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*Masculinity in the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone:  
greed, grievance and entitlement***

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**Abstract**

*During the conflict in Sierra Leone, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) developed a distinct model of conflict that focused on terrorising civilians. They prioritised sexual violence, torture, abduction and looting. The violence was widespread, but it was not completely indiscriminate. The particular tactics chosen by the RUF, such as gang rape or amputation, shows a particular logic when placed in Sierra Leone's broader context. The violence acted out is best understood when placed in the context of RUF military culture. This paper explores the complex relationship between the construction of militarised masculinity in the RUF and the tactics they developed. The concept of youth revolt is explored from a gendered perspective to explain the form that violence took. To do this the forms of violence used, the targets of violence chosen and the role of military leadership have been explored. Finally, the lessons learned through a study of the RUF are placed within the broader context of unconventional conflict.*

**Introduction:**

Between 1991 and 2002 the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone innovated a distinct model of warfare that focused on brutalising the civilian population. Interpretations of the RUF's use of violence are hotly contested by commentators. This paper hopes to contribute to the existing understandings of war in Sierra Leone by exploring the significance of masculinity in the RUF. The practices of soldiers in war are not inevitable or predetermined. Since the late 1980s feminist scholars have begun to develop a strong body of literature on the role of gender in the practice of war. Authors such as Joshua Goldstein, Cynthia Enloe and Kathleen Barry have all worked to demonstrate that the practices of western militaries are constructed by notions of masculinity.<sup>1</sup> So far most of the literature on Sierra Leone has not explored the construction of gender as a primary determinant of combatants' behaviour. Hoping to rectify this situation this paper suggests that an understanding of masculinity can help to explain the RUF's use of violence against civilians. To do this, the existing literature on the RUF is explored and critiqued from a pro-feminist perspective. It is shown that gender neutral appeals to greed or

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1 Kathleen Barry, *Unmaking War Remaking Men: how empathy can reshape our politics, our soldiers and ourselves*, Spinifex Press, North Melbourne, 2010, Joshua Goldstein, *War and Gender: how gender shapes the war system and vice versa*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, Cynthia Enloe *Does Khaki Become You? The militarization of women's lives*, Pandora Press, London, 1988, Cynthia Enloe, *Maneuvers: the international politics of militarizing women's lives*, London, University of California Press, 2000.

grievance are not sufficient to explain the RUF's practices. Instead, it is suggested that an understanding of male entitlement is central to the scripts of greed and grievance in Sierra Leone.

### **Civil War in Sierra Leone**

Civil war started in Sierra Leone in 1991 when the RUF crossed the Liberian/Sierra Leonean border with a small group of ex-patriots and supporters from the National Patriotic Front of Liberia.<sup>2</sup> The conflict resulted in wide-spread displacement of the civilian population, callous human rights abuses, and the exploitation of Sierra Leone's significant mineral resource by armed groups.<sup>3</sup> During this time the conflict evolved from a conventional insurgency to a messy civil conflict where clear distinctions between each organisation broke down.<sup>4</sup> Attacks against civilians took on a clearly gendered dimension as the rape and sexual torture of women and girls became commonplace.<sup>5</sup> Although all groups were complicit in the exploitation and abuse of civilians, the RUF has been identified by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as the worst abusers.<sup>6</sup>

The RUF was formed by Foday Sankoh and a small cadre of Sierra Leonean ex-patriots while fighting in Liberia with Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia.<sup>7</sup> Their stated aims were to overthrow the corrupt Sierra Leonean government and institute a more egalitarian social order.<sup>8</sup> The political character and ideology of the RUF were at the best of times unclear. The only remaining statement of the RUF's ideology is "Footpaths to Democracy", a possibly forged document which borrows liberally from other revolutionary publications such as the Green Book and Mao's writing.<sup>9</sup> The RUF were strongly opposed to the distribution of power and resources in Sierra Leone prior to the war.<sup>10</sup> RUF ideology also expressed a clear opposition to 'corruption' in Sierra Leone.<sup>11</sup> Despite these professed goals, the RUF did not actively work to combat corruption or exploitation in the areas that they controlled. The organisation of the RUF often resembled the

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2 J. Peter Pham, *The Sierra Leonean Tragedy*, 2006. p.84.

3 Human Rights Watch, "We'll Kill You if You Cry" Sexual Violence in The Sierra Leone Conflict, *Human Rights Watch*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 2003.

4 Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report Volume 2*, Freetown, 2004. p.9

5 Amnesty International, *Sierra Leone Rape and Other Forms of Sexual Violence Against Girls and Women*, 2000.

6 Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report Volume 2*, Freetown, 2004. p.43.

