THE MEANING OF A MILITIA: UNDERSTANDING THE CIVIL DEFENCE FORCES OF SIERRA LEONE

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ABSTRACT

This article is an adapted, narrative version of an expert witness report the author wrote for the Defence of one of the accused before the Special Court for Sierra Leone. The case against the Civil Defence Forces militia was predicated in part on the argument that the CDF was a military organization with military-style command and control. Based on a close reading of the Prosecution’s military expert witness report and the author’s ethnographic research with the militia, the article outlines a case for understanding the CDF as the militarization of a social network rather than as a military organization. This framing has implications not only for post-conflict adjudication, but for how we think about and intervene in violent contexts throughout contemporary West Africa.

ON 14 JUNE 2005 COLONEL RICHARD IRON TOOK THE WITNESS STAND in the case against the Civil Defence Forces at the Special Court for Sierra Leone. The Court was trying those accused of bearing ‘greatest responsibility for serious violations of humanitarian law and Sierra Leonean law’ during the latter half of the country’s ten-year war. Iron, a British officer, was in Freetown to answer the Defence’s challenge to a report he wrote on behalf of the Prosecution. Iron’s report did not speak directly to the ultimate issue, the Court’s terminology for the guilt or innocence of the accused. Instead, his report addressed one of the key pillars of the Prosecution case: that the CDF should properly be considered a military organization with a system of military command and control.

At stake was more than simple terminology. By arguing that the CDF was indeed a military outfit (though in his words ‘not a very good one’) Iron mapped a chain of command and a structure of responsibility that would...
make Chief Samuel Hinga Norman, Moinina Fofana, and Allieu Kondewa guilty of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and violations of the laws of war and of the Sierra Leonean state. Their culpability would be rooted in their responsibility as military commanders for the actions of those who served beneath them.

On 9 October 2006 I took the Special Court witness stand to respond to the Prosecution’s challenge of my own expert report. The Defence team for one of the accused (Moinina Fofana) asked me to write what was in essence a counter-argument to Iron’s military expert witness report. Much of my work as an anthropologist studying the CDF and other area militias dealt with exactly the question Col. Iron’s report addressed: how was the CDF structured and what was the relationship between various individuals and organizational components? Like Col. Iron, I was not asked to speak to the ultimate issue, but clearly my findings were directly related. Unlike Col. Iron, I have never thought of the CDF as a conventional army. In my view, the CDF has always been better understood as the militarization of a web of social relations.

What follows is a narrative version of select parts of my expert witness report for the Defence.¹ I present this material for two reasons. First, because I believe the Special Court transcripts and archive will be the primary historical record of the war. Over the more than two years of the CDF trial, the Court amassed an extensive physical record of the militia’s history. Though there are a number of excellent books, articles, reports, and websites dedicated to analyzing or documenting the CDF, no other body collected the sheer volume of data that the Special Court did. A great deal of this material is freely available online. In my view, much of the Prosecution’s interpretation of that material was inaccurate. My report and the current article are therefore meant as a dissenting voice in the CDF archive.

My second reason for circulating the basics of my report is that I find Col. Iron’s frame of analysis to be representative of the ways many observers

¹. The original report consists of two major components. The first outlines the history, role, and structure of the CDF. The second is a detailed reading of the Iron military expert witness report. I combine the two here. Much of what follows is repeated verbatim from the ‘Expert Report on the Kamajors of Sierra Leone,’ though I have changed the formatting and heavily edited and abridged the text. I have included transitions and background material where necessary, and have contextualized the analysis further in terms of its implications for thinking beyond the limited scope of concern to the Special Court. In keeping with the style of the original report, and in the interest of protecting some sources, I have not named most of my interview subjects here. I draw heavily on the transcripts of the Special Court testimony as a way to contextualize both my argument and the Court archives. When doing so, however, I have used only those parts of the testimony that I find credible based on my own field interviews or sources outside the transcripts themselves. I do not know if my original report will be publicly available as part of the Special Court archives, though my assumption has always been that it will be. With the exception of the names of a few of my informants, no part of my report or testimony was closed. As of the time this article was revised for publication, there is no verdict in the CDF trial of Moinina Fofana and Allieu Kondewa. Hinga Norman’s death on 22 February 2007 means that there will be no judgement in his case.
conceptualize militia movements and violence in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa. Col. Iron’s work exemplifies the conventional wisdom about post-Cold War violence and the discourses by which it is understood. This has profound implications not only for post-war prosecutions, but for how international actors – from the current Bush administration to the United Nations, from non-governmental organizations to entrepreneurs – deal with (and in) African conflict zones.

At the time of writing events in the Horn of Africa suggest that how we understand the nature and operation of violence by state, non-state, and extra-state actors will be critical to the direction of any international intervention in African conflicts. Unrest in Guinea and the continued bifurcation of Côte d’Ivoire have serious implications for the entire coastal stretch of West Africa. These events suggest that the call for international peacekeeping forces and emergency NGOs may again come to dominate discussions of the region. The militia movements which continue to gain strength in Nigeria’s oil-producing regions are likely to become even more important players on the political scene of Africa’s most populous nation and on the world stage as the politics of oil becomes more and more complex. Militias have already become a factor in how NGOs, multi-national corporations, and local, regional, and national governments interact in this region. In short, what we understand militia movements like the CDF to be, and how we frame the violence in which they are engaged, are crucial to how we approach interventions of every sort and at every level.

In what follows I briefly contextualize both the CDF as an organization and the military expert witness report. I then look more closely at each of three broad assumptions made in the report, and divide each of these into topical subsections. I conclude by suggesting some of the wider implications of these assumptions for how we understand violence in this region.

It is important to reiterate here that I do not offer this analysis as an apologia for the CDF or as an argument for the innocence of the three CDF members indicted by the Special Court. While I feel personally that Moinina Fofana (with whose case I was directly involved) should not have been charged under the terms of the Special Court, my role with the Court was to assist in understanding the dynamics of the movement. I was not asked to speak directly to questions of culpability. I do not do so here, either.

