

‘Fused in Combat’: Unsettling Gendered Hierarchies and Women’s Roles in the Fighting Forces in Sierra Leone’s Civil War.

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Abstract

In recent years attention has been given to the gendered nature of ‘bush-life’, especially to the gendered roles, hierarchies and socialization processes within warring factions in civil conflict situations in Africa. In this article, I explore the hierarchies and patterns of interaction that defined gender relations between combatants in two fighting forces — the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and the Kamajor militia faction of the Civil Defense Forces (CDF) — during the civil war in Sierra Leone. I argue that although gender differences between female and male combatants was much transformed, albeit aggressively, during the war, they were shaped by the origin and character of the warring factions, and the pre-war perceptions of women’s sexuality. I explore how women’s sexuality shaped their mobility within the ‘rebel camps,’ and with it, the patterns of gender relations in these forces. I conclude that although new gender identities were created (and some dissolved) during the war, the power relationship between men and women remained undisturbed within the armed factions. And, although women enjoyed positions of power within these factions, they worked within a patriarchal hierarchy and towards patriarchal ends.

Introduction

By way of recognition, analyses on gender relations between male and female combatants¹ are on the increase, as are the sequelae resulting from the logic of war, especially the engendering of wartime violence, the systematic use of mass rape, and the forced conscription of women and children. The literature exploring these issues in Sierra Leone has, however, been dominated by case-specifics, with less attention given to comparisons between distinct groups. The fluid character of these factions and the changing patterns of relations between (and within) groups could explain, in part, why research on this civil war has taken this trend.

¹ See for example, Tanya Lyons, *Guns and Guerilla Girls: Women in the Zimbabwean Liberation Struggle* (New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2004); Chris Coulter, *Bush Wives and Girl Soldiers: Women’s Lives Through War and Peace in Sierra Leone*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2009).

Despite the recognition of women's involvement in the civil war that was, *a priori*, considered a political contest between men, little attention has been given to the relationship between the nature and character of the warring factions and women's roles (and socialization processes) within them. Also, in tandem, it is important to consider how the male combatants used patriarchal war ideologies to distort pacifist perceptions about women. Within the RUF for example, male combatants wore female fatigues — such as brassieres, wigs and the application of lipstick — and the female fighters were often forced to take up violent masculine names and wear male fatigues.² In the Kamajor militia, as we shall see later, in as much as women were not actively involved as combatants, they were the passive reason for the emergence of the Kamajor movement.³ Against this backdrop it can therefore be argued in line with Zillah Eisenstein's⁴ thesis, that in armed conflict situations the women associated with the warring factions are mostly used as “sexual decoys” to give a façade of gendered representation.⁵ It is within this gendered narrative of war, and what occurred therein, that this article discusses the patterns of gender relations within the fighting forces, in particular the interactions between male and female combatants. Moreover, this article focuses on power differentials between women and men, and men's

² John Idriss Lahai, “Gendered battlefields: A contextual and comparative analysis on women's participation in armed conflicts in Africa,” *Peace and Conflict Review*, 4:2 (2010), 13.

³ I refer to the Kamajor militia as a movement because it evolved from an already established militarised social network that was directly connected to the Wonde secret society. The Wonde society is an esoteric ritual society that is believed to have emerged in the 15th century to provide security in Mende communities/fiefdoms before the emergence of colonial rule in 1808. The Kamajor, as a movement, however, is ethno-centric and its militarised agenda was neither political nor ideological. Rather, its war agenda was to continue to provide a relatively peaceful social order within Mende communities. To achieve this, part of the initiation process into the movement required the male warriors to swear an oath to the Wonde Deity that the protection of their women and children (and the ‘other’ men) within their communities is a sacred duty to be uphold till death, if the Wonde Deity willed it.

⁴ Zillah R. Eisenstein, *Sexual Decoys: Gender, Race and War in Imperial Democracy* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2007).

⁵ Although it is beyond the scope of this article to delve into the debates about the so-called ‘pacifist nature of women’, an analysis that looks into the power relationship between men and women within these factions can provide a useful analytical framework for interpreting the civil war – to understand how women are fused in combat. For a critical analysis of the contending schools of feminist thought on Women and War see for example, Eisenstein; Lyons; and Cynthia Enloe, *All Men Are In The Militias, All The Women Are Victims: The Politics Of Masculinity And Femininity In Nationalist Wars*, (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

patriarchal control over women's sexuality, which characterizes gender relations in Sierra Leone.

Importantly, this article is based not only upon the existing literature on the subject, but my own personal experiences as a child soldier in the Kamajor faction during the civil war in Sierra Leone. In 1993 it became apparent that the RUF was fighting a war of annihilation. The government, a military junta known as the National Provisionary Ruling Council, who came to power in a violent coup in 1991, were unable to protect the country from the rebel offensive. Several vigilante, albeit ethnic militia, groups were then formed in all the communities and villages in the country. However, as shall be explained, the connection between the Mende ancestral religion and the militaristic customary obligation that it placed on its men and boys (especially on the chiefs, their first born and first grandsons) led to my 'forced' conscription into the Mende-ethnic Kamajor militia movement. It was during my fighting years and period in captivity in the RUF camp that I was able to understand the patterns of gender relations within the Kamajor militia and RUF camps. Unlike other scholarly works that are written by 'outsiders,' this article is an 'insider's' perspective that will contribute to the discourse on gender and conflict in Sierra Leone. It will also correct the misconceptions about gender relations within the Kamajor militia movement.