7 J. Peter Pham, *The Sierra Leonean Tragedy*, 2006. p.85.

8 Yusuf Bangura, 'The Political and Cultural Dynamics of the Sierra Leone War: a critique of Paul Richards', in Ibrahim Abdullah (ed.), *Between Democracy and Terror: the Sierra Leone civil war*, Codesria, Senegal, 2000. p.14.

9 Yusuf Bangura, 'The Political and Cultural Dynamics of the Sierra Leone War: a critique of Paul Richards', 2000. p.15.

10 Danny Hoffman, "Dissent Politics and the War in Sierra Leone", *Africa Today*, Vol.52, No.3, 2006. p.3.

11 Danny Hoffman, "Dissent Politics and the War in Sierra Leone", 2006. p.3.

most corrupt and exploitative tendencies in Sierra Leone's patrimonial system.<sup>12</sup> Due to the hypocrisy and cruelty of the RUF they failed to garner significant support among the Sierra Leonean population at any stage during the conflict.<sup>13</sup> Their lack of appeal with civilians resulted in the RUF forcibly recruiting young men and women. This was primarily done through abduction or coercion.

The RUF were quite successful in indoctrinating their forced recruits. Many becoming deeply attached to the RUF project despite their initial experience of being abducted or coerced. Interviews with ex-combatants suggest that they became devoted to the RUF in a very profound way.<sup>14</sup> Ex-child soldiers interviewed by Myriam Denov suggest that they became deeply attached to the RUF's successes and failures, eventually expressing a great deal of joy or despondency depending on the success of the last mission.<sup>15</sup> The RUF were also very successful in turning every day civilians into efficient torturers, willing to brutalise their former neighbours.

The RUF model of warfare was developed over time. The RUF began as a fairly conventional insurgency, using some heavy military equipment such as artillery and armoured vehicles.<sup>16</sup> However, once it became apparent that the RUF was not receiving widespread support they began directly attacking the civilian social order that had rejected them. Peter Pham has recorded this shift in detail, suggesting that after 1993 the RUF avoided direct confrontation with the Sierra Leonean Army (SLA), preferring to attack "soft" targets such as humanitarian mission compounds, towns and mines.<sup>17</sup> These efforts worked to extract resources, control lucrative ventures and brutalise civilians.<sup>18</sup> The focus on civilian targets raises a number of questions. These tactics do not appear to have served any significant strategic interest. Understanding why the RUF chose to use such brutal violence is an essential challenge to conceptualising civil conflict in Sierra Leone.

Violence was used to control the population and enhanced an 'enclavist' military culture that treated all non-members as enemies deserving brutal violence.<sup>19</sup> Through directly targeting non-combatants the RUF was able to destabilise Sierra Leonean society and gain control over lucrative diamond mining regions. Mineral resources were smuggled across the border into neighbouring countries such as Liberia in exchange for arms, drugs and luxury goods.<sup>20</sup> To supplement this income the RUF was able to loot most of their other material needs

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12 Peter Krijn *War and the Crisis of Youth*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2011. p.37-41

13 William P. Murphy, "Military Patrimonialism and Child Soldier Clientism in the Liberian and Sierra Leonean Civil Wars", *African Studies Review*, Vol.46, No.2, 2003. p.68.

14 William P. Murphy, "Military Patrimonialism and Child Soldier Clientism in the Liberian and Sierra Leonean Civil Wars 2003. p.70.

15 Myriam Denov *Child Soldiers* 2010. p.106.

16 J. Peter Pham, *The Sierra Leonean Tragedy*, 2006. p.83.

17 J. Peter Pham, *The Sierra Leonean Tragedy*, 2006. p.94.

18 Greg Campbell, *Blood Diamonds: tracing the deadly path of the world's most precious stones*, Westview Press, 2002. p.xxiii

19 Lansana Gberie, *A Dirty War in West Africa: the RUF and the destruction of Sierra Leone*, Indiana University Press, Indiana, 2005. p.136.

20 Greg Campbell, *Blood Diamonds: tracing the deadly path of the world's most precious stones*, Westview Press, 2002. p.xxiii

from civilian populations.<sup>21</sup> The plunder of resources gradually became a core focus of all military organisations.<sup>22</sup>