*The Civil Defence Forces (CDF) of Sierra Leone*

By one account, the term CDF originated in Monrovia among a group of expatriate Sierra Leoneans producing propaganda for the exiled Sierra
Leone People’s Party (SLPP) during the 1997–8 interregnum. A compromise term meant to invoke both an armed mission and a commitment to democratic processes, ‘Civil Defence Forces’ served as an umbrella term for disparate militias previously referred to by ethnically coded titles: among them the Kuranko tamaboro, the Temne gbethis and kapras, and the Kono donsos.

By far the largest of these forces were the Mende kamajoisia, or, in its standard Anglicized form, the kamajors. Prior to the war, the Mende term referred to specialized hunters empowered to use both firearms and occult ‘medicines’ [hale] in the pursuit of big game and, more importantly, the various animal, human, and extra-human forces of the forest that threaten rural villages. In Mende mythology, the kamajors’ very identity is predicated on the protection of villages. By the mid-1990s the specialized, exclusively male figures became both the symbolic and material centre of community defence mobilizations throughout south-east Sierra Leone when it became clear that the state military was largely unable or unwilling to defeat the rebel forces of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF).

Under the direction of key figures like the Mende nationalist academic Dr Alpha Lavalie and the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) Secretary of State East, Lieutenant Tom Nyuma, various loosely organized community defence efforts adopted the kamajor title. With the election in 1996 of the Mende-dominated SLPP, these forces gained a greater degree of organizational coherence. The Regent Chief of Jiama-Bongor chiefdom, Sam Hinga Norman, became a key figure in the kamajor movement and was appointed the SLPP’s Deputy Minister of Defence. The kamajors were widely perceived (most notably by the Sierra Leone Army) to be the SLPP government’s de facto security force. The military overthrow of the SLPP in May 1997 brought the kamajors and other irregular forces into direct and open conflict with the army. Working with the Nigerian-led ECOMOG

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2. This version of the origins of the term CDF comes from the author’s interviews in Freetown and Monrovia with individuals who claimed to have been part of the deliberations setting up the CDF. This account of the origins of the term are at odds with some of the Special Court testimony, notably that of Hinga Norman. See Norman’s testimony on 26 January 2006, p. 58.


troops, these irregular forces (fighting under the banner of the CDF) helped to reinstate the SLPP by March of 1998. The CDF remained officially constituted until the war was declared over in January 2002, with combatants identifying themselves both as members of the umbrella CDF organization and as members of more localized units (kamajors, gbethis, donsos, etcetera and the various subsets of these collectives).

On 7 March 2003, the Special Court for Sierra Leone announced the indictment and arrest of Sam Hinga Norman, who after elections in 2002 had been reappointed as the SLPP’s Minister of Interior Affairs. Soon after, two other high-profile CDF members were arrested and indicted by the Court: Allieu Kondewa, known as the CDF’s High Priest, and Moinina Fofana, the CDF Director of War.

For the most part, charges in the CDF case depended on the argument that Norman, Fofana and Kondewa bore command responsibility for the activities of members of the CDF. Command responsibility has been a central tenet of post-Second World War war crimes tribunals, and the language of the Special Court indictment and the use of the military expert report attempt to establish that such control is based on military conceptions of authority. Iron writes in his report that he was tasked to ‘assist in the determination of the extent to which the CDF and other organization in the Sierra Leone War were military organizations with military command and control.” In the indictment itself, ‘individual criminal responsibility’ for the three men is linked to their positions within the organization, where they ‘individually or in concert, exercised authority, command, and control over all subordinate members of the CDF.’ The description of Hinga Norman in the indictment states that:

he was the principal force in establishing, organizing, providing logistical support, and promoting the CDF. He was also the leader and Commander of the Kamajors and as such had de jure and de facto command and control over the activities and operations of the Kamajors.  

In the same vein, Moinina Fofana is described as ‘leader of the CDF in the absence of Samuel Hinga Norman and was regarded as the second in command.” Central to command responsibility is the contention that the three accused did or should have known what their subordinates were doing in the field, and could and should have put a stop to abuses by CDF forces. As the indictment puts it:

7. Ibid., p. 3.
8. Ibid., p. 4.
Each Accused is responsible for the criminal acts of his subordinates in that he knew or had reason to know that the subordinate was about to commit such acts or had done so and each Accused failed to take the necessary and reasonable measures to prevent such acts or to punish the perpetrators thereof.\(^9\)

The indictment specifies eight ‘counts’ including murder, violence to life, looting and burning, and use of child soldiers. Though the mandate of the Special Court covered alleged crimes from as early as November 1996, the majority of the incidents presented at the CDF trial occurred during the period of the SLPP exile (May 1997 to March 1998).

**Reading the report**

Like a number of other European and North American governments, the United Kingdom donated not only money but personnel to the Special Court for Sierra Leone. Among these was Col. Richard Iron. As an expert witness for the Prosecution, Iron was asked to prepare a report in each of the three cases against the CDF, RUF and AFRC.\(^10\) The purpose of these reports was in each instance to establish whether the faction in question was in fact a military organization.

Iron wrote his CDF report based on interviews with seven Prosecution witnesses who were reasonably highly placed within the CDF. Over the course of fourteen days, Iron ‘walked the ground’\(^11\) with participants involved in a series of attacks on the towns of Bo, Koribundu and some of the surrounding villages.

My own expert witness report for the Fofana Defence and my testimony before the Court took issue with Col. Iron’s military expert witness report on methodological, theoretical and empirical grounds. Leaving aside the methodological considerations, there are three broad theoretical and empirical arguments which I find problematic in the Iron report. Those three points can be summarized as follows:

1. War is an event unlike any other.
2. Unless it is aimless or anarchic, mass violence requires military organization.
3. The fighting which occurred during the so-called ‘Bo/Koribundu campaign’ was representative of the activities and organization of the CDF during the period covered by the Special Court indictment.