This article explores women's roles, gendered hierarchies and the socialization processes in two warring factions: the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and the Kamajor militia during the Sierra Leone's eleven year (23 March 1991 to 18 January 2002) civil war. It is argued here that the patterns of gendered relations within these factions were determined by the origins and character of the group and the pre-war social constructs surrounding women's sexuality. In this regard, the article posits that war-time in-group gender relations, though violently transformed, were merely an extension of the pre-war patriarchal order. The gendered, albeit sexualized 'privileges' that women enjoyed within the rebel camps, including their ability to manoeuvre and, where possible, transcend gendered barriers, were patriarchally, militaristically and ritualistically determined.

That said, this article is divided into two sections: the first explores the origin and character of the warring factions under review; the second provides a detailed discussion of the gendered hierarchies and women's roles within these forces.

The RUF: The origin and character of a Lumpen revolutionary movement.

The historical precursors to the emergence of the RUF as a pseudo-revolutionary rebel movement in 1991 have attracted several theoretical perspectives. The first presents a theory of pre-war youth marginalization and radicalization. In his analysis on the origin and character of the RUF, Ibrahim Abdullah contends that the RUF grew out of the violent socialization processes surrounding youth relations in the country.⁶ He traces the origin of the *lumpen-militariat* character of the youth to the demise of mainstream pan-Africanism, especially the West African Youth league in the 1930s. After this period, he argued, the inter-generational relationship between the political elites and the youth became disturbingly violent. The youth (especially those he referred to as ‘lumpen first generation youth’) became the political instrument used by politicians to oppress political opponents. It was this politicization of youth relations that created a culture of violence that fed into the RUF drug-induced war ideology of violence and plunder. Abdullah’s work is a direct critique of Paul Richards’ research *Fighting for the Rain Forest*⁷ which presented a ‘people-forest’ theory of pre-war forest life to explain the revolutionary and guerrilla character of the RUF. Like Gberie,⁸ Abdullah was of the view that Richards failed to understand that it was the political misuse of these disgruntled youth in the urban and peri-urban slums of the country that shaped the violent pre-war youth culture. Furthermore, that during the war the patterns of youth conscription into the opportunistic and resource-driven RUF resulted in much aggression.

It was from these slums that the ‘Raray man’ (miscreant street youth) culture was born, a culture that would shape the patterns of political violence and the stereotypes of social delinquency that were attached to the youth after 1977.⁹ Unfortunately, the plummeting economy and the lack of jobs for these illiterate youth led them to create their own settlements, which were dubbed the *potes*. According to Abdullah, these were a popular ‘drug infested’ peri-urban area of relaxation for countless

⁶ Ibrahim Abdullah, “Bush Path to Destruction: The Origin and Character of the Revolutionary United Front/Sierra Leone,” *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 36: 2 (1998), 203-235.

⁷ Paul Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth and Resources in Sierra Leone* (London: Heinemann, 1996).

⁸ Lansana Gberie, *A Dirty War in West Africa: The RUF and the Destruction of Sierra Leone* (London: C. Hurst, 2005).

⁹ David Keen, *Conflict and Collusion in Sierra Leone* (Oxford: James Currey Ltd, 2005): 35.

numbers of unemployed youths, and also served as a cultural space constructed around the *Odeley* masquerade,¹⁰ a subterfuge that was hated by the more conservative ‘civilized’ society. These *potes* did strengthen a feeling of dissidence against the wider society and the government. The RUF exploited these feelings, which resulted in a misguided *lumpen militariat* social movement that was created by *lumpen* revolutionaries.¹¹

The economic hardship during the 1980s also created a large crop of unemployed university graduates¹² who could not find meaningful jobs within the formal economy. Consequently, this class of educated elites, dubbed ‘organic intellectuals/second generation youth,’¹³ joined these rary men in the *potes*. They entered with a revolutionary message that transformed the ‘rary man culture’ to the *Savisman* (‘street smart youth’) culture. Subsequently, much of the pseudo-revolutionary ideological

¹⁰ Like other ritualised, albeit mystic, secret societies of the Sierra Leone/Liberian rainforest, the Odeley Masquerade is an offshoot of ancestral worship, and the mysticism surrounding the forest that evolved into a secret society. According to some the historiographical folklore surrounding its emergence in Sierra Leone, it was founded by the returned freed slaves, most of whom were believed to be of the Nigerian Yoruba race who were captured and sold into slavery, but who were returned to Sierra Leone by 1837 at the end of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The reason for its creation, from what I was made to understand, was to enable these returned slaves to feel protected against the countless numbers of secret societies practiced by the indigenes in the land they were re-settled into, especially the Temnes, who occupied the region that was to become Freetown, the capital city and home of the freed slaves..However, as a result of the amalgamation of cultures, the Odeley Masquerade began to adopt some of the ritual practices and belief systems of the secret societies they met. By 1978, following the emergence of the one-party dictatorship of the APC—a period that coincided with the economic downturn, the youths saw the Odeley as a society that would create the necessary space they needed to express their views against the social order that saw them as social miscreants. And as time went by, politicians who wanted power began to hire these ‘drug-crazed’ Odeley young men to intimidate (and/or kill) their political opponents. Soon a culture of violence became associated with the Odeley masquerade. Many, especially religious groups, both Muslims and Christians, began to advocate for their ban in the country. To pay back, the Odeley adopted the practice of bringing out its masquerade, the Ogunu, to perform publically during Muslim and Christian festive holidays. To impress upon the ardent believers of these religious groups that Ogunu reigned supreme, the members of the Odeley sought to counter the ecclesiastical narratives of the established religions in Sierra Leone. As a result there emerged a negative public attitude towards the Odeley Masquerade and its members.

