all, he had financial troubles of
his own. A third or a half of the newly minted ex-combatant’s pay packet
seemed a fair trade for the opportunity to pass through disarmament and train for
a job in post-war Sierra Leone. The upshot was that only those who had made
the necessary bargains with their commanders had any hope of passing through
the locked gate to the inside of the stadium. What’s more, only those command-
ers who had themselves made the proper gestures toward the highest-ranking
elders in the militia—usually men of standing and means in the community—
were likely to have their men selected by gatekeepers like General Joe to be
ushered to the front of the waiting crowd and therefore eligible for the limited
disarmament slots. Joe typified what has come to be known as the African
postcolony’s patrimonial or neo-patrimonial form of governance, in which
resources are distributed according to networks of personal relations. Those in
political office distribute wealth and other forms of capital to followers with
whom they maintain a patron–client relationship dependent on personal, rather
than bureaucratic, networks, though the fiction of the bureaucratic state is
sustained and strategically deployed. At every level, individuals are dependent
on those with greater access and responsible for those with less, extending
upward to the national leadership and downward to the village level. Individuals
such as General Joe existed somewhere in the middle, operating as ‘big men’ for
individuals dependent upon them for favors of resources, access, and protection,
while at the same time beholden to and dependent upon others with even greater
accumulations of wealth and power. In sum, to be admitted past the gate at the DDR was to illustrate the second synonym of youth—its ‘vertical’ dependence on those with greater access to patronage resources.

At the disarmament center, there were moments when the crowd nearly lost control. It was impossible to bring the chosen bodies into the stadium, and impossible to keep those not chosen out. General Joe took charge at one such moment, and ordered the Guinean peacekeepers to throw open the gates. In his bright red tracksuit and straw sunhat, Joe waded into the throng, randomly throwing punches and delivering kicks, cursing as the hundreds of youth surrounding him pushed back to give him space. By his presence—the ferocious senior man who controlled their fates—more than his actions, he corrallled three distinct and reasonably orderly lines outside the gate. No easy feat in itself, but all the more impressive when one noticed him shoving to the front of each queue select young men serving under favored commanders or with whom he had struck deals in advance.

To be outside the gate was to live the reality of one’s youth, to negotiate successfully or otherwise one’s exclusion and dependence. In the contemporary period of crisis, this dependence is precarious, it offers no guarantees. The war-scape of Sierra Leone (a war-scape that pre-dates the outbreak of combat in 1991) was above all a remapping of the social relations of its citizens. The hierarchies and exchanges which always serve to construct the meaning of childhood were—and remain—one of the war’s many battlefields, utilized and transformed by violence in unpredictable ways. Since one can never be sure what to expect from the system, young people constantly improvise, beg, threaten and scheme to negotiate the ever-changing crisis scenario, playing multiple roles at once to satisfy incompatible, and often incomprehensible, demands.

Among the crowd were kamajors turned away from other disarmament centers, and many who had now queued for days at Bo and saw their chances for entry rapidly dwindling as abuses of the system grew ever more blatant. Every few minutes, a young man would break through the gates and make a dash for the line, only to be nabbed by the Guineans or the CDF commanders inside, beaten, and thrown back out, while the crowd outside chanted in unison ‘We want to disarm!’

In an instant, the crowd scattered from the middle, the young men sprinting and diving from a central point in the mob. A young militiaman had thrown a grenade into the throng, making good on one of many threats to disrupt the proceedings if he was not allowed in. It is impossible to say whether the ordnance was faulty or whether the young man simply didn’t understand its mechanics, but the grenade failed, and the crowd quickly reassembled much as it had been before.