\(^10\) The AFRC (Armed Forces Revolutionary Council) was the name adopted by the military junta when it took power in 1997. Although he apparently wrote reports for the RUF and the AFRC, only the report on the CDF was actually used by the Prosecution.
All three of these claims have both conceptual and empirical dimensions. They are important not simply for the role they (via Iron’s report) played in the prosecution of the three CDF accused, but for how they reflect a more generalized discursive framing of the activities of the CDF and of other regional militias. The fact that they do not match the particulars of the CDF’s activities suggests why it has been so difficult to understand the conflict and why it has been so difficult to craft meaningful interventions. I take each of these three points in turn.

**War is an event unlike any other: Understanding the local**

In a section of his report detailing the criteria by which he defines a military organization, Col. Iron writes the following:

> Note that the nature of conflict is regardless of the type of conflict. General war and insurgency, whether today or two thousand years ago, have more in common with each other than any other kind of non-warlike activity. It should be no surprise, therefore, that military organizations tend to have recognizable hierarchies and structures (original emphasis).\(^{12}\)

On the one hand this is a relatively minor point used to establish Iron’s qualification to speak to a conflict about which he had little prior knowledge. Embedded within it, however, is a more profound claim. That claim is that war is, in essence, an ahistorical phenomenon. Its most important elements transcend local specificity. Conflict generates its own trans-historical and trans-locational culture, history, habitus, and social structure. There is a core of ‘recognizable hierarchies and structures’ that link fighting factions and their operations across contexts and which differentiate them from all non-warlike sodalities or socio-political processes. The specific requirements of mass violence necessitate disciplinary, command, and communication structures that develop along similar lines in any military outfit. As a result, one can understand many of the activities of the CDF with reference to Northern Ireland’s Provisional IRA, the Polish resistance in the Second World War, or the anti-colonial struggles of ZIPRA in the Rhodesian/Zimbabwean conflict. Indeed, each of these examples is used by Iron in his report.

Iron’s positing of war and its agents as outside of historical, geographic, or cultural contexts is particularly stark, but it is by no means unusual. David Francis and his co-contributors in a recent volume on militias in Africa begin by calling for a ‘context specific’ Second Generation of thinking on militias.\(^{13}\) Their intervention is aimed at the fixed, universal definition of a

12. Ibid., part B2.3.
militia as ‘a kind of private army whose members are enrolled along military lines, are subjected to the same discipline as soldiers, like them wearing uniforms and badges, ready like them to meet the enemy with weapons in physical combat.’ Military historian and occasional Bush administration adviser Victor Davis Hanson routinely draws direct analogies between battles from conflicts as disparate as the Peloponnesian War, the US Civil War, and the Second World War, and compares fighting forces from a range of geographic and historical contexts. As with Iron’s military expert report, these comparisons exceed the level of tactical analysis and are meant instead to illuminate the trans-historical nature of war, fighting forces, and superior forms of military organization. And in a particularly poignant example of the supposed timelessness of military knowledge, the US Marine Corps’s primary text on counter-insurgency a year into the occupation of Iraq was the *Marine Corps Small Wars Manual*, a text written in 1940 based on the US interventions in Central America.

The history of the anthropology of war has, however, been a history of refuting exactly this kind of decontextualized reading of communal violence. As Paul Richards and others have recently pointed out, one of the greatest weaknesses in much of the analytics of violence is the unwillingness of observers to locate their understandings of conflict within specific local contexts and to recognize war as one social process among others. At the very least this suggests that a better place than the Second World War to look for insights into the particularities of the Sierra Leone war would be other meaningful local dynamics within Sierra Leone and the region.

*The meaning of ‘kamajor’*

The very term ‘kamajor’ is a case in point. Even after the CDF moniker came into wide use, the most important identificatory titles for the majority of combatants remained those which predated the war (kamajor, *gbethi*, *donso*, or one of the subsets of these terms). For combatants these terms located their activities within a conceptual field of rights, responsibilities,
and obligations that predate the war. The kamajors’ very identity is predicated on the protection of villages. Throughout the war the name carried with it the same connotations of community defence, entitlement to carry firearms, and the possession of secret ‘medicines’ (hale) that was embodied in the pre-war use of the term. This is not to say that kamajors did not also intend to benefit personally from their initiation into the movement. Yet it is not contradictory to say that they simultaneously maintained a sense of obligation to the community. This is expressed in part in the common kamajor slogan kama\(\text{ja\(\text{r} \text{ baa voteh}. \) ‘Do not turn’ or ‘do not turn back’ was an injunction against retreat from the battlefield, but it was also a moral command not to betray the community one had been initiated to defend. The implicit contrast here was to the sobels, those who had been charged with defending the community but had instead allied themselves with its enemies for personal gain. In war songs, battlefield chants, and ritual settings, kama\(\text{r} \text{ baa voteh} \) was repeated as a way to express to themselves and to others that one of the ‘laws’ of the society was that a kamajor’s responsibility to the community remained central to his identity.

In Iton’s formulation, one of the principal characteristics that sets a military organization apart is its need to implement structures to discipline the uses of violence. Yet the figure of the kamajor suggests that there may not be such a clear distinction between the disciplinary apparatus for violence and other meaningful non-military social roles of combatants. Unlike, for example, the RUF, combatants with the CDF did not necessarily see themselves as outsiders to their social landscape. This has a number of potential consequences. For example, Amos Sawyer has suggested that regional social institutions like the Poro men’s ‘society’ need to be re-animated as governing structures. In contexts where the exercise of violence becomes synonymous with the demands of citizenship, adult manhood, or economic survival (all of which were true of the kamajors), these kinds of non-military, but temporarily militarized social institutions are a more logical entry point for both understanding and engaging the sodalities which constitute the conflict zone.