¹¹ Abdullah, 223.

¹² Ibrahim Abdullah and Patrick K. Muana, “The Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone. A revolt of the Lumpenproletariat,” in Christopher Clapham, ed., *African Guerrillas* (Oxford: James Currey, 1998), 173.

¹³ Abdullah, 209.

rationalization, which later gave birth to the RUF's ideology of 'youth emancipation' and its *militariat* approach to its "bush path to destruction,"¹⁴ emerged from these *potes*.

Other theoretical perspectives on the origins of the RUF contend that it was an attempt by the Liberian warlord Charles Taylor to "do a RENAMO" on Sierra Leone.¹⁵ This argument, though contentious, is supported after 1993, when the RUF shifted its illogical rhetoric of 'liberation and democracy'¹⁶ to 'resource appropriation' and started 'gunning for diamonds.' This economic rationalist explanation of the origin and character of the RUF was widely discussed by rational-choice scholars,¹⁷ who attempted to draw a direct relationship between lootable resources and the civil war in Sierra Leone. They based their argument on the premise that "in countries rich in natural resources...the political goal of wars often interact with the multiple logic of resource appropriation..., the looting of private property, and vandalism."¹⁸

Despite the contribution of these aforementioned perspectives to our understanding of the origin and character of the RUF, they can be criticized for being insensitive to the gendered nature of the patterns of youth marginalization and its implication on RUF's in-group relations during the conflict.

The prevailing view of the RUF at the time was that women constituted the majority of the 'civilized' society that was against political violence and the reckless misuse of youth by politicians before the war, when the RUF was formed it was natural that they would abhor it. Consequently, this 'misogynistic movement' did not only commit violence that targeted women, by recruiting women it sought to implicate them in its criminal enterprise. Although some women 'voluntarily' joined, and became its

¹⁴ Abdullah; Gberie.

¹⁵ Alfred B. Zack-Williams and Stephen Riley, "Sierra Leone: the coup and its consequences," *Review of African Political Economy*, 56 (1993), 91-98.

¹⁶ The propaganda of the RUF as stated in its manifesto "Footpath to Democracy: Towards a New Sierra Leone;" (see the Basic Document of RUF/SL 1989) talked of liberating the country from the autocratic one party government of the All People's Congress (APC) party, which it referred to as "military adventurist". See <http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/footpaths.htm> (accessed 10 January 2010).

¹⁷ Paul Richards; Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, *Greed and Grievance in Civil War* (Washington DC, World Bank CSAE Working Paper, 1996).

¹⁸ Yusuf Bangura, "Understanding the political and cultural dynamics of the Sierra Leone War: A critique of Paul Richards's fighting in the Rain Forest," *African Development*, 22:3/4 (1997), 117.

top political operatives, such as Agnes Deen-Jalloh and Madam Fatu Sankoh (wife of the RUF leader, Foday Sankoh), the RUF used forced conscription as well as patriarchal dictates to lure women into joining the movement as a show of solidarity and support for the actions of their rebel husbands and guardians. Even those who volunteered had to work within a patriarchal system that resulted in the creation of contested identities for them — as their survival depended upon their adoption of a militant and masculine behaviour. This ‘transvestitism’ shows that women in the RUF were expected to act like men and adopt violent behaviour that was to distort the general societal belief in the pacifist nature of women.

Therefore, during the civil war in Sierra Leone, men were able to conquer women across gender lines.¹⁹ The Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission (SLTRC) concluded that women combatants, especially those associated with the RUF, were victims of a ‘crowd psychology’ that was shaped and controlled by men. This made it possible for women to reject their ‘mothering roles’ and ‘pacifist’ character and commit horrific acts of violence, as did the men.²⁰

The *Kamajor* militia: Mende ancestral religion and gender narratives in the making of the war beast

Following an RUF attack on the Village of Jong (Jange) Chiefdom, the rebels are reported to have massacred people in the village including a great...medicine man, Kposowai. His brother Kundorwai, is said to have been captured by the rebels, forced to carry looted goods and tied (‘tabay’) securely for the night whilst the rebels pitched camp. As he drifted to sleep in spite of his pains, Kundowai is said to have had a vision of his brother Kposowai who had been killed the day before. The ropes fell loose and the elder brother invested him with the authority to take the message to all able-bodied Mende men that the defense of their own lives, homes, wives and children was a sacred duty. To assist them in that task, Kposowai is said to have shown Kundorwai a secret concoction of herb and instructed him to use a stringent procedure for ‘washing’ of the warriors in the herbs. This concoction would make them invincible in battle, impervious

¹⁹ For more on how men use women to fulfil their war aims see, Eisenstein, 2007, 6.

²⁰ Sierra Leone Truth Commission, *Witness to the Truth: Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, (Ghana: Graphic Packages Ltd Press, 2004, volume 3b, Chapter. 3), paragraph. 394.

to bullets, and endow them with powers of Clairvoyance if all were kept. Kundorwai is said to have then slaughtered the RUF rebels, freed the other captives, and trekked several miles to a secret hiding place where he initiated the first set of men.²¹

Unlike the RUF's misogynist view of women, the narrative above shows that the Kamajor militia emerged out of the traditional ethnic Mende ancestral religious dictates that proscribed the protection of 'women' and the celebration of the male warrior. However, from all indications, a ritualized cultural narrative on the civil war in Sierra Leone appears to be peripheral, or almost non-existent, in the narratives of the motivations and actions of the Kamajors who took up arms in defense of their communities against the RUF atrocities. Most of the documented history of the war tends to focus more on the political and economic reasons for the emergence of the warring factions during the conflict, with little or no attention given to the cultural, as well as the gendered, histories and character of these factions that roamed the warscapes of the country. There is a plethora of literature surrounding the emergence of the Kamajors, but an analysis that draws a binary relationship between its patterns of warfare (and in-group gender relations) with the Mende cultural belief systems surrounding the sexuality of women is absent in the literature.