The culprit was unceremoniously dragged before the CDF leadership inside the stadium. Eighteen at most, he quivered while the elders debated the relative merits of turning him over to the police, and whether he might be an RUF saboteur. General Joe broke from the group and stood before the youth, then delivered two sharp slaps to his head. As the boy stood pissing himself, an older man walked away muttering ‘all you RUF should go back to your cages’.
The unfinished project of childhood

As each day wore on into the afternoon, tensions swelled. The young men remaining outside the gates became increasingly aware of their slim chances of entry. Standing for hours without food or water through alternating downpours and shadeless sun made everyone irritable. At various points the Guineans and the CDF commanders threw themselves against the gates from the inside to hold back the crush of young arms and legs pressed through from without. When the monitors inside were ready, General Joe or one of his proxies would reach into the throng and select three soon-to-be ex-combatants. Through a small doorway in the gate the chosen ones would squeeze with their weapons, then join the queue on the pitch to have their firearms inspected and their names added to the list. For many combatants, the DDR (despite the ardour of the process) was the only attractive option for the immediate future. Few employment opportunities existed outside the violent economy of labouring in the diamond digging pits. Education fees were high and often necessitated sponsorship to secure a place in crowded classrooms. And many combatants found themselves physically and socially removed from their home communities, regarded as dangerous or simply lost.

It was toward the end of day, when tempers were hottest, that a group of approximately twelve children, none older than 14, made it into the stadium. They milled around looking scared and out of place. A few wore school uniforms, and all were scrubbed and groomed, a contrast to the sweating bodies outside. These were the juvenile relatives of a single commander, and he herded them together and proceeded toward the line for their presentation to the observers—as adult combatants.

CO Death, one of the senior men present despite his young age, stopped the group from moving forward. Only after an intense argument did Death succeed in turning the commander and his entourage away. Death explained later that as garrison commander, one of the highest-ranking positions in the regional militia, it would have been difficult for him to explain to any future war crimes tribunal why he had let so many children fight under his command. As it happened at so many moments within the DDR proceedings, the letter of protocol became the convenient fiction by which a senior man denied the efforts of a junior. The rejected commander herded his charges out, complaining bitterly about the bleak future for combatants, and for the nation, if the young were not able to disarm.

In speaking for the children of his family, the commander was not simply exercising the prerogatives of adulthood, but subtly making manifest the ontology of childhood itself. There is no clear line at which childhood ends and youth begins. But the threatening exteriority of youth takes on a distinctive character when that youth is clearly a child: the exteriority of the not yet, not quite human. For many Sierra Leoneans, children are associated as much with the domains and activities of the spirits as with the realm of the human. As Ferme writes, ‘central to the social construction of infancy (the “attraction and alarm” that infants generate in adults) is the perceived relationship of infants with the world of spirits, which guarantees loyalties in conflict with the world of the living’. To be born is not to be vested with the fullness of humanity; it is, rather, a stage in the process of movement through a liminal, dangerous state. Only with
socialization, articulated through initiation, does one achieve the status of a complete human being. Until then, children cannot be fully trusted. Their relationship to the world is suspect and volatile, unconditioned by the regulations and responsibilities that can only be inculcated through initiation.

In Mende, uninitiated children are referred to as *kpowanga* (pl.), a term that also means ‘mad’ and ‘mentally deficient.’ In other words, until children are taught how to use knowledge so that they might achieve real understanding, they are capable only of imperfectly perceiving the world around them and are unable to operate in it according to codes of prescribed social behavior.\(^{12}\)

The process of becoming an adult is also the process of becoming a fully realized human being.

A hand-out given to combatants explaining their new would-be status outlined specifically the difference between the requirements for disarmament as an adult and those as a child. To qualify as an adult, a combatant needed first to satisfy the UN observers that he belonged to one of the fighting forces. Through an identification card, a demonstrable knowledge of military affairs, or on the word of a commanding officer (the exact criteria by which the observers should be satisfied is not spelled out), those claiming to be combatants needed to make a reasonable case that they had, in fact, been so. Next was the requirement to produce a working firearm, a grenade, mortar, other explosive, or ammunition in sufficient quantity to warrant decommissioning. By contrast, the wording by which children could be qualified was so vague as to virtually rule out exclusion; it included any child ‘being an underage combatant, accompanying minor, unaccompanied minor, or any other participants under the age of 18, presenting with any of the fighting forces’. In other words, to be disarmed as a child combatant, a child simply need show up. No proof of membership, no weapon required.