Local politics

Paying attention to pre-war social histories and political dynamics paints a picture of the war in Sierra Leone as the conglomerate of many more localized conflicts. Obviously this is true to some extent of any war – a

19. Sobel is a colloquialism for soldier/rebel, or members of the armed forces who colluded with or impersonated RUF fighters and preyed on rural communities.
war is comprised of individual encounters. But this localization is especially pronounced in conflicts in the Mano River region, where politics at the district, chiefdom, and town levels has a much greater impact on the average person’s daily existence than do events at the national level.

The chieftaincy system in Sierra Leone concentrates a great deal of power at the local level. The result is often bitter, violent feuds between individuals, families, and even villages over ascendency to local office. These political contests tend to preoccupy people outside the capital more than do national campaigns. The relationship between Hinga Norman and elders in Koribundu is a case in point, illustrating the extent to which chieftain politics serves as the rubric for understanding even national events. Koribundu is the seat of the Jiama chiefdom which was amalgamated with Bongor chiefdom under Chief B. A. Foday Kai, Hinga Norman’s predecessor. The seat of Bongor chiefdom, Telu, was made the seat of the joint Jiama-Bongor chiefdom, a move which angered some elders in Koribundu. When Chief Sam Hinga Norman became Regent Chief of Jiama-Bongor, he elected to keep Telu as the chiefdom seat. Since that time, there have been hostilities between Norman and some community members in Koribundu, a point raised by Hinga Norman in his testimony before the Court. Many within the CDF felt that the Prosecution witnesses from the southern region who testified about the Koribundu campaign were playing out personal animosities held towards Norman for privileging Telu as the chiefdom seat. Whether or not such partisanship was at the heart of witnesses’ testimonies is somewhat beside the point for my purposes here. More important is how it suggests narratives of national healing, accountability, or intervention are always subject to more localized reinterpretation.

Outside the Court, narratives of the war are generally made up of exactly these kinds of references to smaller-scale conflicts. The Ndogboyosoi rebellion is only the most commented on of a number of examples. Ndogboyosoi was a series of mid-1980s conflicts between APC and SLPP strongmen in the Pujehun District, motivated both by party politics and (allegedly) con-
control over trade routes. The RUF found some initial support in the Pujehun region by exploiting the factionalism and resentment still associated with Ndogboyosoi. This led many people in the region, both combatants and observers, to conclude that the RUF invasion was simply an extension of the Ndogboyosoi conflict. In an excerpt from an interview with a combatant who joined ULIMO in 1992 to fight the RUF on the Liberian border in Pujehun, Paul Richards records the following relevant exchange:

Question: ‘Why did lots of Pujehun people join the war?’
Answer: ‘The earlier Ndogboyosoi War made them join.’

Question: ‘Why?’
Answer: ‘Because lots of people were killed, and the others were unhappy. This way they could gain revenge on their enemies.’

As Lansana Gberie has pointed out, even the Chief of Staff of the Sierra Leone Army declared in 1993 that the RUF invasion was an extension of Ndogboyosoi.

The examples which Col. Iron employs as qualitative equals to the CDF (the IRA, ZIPLA, and the Second World War national resistance movements) are invariably nationalist movements which privilege the future of the state as their primary objects and constitute their *raison d’etre* as a military force. By contrast, the localization of violence in Sierra Leone would suggest that this kind of pan-organizational, national coherence is at best highly unlikely.

**Decentralization**

There is no doubt that as it grew over time, the kamajors organization that became the CDF changed dramatically. The organization’s relationship to its founding figures and even its community emphasis shifted. So did its relationship to the SLPP. Iron’s military expert report traces one version of this trajectory. In it he sees a centralized, military command structure


superceding the eroding mechanisms for controlling violence. He claims that the movement went from one of tight, local territorial control to a more centralized, military command structure. In his report and in his testimony, Col. Iron implies that over time the chiefs’ ebbing influence generated a kind of vacuum which needed to be filled by a military authority. ‘After the coup,’ he argues:

they were driven from many of their traditional areas; the chiefdom structure of the CDF broke down; they were under attack from the AFRC and RUF, who, at this stage, were much stronger than the CDF. So the CDF leadership recognized that they must first preserve their organization and then build up strength so as then subsequently to counterattack against junta forces. 26

This analysis misrepresents both ‘phases’ in the life of the militia. In historical accounts of the mobilization of the kamajors it is clear that the control of local chiefs was never dependent on them being resident in their ‘traditional areas’. In his early account of the kamajors, for example, Patrick Muana writes that the self-Defence militias were organized in ‘squalid refugee camps situated around the safe urban enclaves of Bo, Kenema and Makeni’. 27 A similar point is made by the anthropologist Doug Henry 28 in describing the origins of the kamajors around Kenema, and by the interviews Krijn Peters and Paul Richards 29 conducted with ex-combatants.

Testimony by both Prosecution and Defence witnesses who were CDF members also points toward the diasporic origins of the movement. For example, in his Special Court testimony, the Prosecution witness Albert Nallo states:

**Q:** Mr Witness, in your evidence-in-chief you said that each chiefdom to the south, so far as you knew, they had their own local hunters. Is that correct? Each chiefdom had local hunters?

**A:** Yes, My Lord. That does not necessarily mean you will be initiated in your chiefdom. You were born in Moyamba and your Paramount Chief was in Bo, you were initiated in Bo because the people were coming from afar [were dislocated]. 30

In short, there was never a time when ‘local’ (in this case, chiefdom) control over the kamajors broke down as a result of their displacement from

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territories they controlled. Recruitment into the kamajors occurred while many chiefs and combatants were already displaced. The instabilities of the region did indeed have profound ramifications. But it is too big a leap to equate these dislocations with a ‘vacuum’ of leadership that needed to be (and could only be) filled by a centralized military structure. Iron’s conceptualization of social structures is antiquated; sociality is not something that can be present or absent. Social relationships may be reconfigured profoundly in wartime but they do not simply deteriorate or break, only to be replaced by a universal military structure. This is particularly important for how we think about the second assumption in the military expert report.