A glaring feature of Mende ancestral religion is the cultural symbolism it places on women's roles. Mende women are the foundations of Mende civilization, and on which communal gender relations are built.²² In most studies of the miasmatic and brutish civil war in Sierra Leone, there is an almost complete absence of a religious conviction in the reasons for the civil war. Moreover, the religious impetus for the conflict between the RUF and the Kamajor was trivialized because of a lack of an 'insider's' perspective that would explain the true nature and character of the Mende ethno-social make-up and the representation of women in local folklore and in nation building.²³ The failure to understand the nature of the internal complexities and contradictions of Mende traditionalism may also explain why advances in scholarly understanding of the origin and

²¹ Patrick K. Muana, "The Kamajoi Militia: Civil War, Internal Displacement and Politics of Counter-insurgency," *African Development*, 22:3/4 (1997), 87-88.

²² Kenneth Little, *The Mende of Sierra Leone: A West Africa People in Transition* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951).

²³ For more on the cultural representation of Mende women in local folklore see Mariene Ferma, *The underneath of things: Violence, History and the Everyday in Sierra Leone* (California: University of California Press, 2001).

character of the Kamajor has failed to underscore the contribution of Mende ancestral beliefs, although Wlodarczyk²⁴ and Hoffman²⁵ have been influential in highlighting an Afro-traditional perspective.

Among the Mendes of South-East Sierra Leone, where the war was ignited, and who faced the brunt of the scorched-earth tactics of the RUF rebels, the phenomenon of omnipresent Mende ancestral religion was brought out by Sawyer and Harris,²⁶ who discussed the relationship between women and men and their connections to *Ngewo* (the divine). This relationship, they argue, is engendered and universal: it is seen from birth to death, in celebration and lamentation, and in every other attitude of the ‘civilized’ Mende. The engendered communal nature of social relations in Mende communities is anchored to brotherhood (‘*N’dakay*,’ for men, and ‘*Nyapui*,’ for women) and the nuanced patriarchal narratives of the ‘warrior man,’ who must protect his life, homes and wife (or wives, as polygamy is widely practiced among the Mende), and also to the ‘custodian woman,’ whose domestic roles symbolizes the continuity of society.²⁷ Mende women were expected to cement their relationship with *Ngewo* (the supreme deity or God) through their men. The SLTRC reported that, “in the Mende worldwide...every woman must be affiliated to a man if she is to find acceptance in the community. This insistence is rooted in the belief that a woman’s prayer goes to God through a man.”²⁸

It is also worth noting here that this affiliation emphasizes chastity on the part of the girls and ‘unmarried’ women. Among the Mendes, girls were expected to keep their chastity until marriage, and shamed their families if this taboo was broken. All girls among the Mendes have to go through the ‘rite of passage’ in the women’s secret society, the *Sande*.²⁹ These are

²⁴ Nathalie Wlodarczyk, *Magic and Warfare: Appearance and Reality in Contemporary African Conflict and Beyond* (Palgrave, Macmillan, 2009).

²⁵ Danny Hoffman, “Like Beasts in the Bush,” *Journal of Post Colonial Studies*, 6:3 (2003), 295-308.

²⁶ Harry Sawyer and William Thomas Harris, *The Springs of Mende Belief and Conduct: A Discussion of the Influence of the Belief in the Supernatural among the Mende* (Freetown: Sierra Leone University Press, 1968).

²⁷ Ferma.

²⁸ Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission, paragraph 82.

²⁹ In this society it is believed that girls are given lessons on the marital and communal responsibilities of women and on the customs and taboos of their clans. The graduation (or ‘coming out’) ceremonies of these girls, bathed in white chalk, solemnly marching in a queue, their hair braided, would often stir a ‘primordial feeling’ among the men. However, the cultural importance of this institution is no longer promoted because of the practice of female genital mutilation.

the girls who became women and who were taught to hold their bodies sacred, for their patriarchal society would find it unacceptable if their bodies were exposed or violated by anyone but their husbands.

There are complex laws which govern issues dealing with the sexuality of women. For example, it is unacceptable for a man to have sexual intercourse with another man's wife.³⁰ It is a serious offence to give a gift to any woman who is past puberty, for the giving of the gift would be considered as a first step in initiating an illegal affair. It is a grave crime for a man to touch the buttocks of a woman who had not been betrothed to him. A violent husband risks the ignominy of facing the village court and the reproach of the community. The Mendes, whose influence has embraced all other minority ethnic groups in the south-east, such as the Via, Gissi and Sherbro, have preserved their collective values that mandated conformity to the established norms, for example those which frowned upon disloyalty to one's community or the sexual violence against women and girls. Unfortunately these customs were not only distorted by the war but were violated in public by the RUF rebels in Mende rural villages.