This begs the question: why was there such an effort to enroll children as adults, when claiming status as a child combatant was a virtual guarantee? The answer is no great mystery: while child ex-combatants received rehabilitation, adults received direct material rewards. Children who could be snuck through brought benefits to their parent or patron, the latter often the commander in whose care a child was placed by family or community.\(^ {13}\)

One can read the messages in this tactic against the vaguely African-sounding platitude that it takes a village to raise a child, with its moralistic worldview of a community harmoniously sacrificing together for the good of its smallest members. Yet as Zack-Williams put it: ‘The super-exploitative nature of imperialism, imposed upon local kleptocratic mis-management of the economy, has led to capital flight, uneven development and the inability of local social institutions such as the family to cope with the exigencies of life within peripheral capitalist formations’\(^ {14}\). Certainly here, in a region profoundly impacted by the trade in slaves, the radical wealth disparities occasioned by colonial and post-colonial governance, absolute criminalization of the state, and now the warlordism of resource exploitation, the demands of patrimony and patronage take priority.\(^ {15}\) But to conclude from this a devaluation of children’s lives or a pathological deviation from some normative, child-centric model of the family is to miss the point. ‘Children are dropping out of childhood,’ said an advisor to Graca
Machel, the United Nations Secretary-General’s expert on the impact of armed conflict on children,\(^{16}\) assuming a universal equation of childhood with innocence to which the child as combatant is antithetical. ‘The only international language in the world is a child’s cry’, reads a fund-raising poster for Save the Children,\(^{17}\) invoking the same universalism and charging society itself with the moral imperative to respond to that suffering. Yet both presume a subject-centered ontology in which it might be possible to dichotomize the individual child and the social network to which it belongs.\(^{18}\) By contrast, children are better thought of as the unfinished projects of those networks. They do not belong to them, to be traded on as commodities, but neither do they warrant the special considerations of the person-in-full. They are works in progress, individualized but not quite yet human individuals.

‘Like beasts in the bush’

In a media interview, Chief Sam Hinga Norman, the national coordinator of the CDF, described the recruitment of children into the militia as a civilizing process: ‘A lot of these kids witnessed the slaughter of their parents and were so traumatized that they were living like beasts in the bush. We had to catch them and bring them back into the fold as human beings’\(^{19}\). In contrast to so many images of the child soldier as the passive subject deprived of its nascent human dignity, Norman suggests that only initiation as a child soldier could bring these little monsters back to the human community.\(^{20}\)

Whether they have been traumatized by the violence around them or not, children are dangerous. Their unfinished, not quite human quality is not pacific. It poses the risks of the underworld and other-worlds with which they are associated. Having not yet been initiated, inducted into the secret societies from which they learn the ideals of social behaviour and the techniques for interpreting the world around them, they possess a power they cannot reliably control, a power of secrecy and the spirit worlds they have not entirely left. This gives a certain logic to the child as soldier. Children, combatants say, make the best soldiers because they have no fear. They obey orders without question. They are uninhibited by moral concerns. Given the simplicity of light armaments such as the AK-47, children are physically capable of participation as soldiers. But at the heart of these justifications is a sense that children are not inherently innocent. Nothing in their nature need be overcome or corrupted to turn them into fighters for whatever cause—and the most ruthless fighters at that. It may be what makes the rehabilitation of child soldiers not appear to be of paramount importance; having not yet learned to be responsible social beings, ‘rehabilitation’ refers to no presupposed and valued originary state. Only initiation, even into an organization the purpose of which is the exercise of violence, transforms the child into its fully human state.