Violence requires a military organization: Patrons and commanders

The second assumption underlying the military expert witness report is derivative of the first. The report argues that the suspension of normal social functioning in wartime produces two possible results: a state of aimless violence, chaotic and anarchic, or the erection (intentional or organic) of military structures. ‘Military organization,’ Iron writes, ‘therefore exists in any conflict waged between recognizable groups; otherwise it is simply a state of aimless violence.’

Patronage

Certainly the CDF did not operate in a state of aimless violence. But neither was it a military organization. Its principle organizational logic was one that organizes many spheres of social, political and economic life throughout sub-Saharan Africa: relations of patronage. What this means in practical terms for people living in the region is that social networks are crucial to everything from employment opportunities to ritual initiations to individual identity. Social action needs to be understood not in terms of individual activities but as the mobilization of social networks. ‘People here,’ writes the anthropologist Charles Piot, referring to West Africa generally, ‘do not “have” relations; they “are” relations.’ The social being of an individual is measured by the people with whom one has relations of dependence or for whom one acts as a patron. The capacity to maintain a social network (a demonstrable ‘wealth in people’) is the mark of status.

In Mende the concept is expressed, for example, in terms such as ‘standing for’ others in the community (to ‘stand for them’ or ‘be for them,’ numui

As the anthropologist Mariane Ferme writes in her ethnography of Mende social practices, ‘The crucial point, then, was that everyone must be accounted for by someone else – that everyone must be linked in a relationship of patronage or clientship.’ The person who stands for someone else is responsible for overseeing his or her behavior within a community and providing for his or her basic needs. In other words, for acting as a patron. In return, the patron can expect the performance of favours, a share of any wealth that the dependent or client might accumulate, and a level of respect, support, and privilege.

Patronage logic was embedded in the way the CDF employed terms associated with purely military organizations, terms such as ‘commander’. For a supposed military organization, the CDF had an overwhelming number of ‘commanders’ – and a concomitant paucity of privates or non-officer ranks. In my experience working with the CDF, a number of individuals claimed the title of ‘battalion commander’, ‘company commander’, or ‘platoon commander’, but these titles were not used systematically and did not automatically correspond to a list of duties or a fixed number of subordinate personnel. More often than not they were issued as rewards. Changes in rank did not necessarily signify a change in command. This suggests more than simply that the CDF ‘was just not a very good [military organization]’. It illustrates, rather, that the hierarchy of the CDF functioned according to a different system, one rooted in local understandings of patronage and responsibility.

A former kamajor put the relationship in the explicitly patrimonial terms common to patronage relations by drawing a familial connection between commanders and their dependents: ‘The same way I give [orders] to my son, I can give them to [my fighters].’

As a patron, a “commander” would be responsible for his “clients” in ways not defined by military necessity or protocol. In addition to food, shelter, weapons and ammunition, a patron/commander would be a resource in family emergencies or an arbiter for disputes among equals. He would be expected to “stand for” those beneath him in cases where allegations were made by local authorities or others within the movement. In return, a patron/commander’s dependents would be expected to offer security for the “big man”, share a portion of whatever wealth they might accumulate and tend to his needs as necessary.

**Commanders**

There are two simple illustrations of the primacy of patronage over purely military style command. First is the fact that so many “commanders” and
other titled people within the CDF had no military experience whatsoever, but had been important or respected community members prior to the war. Their patron status, and their networks of dependence (their ‘wealth in people’) simply continued from peacetime into wartime. This was certainly the case with the majority of members of the Base Zero War Council, few if any of whom had a military background. In his testimony before the Court, for example, Samuel Hinga Norman notes that Alhaji Daramy Rogers ‘could be a useful member [of the War Council] at Base Zero’ because he was ‘an Alhaji and a politician’. In the same vein, Brima Jolu Kenneh Sei in Panguma, one of the key figures in efforts to retake Tongo during the junta period, was voted a commander by the chiefs and town council because he was section chief of one of Panguma’s seven sections and therefore considered an ‘upstanding citizen’. Prior to this, he had no military background or training. This was also true of Moinina Fofana (the eventual Director of War), who had no military experience but had achieved a degree of status as a local businessman and benefactor for internally displaced persons. After 1995 Fofana was sometimes described as a Chief Kamajor, having assisted in the supply of food to refugees and combatants. Chief Kamajor was an honorific title sometimes given to Paramount Chiefs and other important persons; it connoted no specific duties or responsibilities and was not used systematically.

There were no fixed definitions attached to specific ranks that codified the duties, obligations or spheres of command for specific positions. Terms like ‘adjutant’, ‘platoon commander’, or ‘battalion commander’ could mean different things in different parts of the organization or at different times in its history. Most important, it could mean different things based on who held the position. This is exactly the opposite of how such titles work in a strictly military organization, where rank implies fixed roles regardless of the individuals who fill them. Most combatants understood the use of these titles as a way to “map” patronage networks.

Take the use of the term “adjutant”. This was a relatively common title that Eddie Massalley, a commander in Pujehun, gave to combatants with a small number of clients/dependents and to individuals who could read and write and were therefore useful organizers. “Adjutant” is indeed a rank in a number of professional militaries, with various duties depending on the service in question. Yet when asked what duties an adjutant was intended

37. This is a case I have documented in interviews in 2001 and 2006 with key figures in the Panguma area. The information here and in my further discussion of this case below is drawn from these interviews.
38. For example, Defence witness Ishmael Koroma notes that a local businessman in Blama was a ‘Kamasoi chief’. See testimony from 23 February 2006, p. 43, lines 5–10. The use of the term Chief Kamajor for important local individuals was also mentioned in various of the author’s field interviews.
to perform, one of Massalley’s former “adjutants” said he had no idea what the term meant or what duties it implied. Massalley, he said, used to give out titles liberally and named a number of combatants as his “adjutants”. Nevertheless, because Massalley had given it to him, it became a nickname by which everyone at Bo Waterside knew him.\(^{39}\)

The fact that these titles did not correspond to designated community roles and did not imply for most people a fixed set of responsibilities also made them subject to a great deal of manipulation. Some combatants referred to “419” claims (after the Nigerian Internet banking scams), a process whereby combatants would claim a certain rank or title for themselves in the hopes of making the claim into reality. Titles in these cases were used to express an aspiration rather than an actual rank. One of the most notorious “generals” in the Bo area, a former Special Security Division officer under the APC, was widely said to have nominated himself to be a CDF general.\(^{40}\) His “rank” became a reality because no one dared challenge him and he was able to cultivate clients/dependents by spreading around the resources he accumulated during the war.