Thus when the RUF rebels (dubbed '*Njiahungbia Ngonga*'—in Mende language, meaning 'miscreant youth'³¹) and renegade soldiers perpetuated the violent atrocities against the Mende women (which included crude sexualized violations, for example rape with objects such as guns, knives, burning firewood, umbrellas and pestles, and the throwing of dice to determine the sex of a pregnant woman's fetus and then proceeding to disembowel her to test their bet) the religious soul of the Mendes community was bludgeoned. The rebels also deliberately undermined the cultural values and social relationships of the community by killing the men and leaving behind many widows throughout the country. Thus, the women were without men to 'protect them.'

³⁰ Male violators were sure to either face litigation in a Mende traditional court and pay the fine (for 'wife damage') or risk an ancestral curse, and possibly death through the *ngele gbaa*, a tiny axe made from a meteorite (and wrapped in a hamper of leaves with other charms and metal objects) dug from the ground inside a forest that is believed to have been brought from the world of the cosmological deities by the ancestors themselves. For more on the procedure of a *ngele gbaa* curse among the Kpaa Mende of Sierra Leone, see Joe A.D. Alie, "Reconciliation and traditional justice: tradition-based practices of the Kpaa Mende in Sierra Leone," in Luc Huyse Mark Salter, eds., *Traditional Justice and Reconciliation after Violent Conflict Learning from African Experiences* (Sweden: Institute for Democratic and Electoral Assistance: IDEA Press, 2008), 138.

³¹ Muana.

There was no civil judicial space to punish these violators. Amid the inability of the government forces to defend the people, the Kamajor Militia therefore emerged to defend their communities against this rebel onslaught. The origins of the Kamajor were thus also based on the conquering of gendered lines. My recollection of observations made during my time with the Kamajors in the civil war was that the shame and guilt over violence against ‘civilized’ Mende women (i.e. women who abide by the laws of chastity) was put on the whole clan or village. This collectivization of the defilement of women and girls was interpreted by the men as a shaming defeat of their manhood and of their ability to defend women. In this context it is very difficult for women’s war roles to be placed on the same pedestal as men’s.³² In south-eastern Sierra Leone, where gender relations intersected with other aspects of a woman’s identity – ethnicity, traditional religious and ritual practices, and social class, it made women specific targets during the violence which aimed to destroy the foundations of society.

That the Mendes, who by 1993 were able to mobilize their men (including boys, as young as seven years old) into what has been referred to as a militarized social network,³³ was not merely a defensive posture to defend themselves against the barbarity of the RUF, but against the affront to their religious values. Nothing would have made it possible for the *Kamajors* to be mobilized in the defense of their women and homes, but for the belief that they were protected by their ancestors.³⁴

The spiritual laws that governed the Kamajor forbade, for example, the touching of women, and also any physical and sexual contact when dressed in their amulets or during fighting, fearing that women would

³² For more on the feminist perspective of men and war, see Cynthia Enloe, *All men are in the Militias, All the Women are Victims: The Politics of Masculinity and Femininity in Nationalist Wars* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

³³ Danny Hoffman, “The Meaning of a Militia: Understanding the Civil Defense Forces of Sierra Leone,” *African Affairs*, 106:425 (2007).

³⁴ The Kamajors were initiated with mystic charms that were endowed with metaphysical powers that made them resistant to bullets and the ability to become invisible at will. They also had the power to sense rebel spies in the midst of civilians. All the documented photographs of the vaunted Kamajor fighters would show them bedecked in cloths specially ‘treated’ after being dipped in a ‘magic potion’, and with charms and amulets covering their bodies. This mysticism was not taken as a mere cultural vinaigrette, but religious attire made special by their ancestors. At the height of the war, Kamajor fighters were invoking that which would always be permanent in them, their ancestral spirits — believing that other religious beliefs such as Christianity and Islam could not protect them against the RUF carnage.

neutralize any mystic charm bestowed upon them.³⁵ Those who violated these laws would be vulnerable to enemy combatants, for they believed that their mystic imperviousness would fail and they would lose their powers of invisibility. Few Kamajors put this ritual belief to test.

Arguably, this strict adherence to no sexual relationships would have enabled the women to gain entry into the fighting ranks of the Kamajors and, in tandem, be protected against sexual violence. However, according to the *Wonde* philosophy, the mere presence of women among these charm-glad warriors represented a bad omen. The *Wonde* philosophy emphasised the protective roles of men, and that women should rely on this social order and accept that they are the protected. Therefore, men should be willing to fulfil their patriarchal obligation to protect their women from the enemy, and to go to war to save their bodies from the very violent gendered attacks by the enemy. Despite this distinction between the male protector and the protected female, women were able to work in supportive roles that encouraged their men to continue fighting, and in doing so their actions helped shape in-group gender relations.

‘Fused in combat’: Unsettling the gendered hierarchies and roles in the fighting forces

It was in the fighting camps that the women began to relate sexually to men in a way that went against tradition. Away from home and the constraints of social order, many of the young women took on lovers or husbands or had children out of wedlock. Having left families behind they created new ones. In the uncertainty of war what matters is the tangible clinging to life, not custom. For the men, war also meant relating to women in ways to which they were not accustomed.³⁶

It can be argued that the distortion of gender identities is a common phenomenon in all conflict situations. This phenomenon, however, presents analytical difficulties when women’s roles in wars are brought into focus. I argue here that in-group gender relations, shaped by the origin and character of the warring factions and their pre-war perceptions of women’s sexuality, influenced women’s roles and shaped their survival strategies and mobility within the fighting camps. Significantly,

³⁵ The *Wonde* Secret Society’s (the foundation of the ritualized beliefs of the supernatural protective powers of the Mende ancestors, and where the initiation into the movement took place).