At the end of one of the disarmament days, a young boy approached and presented his kamajor identification card. Basheru, it said, was 10 years old when his card was issued in 1999. Too shy to tell me his story, some of the teenage combatants knew him and described his role in his unit at Gondama—to carry the ‘controller’, the occult protection that shielded the men behind from
Basheru, they said, would be the first in line if his unit confronted, or thought they might confront, enemy fire.

Basheru suggests a different understanding of the child soldier from one prominently on display when I passed through Amsterdam’s Schiphol Airport in the summer of 2000. Suspended from the ceiling in the cavernous terminal lounge was a billboard depicting an armed black child striking a Rambo-like pose against an indeterminately African bushveld landscape. The caption on the BBC World advertisement read: ‘One international decision maker you won’t find in the boardroom’. The racialized, stereotyped iconography of the image was striking in itself—the child dressed like an African-American gangsta, posed against a southern African landscape, invoking a phenomenon mostly associated with the west of the continent—as was the nod to the reality of contemporary global connectedness. But equally intriguing was the implication of agency, something normally written out of the narrative of child soldiering in Western discourses of the hapless, corrupted child conscripted in combat. Given the logic of the child as combatant is linked to its unfinished, chaotic quality, agency seems a misplaced analytic category for understanding child soldiers, relying as it does on a very particular concept of the individualized, monadic subject. If it is relevant to discuss the agency of child combatants at all, it might be best to do so in the same way one discusses the agency of the spirit world with which they are associated: morally neutral, capable of tremendous harm, able to impact upon the everyday course of events in the human realm (and eager to do so), but subject to some control or abeyance under the proper precautions and with
extreme vigilance. This can be extended somewhat to older youth, who are frequently equated—and equate themselves—with trickster figures such as Musa Wo, who straddles the human and extra-human worlds.23

As a general phenomenon, there is little evidence that children have long been used as soldiers in Africa, and some evidence to the contrary. Across the continent, until the professionalization of soldiering under colonial and then nation-state armies, ‘warrior’ status was most often associated with adult initiation and specialized training in military and perhaps hunting affairs.24 Certainly this seems to be true among Mendes, where responsibility for community defense fell to highly specialized adult hunters and the adult male secret societies such as the Poro.25

What forces led to the harnessing of children’s power for soldiering is anyone’s guess, though one might imagine that the technologies of warfare, demand for numbers and lack of alternatives have all played their part. What is certain is that in Sierra Leone, there now exists a certain habitus of war.26 The processes of socialization, and the organizing principles of sociality itself, are not disrupted by war but are now inextricably bound to it. The war/peace dichotomy is increasingly meaningless. For example, as conflict disrupts the cycles of male initiation, participation in combat—initiation into the militia—becomes the passage into manhood. It is no coincidence that to become a kamajor one must be initiated, and that during the war to become a man one needed to become a kamajor in much of the rural Mende-dominant region. Kamajor war songs frequently linked fighting the enemy with the essence of manhood, and an elderly commander once challenged me to find a rural Mende male who was not an initiate. Such a person, he claimed, would ‘be no better than women or children’.27 Where initiation serves to mark the differences in childhood and adulthood, men and women, the responsible members of the community from those not yet trusted to behave as reasonable people, increasingly those limits are set by the capacity and exercise of violence.