Further illustrating the primacy of the patronage network was the relative frequency with which captured RUF combatants were integrated into the CDF and established long-term, trusting ties with their new CDF commanders. A number of CDF fighters\(^{41}\) were former RUF combatants who switched sides, either voluntarily or when captured by the CDF. To be accepted within the CDF, a former RUF fighter required someone to “stand for” him – to vouch for him as a person worthy of joining the society and as someone for whom the new patron would be responsible. Describing a situation in which he “stood for” a captured RUF combatant, one former kamajor from Bo described how to this day the captured individual comes to visit him and pays him respect as a social elder: ‘He is always my boy. He’s just like my junior brother now. After I did that for him, his family took me to be part of them.’\(^{42}\) The upshot of the primacy of the patronage network is that, for most combatants, the person of most import was their immediate patron, rather than persons who might be of superior ‘rank’ but to whom they had little if any direct contact.

\(^{39}\) Author interview, 15 April 2006, Kenema, Sierra Leone.

\(^{40}\) In his testimony before the Special Court, Albert Nallo makes reference to this individual and his claims to the title of general. See testimony of Albert Nallo, 10 March 2005, pp. 62–4. This was a well-known case among CDF members in the Bo region. I have written elsewhere about the performative dimensions of this individual’s claims to authority. See Danny Hoffman, ‘Like beasts in the bush: synonyms of childhood and youth in Sierra Leone’, Postcolonial Studies 63, 1 (2003), pp. 295–308.

\(^{41}\) There is no way to establish exact numbers, but in the course of my own research I have encountered enough such stories to confirm that it was a frequent occurrence.

\(^{42}\) Author interview, 13 April 2006, Bo, Sierra Leone.
Reconfiguring the web of relations

At the same time, for many young people, the war offered a way to bypass the existing pathways by which one established patronage networks of one’s own. Young men who were referred to as “commanders” at various levels claimed to have achieved that rank as a result of distinguishing themselves through their hard work, bravery and trustworthiness. These are individuals who were able to challenge the standard routes by which young men achieved status (paying one’s dues to a patron until reaching a certain age, marital status, or inheritance worthy of a “big man”) by finding an alternative: attracting clients/dependents by establishing effectiveness on the battlefront. Because the patronage system which dominated the CDF overlapped so extensively with the patronage networks that operated prior to the CDF, this often meant that young commanders acted independent of more senior men if by doing so they could establish the means by which to secure client/dependents of their own.

The case of Brima Sei at Panguma is instructive here. A relatively junior person, Musa Junisa, was able to establish himself ahead of the commander at Panguma, Brima Sei, by securing ammunition from CDF patrons at two locations, Base One and Base Zero (see below). When the junta took power in 1997, kamajors at Panguma had enough weapons but not enough artillery to fight the AFRC/RUF in the Panguma and Tongo areas. Musa Junisa and a few other fighters went first to Gendema, where they were given approximately a dozen RPGs. They then proceeded to Base Zero, where they were given cartridges for AK-47s and G3 rifles. Returning to Panguma, Junisa was able to displace Brima Sei as commander in part through his ability to control this ammunition and therefore create a network of dependents. From February of 1998 his new authority allowed him to claim the title of Director of Operations, Eastern Region.

Within the CDF various individuals used the provision of weapons as a means by which to garner and maintain support. Important Mende political figures such as Daramay Rogers, George Jambawai, and Albert Nallo all travelled to CDF-held areas and dispensed weapons and ammunition. These activities should not simply be seen as carrying out duties attached to rank; rather, they were efforts to obtain ‘clients’ and establish patronage relationships in a highly competitive and diffuse field. Where a supply officer of a certain rank in the British military may be charged with distributing logistics, within the CDF an individual would as likely be considered an “officer” (a person of importance or rank) by first having demonstrated his ability to procure and distribute logistic supplies.

43. This is a theme repeated in almost every interview the author has had with CDF commanders at all levels.
In short, the social logics which pre-dated the war remained salient for the CDF during the war. Rather than a military organization, the CDF is better thought of as the militarization of that dominant logic, or the militarization of a particular network of social relations. The organization did not simply come into being out of the necessity to control the violence around it and in the absence of other social structures. Instead it emerged from a conjunction of patronage demands and opportunities reconstituted by the contingencies of the Sierra Leone war-scape.

Kamajor mythology and the Koribundu/Bo campaign

The third assumption underlying the military expert witness report is that the efforts by the CDF during the junta period to retake Koribundu and Bo are representative of the entirety of CDF activities. This is the most empirically grounded claim in the report, though it, too, entails a theoretical proposition. Because the CDF is assumed to operate according to a universal military structural logic, understanding how it functioned in any given locale would suggest a template for how it functioned elsewhere in the country. What I wish to do here is trace some of the specificities at work in the Koribundu/Bo fighting to suggest that these are not, in fact, representative of how the CDF operated nationally. There were social, political, and logistical factors that made Bo and Koribundu unique. It is important to note, however, that this misreading is not simply a fault of the military expert witness report. The internal politics of the CDF generated a narrative which privileged the activities of the southern region. In the “mythology” of the CDF, the operations of kamajors at Base Zero in the Bonthe District were presumed to be synonymous with the organization as a whole.