³⁶ Alexis DeVeaux, "Zimbabwe Woman Fire!" in *Essence*, July 1981, p.111, cited in Lyons, 187.

it also entrenched the nuanced patriarchal resistance to women's access to power. It was this resistance that led to the mass forced conscription of young women and girls, rather than 'older' women whom these youthful rebels might have been tempted to call 'mothers.' While the RUF offered restricted duties to some older women, any access to power for women within these fighting forces depended largely on their sexualized relationships with the male combatants. Since it was their sexuality and identity that exposed them to excessive brutality and uncontrolled drug-infused sexual violence, some women turned their victimisation into agency. They began using their sexuality and bodies as survival tools to protect themselves and their families from harm. Through their sexuality many were able to gain entry into the household of the rebel commanders, who accepted them as wives. However, the ways in which some of these women interacted with the RUF also depended on the patterns of rural demographic shift and population dynamics during the war.³⁷

Before the war, the pattern of population shift saw an increasing number of young women moving from the urban and peri-urban areas to the villages to engage in small scale farming activities. Young men, on the other hand, tended to move from the agricultural communities and the urban areas to the artisanal diamond mining areas in the South-east of the country. This trend, however, took another turn when the war erupted, as young women and girls began to move to the urban areas for security reasons. As was expected, the young men took advantage of the resource driven and opportunistic nature of the war, and many stayed and voluntarily joined the RUF. This trend resulted in fewer numbers of women in the rural areas. Against the backdrop of wanting more women in their camps to perform their gender-assigned domestic functions, and in tandem, to fight as combatants, the RUF prioritised the abduction of young women over whom they could have sexual control. As we shall see in the next section, the RUF prioritised the abduction of young women because a relationship between a man and women in rural Sierra Leone was largely determined by their sexual relationships.

'Domesticating the bush': Gendered hierarchies and women's roles in the RUF camps

The RUF entered Sierra Leone with a patriarchal and militarized command structure. They were divided into two subcategories: the 'Vanguard' and the 'Special Forces.' The former was under the command

³⁷ Mellissa Leach, *Rainforest Relations: Gender and Resource use among the Mende of Gola, Sierra Leone* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 1994); Ferma; and Richards.

of Foday Sankoh and Abu Kanu. The latter composing mainly of Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) rebels and other mercenaries on loan to the RUF. By 1994 Sankoh had taken command of the Special Forces³⁸ and assumed leadership of the movement, bringing with him the 'first and second generation' *pote* youth. This marked the demise of a 'populist movement' and the birth of a chauvinistic terrorist network, with heightened levels of sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls. There were four categories of women within the RUF's gendered hierarchical structure. At the top of the strata were the Commanders' wives. Below them were the 'Mammy queens' (god-mothers). Next to them were the combatants of the Women Auxiliary Corps (WACs), while at the bottom were the abducted domestic slaves. However, mobility from one class to the other was a possibility determined by 'fighting skills,' and as some argue by the women's 'seductive feminine charms' in enticing camp commanders into sexual relationships. Moreover, with the exception of those within the Mammy Queen category, age was not a requirement for mobility. It was a common occurrence, for instance, for an abducted slave to become a commander's wife, and for a commander's wife to be demoted, raped and even killed at the authority of the commander when caught sabotaging the survival of the camp, selling secrets, spying for the enemy, or engaging in sexual activities with a junior rebel in the camp. According to Chris Coulter, "there were...cases in which women who had been sent to the front lines or to head particularly dangerous missions were bush wives who had been rejected by their bush husband commanders."³⁹

³⁸ These forces were under the direct command of Rashid Mansaray who was allegedly killed by Sankoh when the struggle for leadership ensued in 1993. See Abdullah, 225. By 1994 Foday Sankoh had eliminated his co-conspirators, and allegedly master-minded the removal of Philip Palmer, Mohammed Barrie, Fayia Musa and Ibrahim Deen-Jalloh from the movement. It is widely believed that Sankoh hijacked the RUF from these men, who were believed to be the real architects of the RUF. After the 1977 student riots, as university students and lecturers these men began to mobilise themselves into a revolutionary study group with the aim of replicating the Green Revolution of Gadhafi's Libya, in Sierra Leone. According to Abdullah and Gberie, it was during one of their meetings in Bo, Southern Sierra Leone, that Sankoh, a semi-illiterate retired Army Corporal, requested membership into this Pan Africanist revolutionary group. When the RUF was formed, it was natural that Sankoh would try to eliminate them because their populist revolutionary ideology was diametrically opposed to his. It is without doubt that Sankoh's 'drug crazed' political ideology was to rule Sierra Leone based on the dictates of his grand master, Charles Taylor of the NPFL in Liberia. Part of this also calls for killing all those that would stand in his way.

³⁹ Chris Coulter, 137.

The Commanders' 'wives' were very important within the rebel camps. To be considered a responsible wife, these women/girls had to act in ways that would sustain in-group cohesion and promote the social status of their husbands within the camp. Thus, apart from fulfilling their gender-specific domestic duties within the household of their 'bush husbands,' they also performed militarized functions. Dyan Mazurana and Kristopher Carlson described their functions in the rebel camp:

Captive 'wives' of commanders exerted substantial power within the RUF compound. These 'Wives' were predominantly girls. When the commander was away, they were in charge of the compound. They kept in communication with the commander and would select and send troops, spies, and support when needed. These girls and young women decided on a daily basis who in the compound would fight, provide reconnaissance, and raid villages for food and loot. Some counselled their captor husband on war strategies, troop movement, and upcoming attacks.⁴⁰

It should be noted here that any young woman or a girl child, irrespective of communal social status, could become a commander's wife. However, the girls born into chieftain families in the villages within the rebel controlled areas were sometimes either captured or voluntarily given to the commanders by their parents in exchange for protection. Their 'aristocratic' background assured them of elevation to the position of a first wife.