The gerontocracy

Once the Guinean peacekeepers inspecting the weapons verified that they were in working order, young combatants were directed to a table where General Joe or another commander stood with the UN monitors. According to the official protocols for disarmament, adult combatants were required to present ‘at least a personal weapon or [belong] to a group of at most five combatants delivering at least one group weapon’. At the table, however, things worked differently. A teenage boy stood before the officials with three flares (indulgently referred to by all as ‘bombs’), waiting silently while Joe and one of the UN monitors began negotiations. The observer insisted that three bombs were not enough. Would it be possible to bring in sixty rounds of ammunition as well? Joe suggested that perhaps forty rounds were feasible, and when the observer acquiesced, Joe gave the signal to a young man waiting by the trunk of a car, who reached in and dug out a handful of ammunition. While they waited for the rounds, Joe turned to the now officially ‘ex’-combatant. Writing his name on a small slip of paper, Joe told him in Mende to stop by his house later.
From the vantage point of many of the youth who participated in the conflict in Sierra Leone, the African postcolony is a gerontocracy. The opening sentence from the RUF manifesto states clearly that the corruption against which it claimed to fight was a generational affair: ‘We can no longer leave the destiny of our country in the hands of a generation of crooked politicians and military adventurists …. It is our right and duty to change the present political system in the name of national salvation and liberation’. CDF personnel similarly bemoaned the corruption in the ranks of their own leadership, claiming that elders stole the government allowances allocated for the (young) rank-and-file.

The exploitation, real and imagined, that comes with the systems of patronage in Sierra Leone and elsewhere in postcolonial Africa is experienced by youth as the machinations of their elders. Whether these perceived injustices are the result of a failure of the patronage system or are its natural state is to some extent incidental; it is a system perpetually in crisis, a constant state of emergency. It is a context in which ‘one can no longer locate what results from mere chance, or accident, and what results from “the normal” state of affairs’. Rather than a general malaise at modernity’s inherent inequalities (which Ferguson suggests is at work in contemporary urban Zambia), the young combatants and ex-combatants of Sierra Leone tend to see the spoils of modernity going to identifiable actors on the local, national and international scene: the elders and elites favoured first by colonial powers, then by postcolonial strategies of extraversion, and now by multinational NGOs, corporations, and the UN. ‘Foreign’ actors are not exempt or exceptional, much as they might claim positions of absolute neutrality. The world operates according to discrepancies between what is said and what is, because this is the nature of power and the modus operandi of those who possess it. Joe’s horse-trading with Colonel Rhodes was also Colonel Rhodes horse-trading with General Joe. To young Sierra Leoneans, the politics of patronage do not end at the nation’s borders.

If there is no physical ‘outside’ to the vicissitudes of this nervous system, militarization increasingly presents itself to some as a way to opt out, to subvert the injustices of patronage by violently leveling the field. Here belonging and accumulation become indistinguishable; to join the militia is to (seemingly) overcome the social and material exclusions of patronage. Mustapha was a young man who sat idly in the bleachers of the football stadium, smoking djamba (marijuana) when it was passed around and waiting for the day’s proceedings to end. Having turned in his weapon and registered that morning, he joined those whom a UN vehicle would come to collect for Gondama, the disarmament camp where they would receive their benefits. Young men like himself, he claimed, joined the kamajors because it was to the society that ‘all the good things of the village go’. He echoed a sentiment expressed to me later by a CDF commander recalling the 1999 Freetown invasion. During the fighting, he and his men provisioned themselves with beer from the national brewery and chicken from farms outside the city: ‘We eat well then,’ he recalled. ‘In war, you eat very well’. Computers for which there was little electricity, motorbikes and vehicles for which there was little petrol or operational understanding, were all available during the fighting and prized possessions in the various looting sprees. These are commodities not easily available to the lumpen youth who
make up the ranks of the militias if they rely exclusively on the patronage of their elders, the greedy elite, but which could be had by those prepared to use force to get them. As Richards has suggested of the RUF military campaign, the logic, at least in part, is the effort of an isolated, minimally educated cadre to ‘confront the murky magic of patrimonial power with the unsubtle obviousness of an elementary subtraction sum’.34