The myth of Mende-ness

The kamajor faction of the CDF has quite rightly been associated in the scholarly and popular literature on the war in Sierra Leone with the Mende ethnic group of the south-east. While accurate, what this tends to occlude is the significant role played in the CDF’s success by Liberians and individuals of mixed Liberian/Sierra Leonean heritage. In part this is because the figure of the kamajor is romanticized as a uniquely Mende figure with paramount importance to Mende identity. Hinga Norman illustrates this romanticization when he says of the kamajors in his Special Court testimony:

My Lords, in this country Kamajors are age old people. They had existed before my own great-grandfather. There is no issue of selecting who to become a Kamajor or
who not to become a Kamajor. They’re here permanently. They were, they are, they will continue to be.44

This romanticism has real empirical consequences; namely, the minimization of the role played by ULIMO45 forces and the Special Forces group which operated out of Base One at Gendema on the Liberian border and in close coordination with ECOMOG.

A large number of Liberians or mixed-parentage youths with combat experience in Liberia joined the CDF. As noted in the No Peace Without Justice ‘Sierra Leone Conflict Mapping Report’, former ULIMO fighters assisted the kamajors throughout 1997 and 1998.46 Few if any of these combatants were at Base Zero. The majority were recruited in Liberia or from Liberian refugee camps in Sierra Leone. They operated initially from Base One, which was easily accessible from the Liberian capital. Unlike most CDF kamajors, many of these veterans had been trained in the use of heavier weapons – RPGs, mortars, etc. They were more closely allied to ECOMOG, especially the late Maxwell Khobe. There was, for example, a company of 70–100 men who operated as a Special Forces unit from Base One throughout the junta period under the command of a former ULIMO fighter. Expatriate Sierra Leoneans living in Monrovia were actively recruiting Sierra Leonean and Liberian veterans to fight on the Sierra Leone side of the border. Highly mobile, these fighters could be deployed easily wherever needed. For example, they played an instrumental role in the capture of Freetown from the AFRC/RUF and during the 6 January 1999 Freetown invasion.47 They were also directly involved in the capture of Zimmi and other parts of Pujehun, and operated throughout Kenema, Kono, and Kailahun districts. Informants in and around Bo stated that when they heard about the advances of loyal troops opposed to the AFRC, they heard first about joint ECOMOG/CDF movements coming in from Gendema and the Liberian border (Base One) rather than from Base Zero in the south.

A recent Human Right Watch report underscores the importance of such ‘regional warriors’ to the various phases of the war that has spread from Liberia to Sierra Leone, Guinea, and now Côte d’Ivoire.48 They are a floating population of combatants, many of whom began fighting as children

44. Testimony of Samuel Hinga Norman, 2 February 2006, p. 27, lines 20–4.
45. The United Liberian Movement for Democracy, or ULIMO, formed in Sierra Leone in 1991. ULIMO forces were primarily Mandingoes and Krahs of Liberian descent opposed to Charles Taylor. ULIMO is discussed in the testimony of Defence witness Albert Demby, 10 February 2006, p. 5, lines 7–12.
47. The Brookfields Hotel was the base of operations for many of these combatants.
during Charles Taylor’s first war in Liberia. Their allegiances tend to be to local warlords able to provide them with a cash payout, logistic support, and the opportunity for self enrichment. In short, they are not necessarily beholden to a central command structure, and are often both more highly trained and more violent than their allies in the various factions.

Base one and base zero

In the wake of the May 1997 coup, Eddie Massalley called for all loyal troops, including irregular militias, to assemble at Gendema/Bo Waterside.\(^{49}\) This was the main concentration of kamajor and other combatants until the establishment of Base Zero at Talia in September 1997. Base Zero at that point became a more public face for the CDF and its efforts to restore the government, not least because Hinga Norman operated there and because a number of local and foreign journalists were brought to Base Zero to witness the CDF efforts. This public relations savvy may be one of the reasons why Col. Richard Iron incorrectly concludes that the mobilization at Gendema/Bo Waterside (sometimes referred to as Base One) was temporary and did not last beyond the establishment of Base Zero at Talia. In fact, for many groups of combatants in the field, Base One and Base Zero were primarily locations to which one could travel or send delegates in order to ask for supplies. These journeys are best thought of in terms of patronage networks: those at Base Zero and Base One had access to material that could help local commanders solidify their patronage networks or help those who hoped to become important commanders develop their own.

This ability to dispense material support, rather than to coordinate battlefront activity, made Base Zero and Base One important for the CDF as a whole. The case of the Panguma kamajors outlined above is once again illustrative. Local units in need of supplies would send delegates to one location (usually the closest) to ask for matériel. If it could not be secured at one location, a delegation would then be sent to the other. The RPGs which Musa Junisa received from Base One were clearly insufficient to re-take Tongo or hold Panguma, and so he travelled to Base Zero with the same request.

The success of Hinga Norman and other CDF notables in popularizing Base Zero as the CDF headquarters raised the visibility of the organization’s activities in the region. This hardly makes these activities representative. For example, Hinga Norman’s relationship with the residents of Koribundu, described above, makes it a questionable location to be used as a template for all CDF activity. Similarly Bo occupies a rather unique posi-

\(^{49}\) Gendema is on the Sierra Leone side of the border, and Bo Waterside or Bo Njala is on the Liberia side. The Mano River Bridge connects the two. Gendema is also sometimes spelled Njendema or Jendema.
tion within the context of the war in Sierra Leone. As the nation’s second largest city, it was a symbolically important target for all factions. The war in Sierra Leone was fought in large measure through spectacular demonstrations meant to convince the enemy of one’s numbers, strength, and ferocity – regardless of the reality of one’s actual military capability.\textsuperscript{50} Capturing Bo is not the military equivalent of capturing even a town of moderate size, let alone a small village or hamlet. Bo is doubly important for the Mendes who made up the vast majority of the CDF as it is the major urban centre in the Mende-dominated south-east.

\textit{Conclusion: Wider implications}

My reading of the military expert report in the CDF prosecution was occasioned by a specific historical circumstance – serving as an expert Defence witness for the Special Court. My own report was therefore structured by a certain juridical framework and was meant to address a limited scope of historical questions.