The duties of the second category of women in the rebel camp, the Mammy Queens, were merely an extension of their pre-war communal maternal roles and responsibilities, especially with regards to taking care of young rebel girls until they were old enough to marry. They also act as god-mothers, and even conducted marriages in the rebel camps.⁴¹ In pre-war years, the men were in-charge of affinal arrangements, but due to their absence from the homes these and other duties shifted to the older women.⁴²

⁴⁰ Dyan Mazurana and Kristopher Carlson, *From Combat to Community: Women and Girls in Sierra Leone* (Washington DC: Women Waging Peace Policy Commission, 2004): 14.

⁴¹ Chris Coulter, 106.

⁴² The institution of the *Mammy Queen* predated the war. Following the emergence of the patrilocal and virilocal social systems and the amalgamation of communities before colonial rule, power was structured around them and the traditional rulers. Apart from their maternal roles in mentoring young girls, these women also performed political functions. They were the *Ya Bompuseh* and *Ya Bomporo* (minister of food, and minister of women's ceremonies) in the courts of Temne traditional rulers, and among the other 'tribal' groups which share affinal relations and cultural

The third and perhaps the most important and complex category of women in the hierarchy were those considered as combatants. They were sub-divided into two groups; the adult women that formed the Women's Auxiliary Corps (WACs) and the girls, mostly abductees, who were collectively known as the Small Girls Units (SGUs). These girls and women served both as 'girl friends' to the male unit commanders and the other male fighters, and they also performed routine militarized functions. They were the foot soldiers who fought and conducted reconnaissance missions.⁴³ The women who had volunteered as combatants had gained entry into the RUF in order, perhaps, to benefit from what the war could offer and to liberate themselves from the shackles of patriarchy. They became commanders and trainers to those girls who had been abducted. Like the commander's wives, they too provided strategic advice to the male camp commanders. The abducted fighters, on the other hand, performed, albeit under duress, combative functions, and acted as personal bodyguards to the WACs commanders and the commander's wives. However, these abducted girls accounted for less than two percent of the young girls in the reconnaissance units, for the RUF military strategists believed they might not return once sent out into the field of war.

At the bottom of the hierarchy were the abducted girls whose domesticated functions included, but were not limited to, working as porters, cooks and sex slaves. However, despite their 'domesticated' roles, they were also trained to fight, and when the need arose they were

practices with the Temnes in the Northern Province. This was the highest position a woman was expected to reach in politics at the traditional village level among the Temnes. Age and experience were a prerequisite for a woman to become a Mammy Queen, because young girls looked up to them for guidance on issues dealing with husband and children's care, relations with co-wives and on other matters relating to their gender assigned roles and responsibilities. However, after the emergence of party politics in the 1950s, the institution of Mammy Queen was webbed into the violent political interactions at the national level, which all the more resulted in a mere veneer of women's political participation. It was during this period that "the somewhat patronizing sobriquet '*Mammy Queen*,' indicating their aptitude to stereotypically maternal roles was assigned to them by the male political elites. See John Idriss Lahai, "Sexing the State: The Gendered Origins of the Civil War in Sierra Leone," *Minerva Journal of Women and War*, 4:2 (2010), 34-35; Leach, 58-59; and Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission, paragraph. 58.

⁴³ Binta Mansaray, "Women against Weapons: A leading Role for Women in Disarmament," in Ayissi, A and Poulton, R-E (Eds.) *Bound to Corporate: Conflict, Peace and People in Sierra Leone* (Geneva: United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 2000), 148-49; and Mazurana and Carlson, 15-16.

forced to fight. Aminata, an ex-RUF female combatant/sex slave, told Coulter that,

no woman that had spent a year with them (the RUF) was not trained how to fix gun and fire. This was for protection, maybe even among ourselves, if your companion want to kill you and you also know how to fire, you can retaliate.⁴⁴

Upon entry into the camp, girls and women were separated from the boys and men. The girls were sent to the WACs commanders and the Mammy Queens for military and household training, respectively.⁴⁵ This separation did not only reinforce the patriarchal nature of the RUF, it also demonstrated that although there was a general disintegration of communities during the war, the RUF created its own communal social system - the war communities, which in terms of its inter-community division of labour arrangement, achieved superiority to the neighbouring civilian communities. The rebels communities were considered the 'protectors', while the civilian communities were regarded as the 'providers' and, in return for their own protection, were tasked with the responsibility to cultivate what their overlord communities needed.⁴⁶ It is because of these patrilocal social arrangements that Coulter concluded that apart from being violent, the social organization of the RUF rebel camps, the political and sociological hierarchies, and the gendered division of labour, productive and reproductive, were a replication of communal relations in pre-war years.⁴⁷

The RUF social stratification affected women more than the men. For the male fighters camp life was merely an extension of the '*pote*'. For the women, camp life did not only transform their pre-war domestic responsibilities, it subjected them to heightened levels of male-perpetrated sexual and gender based violence which they were forced to endure.