The irony is that for those youth for whom militarization seemed an enticing opportunity to subvert the systems of patronage and its gerontocratic masters, the para-military organizations in which they find themselves are no less so. The neo-patrimonial rule of a state-based patronage system relies on the fiction of a bureaucratic system and the promise that at any point the institution may offer an alternative to the arbitrary will of the patriarch.35 By contrast, the warlord organizations that replace them, exploiting the region’s mineral resources through youth labour and violence, are dependent almost entirely on the dictatorial rule of a charismatic leader who promises an alternative form of authority to the patronage system but replicates its most exploitative aspects.36 Such leaders have even fewer patronage demands than those struggling to maintain the balance of a neo-patrimonial bureaucracy. As Weber wrote of the
charismatic leader, ‘Men do not obey him by virtue of tradition or statute, but because they believe in him .... The devotion of his disciples, his followers, his personal party friends is oriented to his person and to its qualities’.

For irregular militias around the continent, the only aspect of the gerontocratic patronage system which has been successfully overthrown is the fragile (but expensive) infrastructure of the state.

Conclusion

As the last of the UN’s white trucks, loaded with ex-combatants, rolled out of the gates and toward Gondama, those who had not been processed milled around the stadium grounds. As it happened at the end of each day, there was intense discussion over whether the proceedings would take place again tomorrow. Some had heard they would, others that they most certainly would not.

This scene of confusion seemed to render visible another reality of youth and violence in the African postcolony erased from the BBC billboard in Amsterdam. Underneath the caption which credited the African child soldier with the power to make decisions of international import was the corporate pitch: ‘Making sense of it all, BBC World’. The violent uncertainties of the previous days’ skirmishes and rioting outside the stadium gates, the continuous horse-trading between the CDF command and UN representatives over the acceptance or rejection of young combatants, and now the absurd indeterminability of whether a highly bureaucratized and codified event of national import could be counted on to begin or end according to schedule, make such claims to coherence absurd. The crisis of youth is in part its incoherence.

These narratives of one moment in contemporary Sierra Leone illustrate some of the characteristics of youth and childhood in the African postcolony. Against this background it is easier to see that the state of exteriority, of dependence, of incompleteness and instability is not exclusively that of the child combatant (as so often constructed in the rhetoric of NGOs and journalists), but of childhood and youth itself. They are both threatened and threatening, not unlike beasts in the bush.

Notes

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The completion of the DDR campaign officially brought to an end, in January 2002, a civil war that began in late March 1991. A small contingent of RUF fighters entered eastern Sierra Leone from Liberia with the support of guerrilla leader and later Liberian president Charles Taylor and Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. The RUF achieved a certain international infamy for its attacks on civilian targets, and particularly for its practice of amputating the hands, arms, or legs of non-combatants. The 1996 general elections saw the rise to power of the Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP) and with it the CDF, which took on many of the security functions of a state military. As a result, three principal armed factions—the RUF, the CDF, and the remnants of the official state military—were actively involved in the fighting when a peace agreement was brokered in July 1999. The Lomé Peace Accords established the DDR as the principal vehicle for ensuring the
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long-term stability of the nation; its three phases were intended to remove much of the weaponry from the country, offer some form of immediate assistance to ex-combatants, and finally to facilitate the return of fighters to their communities and to a sustainable economic independence from their military outfits. The DDR proceedings were suspended for a year following the May 8 2000 incident in Freetown in which RUF leader Foday Sankoh’s bodyguards fired into a crowd of demonstrators, temporarily reigniting hostilities and culminating in a massive UN deployment and the intervention of the British military. All together, some 46,000 Sierra Leoneans had passed through the DDR by the time it was completed in 2002.

2 Though it may signify a general chronological age, in much of West Africa the category ‘youth’ is more closely associated with a lack of dependants of one’s own. It implies indenture to one’s elders, defined by higher-ranking lineage or wealth more than actual years, so that even elderly individuals may therefore be considered ‘youths’ in a variety of contexts. See W Murphy, ‘Secret Knowledge as Property and Power in Kpelle Society: Elders Versus Youth’, Africa 50, 1980, pp 193–207. Much of the discussion here is limited to male youth and children, though many of the implications are relevant across gender lines. The kamajors were an almost exclusively male organization, and although some women did disarm under the DDR program (notably RUF ‘camp wives’), none did so during the time I spent at the Bo proceedings.