Nevertheless, the analysis presented in that report has wider implications for how we understand the nature and function of the CDF, the organization of African militias in general, and, perhaps most important, the difficulties of intervening in post-Cold War conflicts in this region. The military expert witness report against which much of my own analysis is framed reflects a range of common assumptions. Col. Iron’s approach to contemporary African violence is consistent with how observers across spheres and disciplines approach war on the continent. By way of conclusion, I trace some of the implications of these misreadings here.

The first and most obvious point is that we cannot continue to see war and mass violence as the antithesis of ‘normal’ social functions. The supposition that war is a universal, ahistorical phenomenon generates responses that are increasingly mismatched to the realities of contemporary conflict. Elsewhere I have suggested that the international apparatus of emergency assistance has become part of the logic of violence in the Mano River region.\textsuperscript{51} This is a consequence, at least in part, of the predictability of international responses to humanitarian crises and the reduction of crisis situations to a


formulaic programme of managing the bare life of civilian populations.\textsuperscript{52} Because war is defined by the absence of routine social structures and because it is thought to generate its own unique (military) habitus, we tend to miss the ways in which wartime and peacetime processes are increasingly indistinguishable.\textsuperscript{53}

For example, the repeated failures of the various Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) campaigns in the region (Sierra Leone, Liberia, and the promised DDR in Côte d’Ivoire) can be traced in part to the one-dimensional approach taken toward combatants. In each case the DDR campaign has been structured around the presumption that the various armed factions function as military organizations which decommissioning weapons would effectively terminate. The cash and jobs training benefits which have been increased with each successive DDR are meant to allow ex-combatants to leave behind the military structures in which they operate and resume life in the ‘normal’ social landscape reconstituted by the end of war.

What this framework fails to recognize is that the patronage networks which dominate everyday existence have not been replaced in wartime, they have simply become militarized. Ex-combatants remain dependent on their commanders even after disarmament. In both Sierra Leone and Liberia, combatants were required to give up most of the DDR benefits to their patrons/commanders to even secure the opportunity to participate in DDR proceedings. This served to solidify the patron/client relation even further and effectively erased the fresh start that disarmament was supposed to entail.\textsuperscript{54} Ironically, disarmament campaigns have helped to create a class of highly mobile young men who can be “deployed” to the various disarmament proceedings by their patrons in an effort to capitalize on the ever-increasing benefits packages.

A second consequence of assuming that war marks the end of routine sociality and the rise of purely military organizations is the possibility of misrecognizing those who might be in a position to wield influence over militia combatants. On the one hand, a network of rural Mende notables with no direct military role or official rank exerted a great deal of influence over the kamajors and CDF at various points in time and geographical location.\textsuperscript{55} These are individuals who are all but invisible within a military chain of command framework and who might not be obvious interlocutors if the presumption is that military commanders are those best positioned

\textsuperscript{52} For just one of the many recent writings related to this point, see Peter Redfield, ‘Doctors, borders and life in crisis’, \textit{Cultural Anthropology} 20, 3 (2005): 328–61.

\textsuperscript{53} See also Paul Richards, ‘New war’.

\textsuperscript{54} See Danny Hoffman, ‘Like beasts in the bush’.

\textsuperscript{55} See Caspar Fithen, \textit{Diamonds and the War in Sierra Leone: Cultural strategies for commercial adaptation to endemic low-intensity conflict} (University College, unpublished PhD dissertation, 1999).
to intervene in the activities of rank-and-file fighters. For the kamajors this included the initiators responsible for making the bodies of combatants bulletproof, but it also included prominent imams, business leaders, various Alhajis and local politicians. At the same time, the importance of the personalized patronage relationships at work within the organization meant that local commanders/patrons, many of them quite young, would have to be included in any discussion about the activities of various units that make up the organization. These are people whose nominal rank would not necessarily imply decision-making capability in a more structured military organization. But they are individuals with an expanded capacity to control the violence of those in their units and are individuals capable of acting with a great deal of autonomy.

Recognizing that mass violence need not require a military structure also allows us to understand what the theorist Paul Virilio has referred to as the dromological aspects of contemporary warfare – the use of speed as a weapon. Combatants in the region not only cycle between conflict zones (Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte d’Ivoire, and now Guinea) but between forms of labour. Fighters with the CDF have alternated their ‘work’ as militia members with labour in the diamond fields, timber operations, and rubber plantations. Most do so in consultation with or on the direct order of patrons, who in many cases are also their wartime commanders. The result is that large numbers of young men can be called up quickly and deployed to various points in the region for different forms of labour (including fighting) with relative ease and at great speed. Most do not think of their labours on the battlefield as qualitatively distinct from their labours in other sectors of the economy, and shifting between spheres requires no fundamental reorganization of their social worlds. Among other consequences, this means that any intervention into conflicts in the region cannot be predicated on waiting for a ‘military leadership’ to emerge or for the solidification of a militarily recognizable chain of command.

Although West Africa is generally excluded from contemporary theorization of the nature of war globally, there is an additional lesson to be drawn from the CDF example for how we think of contemporary militia activity worldwide. Especially in the light of the US experience with organizations like Al Qaeda and with the various forces in the ongoing Iraq war, a great deal of attention has been paid to what theorists have referred to as ‘netwar’ or to various cellular models of military organization. These are efforts to define military structure in the absence of a recognizable vertical hierarchy familiar from professional armies worldwide. In most instances, these

network theorists have sought out micro-structural models with which to replace the familiar military macro-structure. They ask the question of how various cells or nodal points are organized to facilitate rapid deployment and to avoid concentrating resources, knowledge, and personnel. The activities of the CDF and other militias in the region suggest that the real problem for understanding (and intervening in) a great deal of violent activity today is not a more detailed model of military organization. It is, rather, an understanding of the way existing relationships become militarized and how they relate to the unique dynamics of local contexts. What an understanding of the nature and function of the CDF of Sierra Leone allows us to do is rethink the meaning of a militia.