Violence as order? The instruments that sustained the RUF social hierarchy

In-group dispute mediation, public flogging, gang rape, threats of death, and death were among the mechanisms instituted by the RUF to maintain

⁴⁴ Coulter, 135.

⁴⁵ Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission, paragraph 216.

⁴⁶ Susan Shepler, *Conflicted Childhood: Fighting over Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone*, unpublished PhD. Thesis, (University of California, Berkeley, 2005), 63-64; and Paul Richards, "To fight or to Farm? Agrarian Dimension of the Mano River Conflict (Sierra Leone and Liberia)," *African Affairs*, 104:417 (2005): 571-590.

⁴⁷ Coulter, 95.

order and its hierarchical structure. The Mammy Queens and the camp commander's wives mediated disputes between women. According to Coulter, within the "pseudokinship-based family units" of the RUF, the institution of Mammy Queen was an effective way to regulate and control behaviour (and as an addendum, in enforcing codes necessary to maintain the patriarchal status quo). However, despite their influence, there was little these *Mammy Queens* could do to protect these women from male perpetrated sexual and gender-based violence.⁴⁸

Disputes between men, mostly over resource 'loot' and women, were mediated by the male Camp Commander and his head wife. However, there was also peer mediation. For example, minor disputes between ordinary male fighters were often settled by their peers, and it was only when they failed that they would send the matter for adjudication to their commanders. The use of violence to suppress violence (dubbed '*jungle justice*'), such as flogging and deprivation of food, and even death, was another method used to punish violations of camp laws. However, it was not always evenly applied. Perhaps by proxy of their positions of power, the male camp commanders and their 'faithful' wives, the male Unit/Platoon commanders, the Mammy Queens and the WACs commanders were not subjected to public flogging or punishment meted out on other men and women.

Public rape was another method used against so-called 'recalcitrant' women. However, this has also brought to the fore the question of its effectiveness. Apart from the personal and everlasting psychological scar rape had on victims and their families, two opposing perspectives have emerged in the literature. Human Rights Watch found that although the blatant public display of rape led to incidences where families and communities would reject the victims, it also brought the people—men and women—together.⁴⁹ Suffice to say, despite the continuities and discontinuities in gender relations during the war in Sierra Leone, women's behavioural changes towards their subjugation by rape took the misogynist male combatants by surprise. As a result of being constantly subjected to sexual abuse many women tried and many succeeded to live beyond its trauma effect. Some, in fact came to accept it as a natural outcome of the war, amid the rapid changes of public attitudes towards the rebels. This behavioural change, I argue, did create an underlying feeling of inadequacy that demystifies the expressive feelings of control

⁴⁸ Coulter, 106.

⁴⁹ Human Rights Watch, *We'll Kill You If You Cry: Sexual Violence in the Sierra Leone Conflict* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2003), 52.

and capability that had sustained male power during the war. The second perspective posits that wartime (and peacetime) rape, beyond its traumatic implications, also creates a contested identity for women victims. Schott reported that “whatever account is given to explain sexual violence against women in wartime, the persistence of this violence is one indicator that gender identity is a pivotal factor in women’s fates both during and after war.”⁵⁰ In challenging both perspectives, Pankhurst⁵¹ argued that the contention of whether wartime rape is intended to undermine women’s sexuality or activate it, does not help us understand the reasons why rapists rape — an explanation that can only be provided by the perpetrators themselves.⁵²

Conclusion

In the militarized centralized command structure of the Kamajor civil defense forces, women were notably absent from both the militia and the higher command structures, Their presence was mainly in subaltern roles as “initiators”, where they played supportive roles in shaping the belief systems of the Kamajors and in the day to day activities of sustaining the war effort. Their selection, as ‘initiators,’ was determined by their status as heads of the *Sande* society, and also their mastering of the mysticism handed down by Kposowai. The relationship between these women initiators and the male warriors, however, ended upon completion of these ritual ceremonies, as the laws of the Kamajors demanded no body contact between males and females after male initiation.

To be a Kamajor one had to be a member of the male-only Mende secret society - the *Wonde*. It was only through membership that a warrior could understand the philosophy of the Kamajor.⁵³ Therefore, by its origins and connections to spiritual and community practices, the Kamajor were seen as a group that was restricted to male membership only, thus denying women any claim to a role or recognition of their complex roles within the militarized movement. In other words, in as much as women could

⁵⁰ Robin. M. Schott, “Gender and Postmodern War,” *Hypatia*, 11: 4 (1996), 23.

⁵¹ Donna Pankhurst, “The ‘Sex War’ and other Wars: Towards a feminist approach to peace building,” in Haleh Afshar and Deborah Eade eds., *Development, Women, and War: Feminist Perspectives* (A Development in Practice Reader, UK: Oxfam GB, 2004), 32-33.

⁵²In Sierra Leone and in Liberia, there is no research to date that has asked ‘why?’ of the perpetrators of violence. It is thus very important for future research to focus in this area, because the narratives of the ordinary foot-soldiers/rebels/militias are crucial to understand the nature and character of sexual violence during war.

⁵³ Włodarczyk.

perform ritual duties, after those esoteric ritual powers had been bestowed on them, women could no longer touch them. Thus, women were robbed of any claim to have assisted the men in battle, and when the war came to an end their role in the military successes of the movement was not fully recognised. It is against this backdrop that I argue that the perception of women's sexuality shaped resistance to women's access to recognition and power within the fighting forces, and in determining the patterns of gender relations within both the RUF and the Kamajor during Sierra Leone's civil war.

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