5 In Mende cosmology, as in much of West Africa, the forces of the outside are always powerful and threatening, a realm of disorder. See M Jackson, ‘Ajala’s Heads’, in Paths Towards a Clearing: Radical Empiricism and Ethnographic Inquiry, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.

6 O R Gordon, ‘The Culture of Work (I). For Di People, October 23 2000, p 2. More than simply equating violence and poverty, Gordon (like so many Sierra Leoneans) draws on the threat posed by the marginal and the excluded—whether that exclusion be from education, employment, or community.


10 As Uts argues, in popular discourse these are frequently political distinctions meant to imply relative agency and apportion blame, ‘child’ implying a lack of agency and ‘youth’ the opposite. See M Utas, Sweet Battlefields: Youth and the Liberian Civil War, Uppsala: Uppsala University Dissertations in Cultural Anthropology, 2003, p 29.


13 This seems to have been more common with the CDF than the RUF. Especially in the early days of the movement, community leaders often pledged youth to the militia. See P Muana, ‘The Kamajor Militia: Civil War, Internal Displacement and the Politics of Counter-Insurgency’, African Development 22(3/4), 1997, pp 77–100. By contrast, the RUF used forcible conscription as one of its primary methods of gaining members. On the tradition of ‘fostering’ children in Sierra Leone, see C Bledsoe, ‘“No Success Without Struggle”’ Social Mobility and Hardship for Foster Children in Sierra Leone’, Man 25, 1990, pp 70–88.


16 UNICEF, ‘Children at both ends of the gun’ www.unicef.org/graca/kidsoldi.htm

For a critique of such approaches to selfhood and the individual in an African context, see Shaw, ‘“Tok Af, Lef Af”’, Piot, Remotely Global; and the essays in M Jackson and I Karp, eds, Personhood and Agency: The Experience of Self and Other in African Cultures, Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990.

J Goodwin, ‘Sierra Leone Is No Place To Be Young,’ The New York Times Magazine, February 14 1999, pp 48–51, p 48. Norman, whose position as head of the CDF was institutionalized when he was named the Deputy Minister of Defense in the SLPP government, has since been charged with war crimes by the Special Court in Sierra Leone. As of this writing, he is in prison awaiting trial for abuses committed by his forces.


See Utas, Sweet Battlefields.

See the discussion in Shaw, ‘“Tok Af, Lef Af”’.


Shaw, ‘“Tok Af, Lef Af”’.

Not all Mende men were, in fact, kamajors. The exact number of militia members is impossible to estimate; the CDF itself claimed 99,000 members, where disarmament figures put the total at somewhere closer to 27,000. Nevertheless, the Mende male as initiated kamajor had become an idealized figure by the late years of the war, and inevitably there were extenuating circumstances which could be used to explain the circumstances of any single non-initiated Mende male. See Ferme and Hoffman, ‘Combattants irreguliers’, on the masculine dynamic of kamajor membership.


Richards, Fighting for the Rainforest, cites a post-Cold War crisis of patrimonialism as one of the key contributors to the conflict. In his comments on Richards’ work, Y Bangura, ‘Understanding the Political and Cultural Dynamics of the Sierra Leone War: A Critique of Paul Richards’s Fighting for the Rainforest’, African Development 22(3/4), pp 117–148, argues that such exclusions are the ‘natural’ operations of the patrimonial state.

Mbembe and Roitman, ‘Figures of the Subject’, p 339.


For more on the politics and limits of these activities as they relate to the kamajors, see Ferme and Hoffman, ‘Combattants irreguliers’.

Richards, Fighting for the Rainforest, p 176; see also Richards, ‘Crisis of Youth?’