The most significant defining trait of RUF ideology was their opposition to the hegemonic arrangement of Sierra Leonean society. The RUF do not appear to have maintained a coherent ideology beyond a vague opposition to injustices in Sierra Leonean society.<sup>23</sup> Their ideology emphasised that Sierra Leone was a corrupt country in need of cleansing. In particular, they emphasised economic injustices felt by men excluded from the patrimonial system.<sup>24</sup> Instead of only targeting the figureheads who benefited most from the patrimonial system the RUF appear to have constructed society at large as the enemy. In the ideology of the RUF the 'big men' of Sierra Leonean society were singled out as the primary object of hatred.<sup>25</sup> Civilians who suffered atrocities have reported that they were told to go to the president and to let him know what Sierra Leone was suffering.<sup>26</sup> This fits well with the pre-existing construction of masculinity in Sierra Leone. In the patrimonial system present in Sierra Leone prior to the conflict, local people were identified and defined by the patrimonial relationship between patron and client.<sup>27</sup> In this way, social relations in Sierra Leone were arranged like a cog and spoke system, with the patrician 'big men' at the centre and the clients are social subsidiaries of the 'big man.'<sup>28</sup> This functioned on multiple levels, with entire communities subordinate to a regional figure, family units to local 'big men', and women or children subordinate to their husband or father.<sup>29</sup> Although the primary object of the RUF's vitriol was the head of state, their violence was acted out against all who were perceived to be under the state's leadership, from the military to local civilian populations.

Women and girls were also subject to specific gender based violence during the conflict. Rape and sexual slavery were core tactics in the RUF's repertoire.<sup>30</sup> During raids on civilian communities' gang rape was a common occurrence.<sup>31</sup> These rapes were often particularly brutal with many deaths or substantial injuries recorded by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and human rights observers

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21 J. Peter Pham, *The Sierra Leonean Tragedy: history and global dimensions*, Nova Science Publishers, 2006. p.103.

22 J. Peter Pham, *The Sierra Leonean Tragedy*, 2006. p.83.

23 J. Peter Pham, *The Sierra Leonean Tragedy*, 2006. p.94.

24 William P. Murphy, "Military Patrimonialism and Child Soldier Clientism in the Liberian and Sierra Leonean Civil Wars", *African Studies Review*, Vol.46, No.2, 2003. p.63.

25 Krijn Peter *War and the Crisis of Youth*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2011. p.2.

26 Physicians for Human Rights, *War-Related Sexual Violence in Sierra Leone* 2002.

27 William P. Murphy, "Military Patrimonialism and Child Soldier Clientism in the Liberian and Sierra Leonean Civil Wars", *African Studies Review*, Vol.46, No.2, 2003.

28 Krijn Peter *War and the Crisis of Youth*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2011. p.37

29 Chris Coulter, *Bush Wives and Girl Soldiers: women's lives through war and peace in Sierra Leone*, Cornell University Press, New York, 2009. p.58

30 Karen Barnes, Peter Albecht, & Maria Olson, *Addressing Gender-Based Violence in Sierra Leone: mapping challenges, responses and future entry points* International Alert, London, 2007.

31 Human Rights Watch, "We'll Kill You if You Cry" *Sexual Violence in The Sierra Leone Conflict*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 2003. p.3.

such as Human Rights Watch and Physicians for Human Rights.<sup>32</sup> The RUF would often directly target women with whom it was taboo to have sex such as the elderly, very young girls and pregnant or breastfeeding women.<sup>33</sup> In addition to this there was widespread sexual slavery within the armed groups. The practice of 'bush' or 'AK47' marriages has been documented as widespread within the RUF.<sup>34</sup> Despite the prevalence of sexual violence during the conflict few academic accounts have focused on the gender. Some strong gendered scholarship has been developed on gender in relation to female soldiers by Chris Coulter and Myriam Denov.<sup>35</sup> However, these works tend to focus primarily on females. This literature is informative and valuable but further work is needed to understand the other half of gender and how masculinity informs men's behaviour.<sup>36</sup>

### Existing Scholarship

A strong body of existing scholarship on the RUF has developed since violence ended. Many accounts oversimplify or naturalise the behaviour of combatants. This is done by making broad appeals to the base savagery of combatants or their class composition. Existing research provides a strong basis for understanding the practices of the RUF. However, it does not explain the complete picture, often ignoring gender as an analytical category and treating actors as impartial neutral participants

Three approaches exist to try and explain the RUF's use of violence. The first approach forwarded by Robert Kaplan suggests that violence was caused by a combination of resource scarcity, tribalism and poor governance. The second approach emphasises combatants' grievances, suggesting that the RUF was motivated by the failed patrimonial system and corrupt government. The third approach suggests that conflict was caused by economic pressures such as the class composition of the RUF or collective greed. Each of these accounts provides valuable analysis. However, none of the existing approaches alone is sufficient to explain the practices of the RUF.

The work of Robert Kaplan provides some of the earliest analysis of violence in Sierra Leone. Drawing on his experiences on the West African coast Kaplan wrote the influential article *The Coming Anarchy* in 1994. Kaplan suggests that the burgeoning conflict in Sierra Leone was caused by resource scarcity, weak

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32 Physicians for Human Rights, *War-Related Sexual Violence in Sierra Leone: a population-based assessment*, Physicians for Human Rights, USA, 2002, Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report Volume 2*, Freetown, 2004.

33 Human Rights Watch, *"We'll Kill You if You Cry"* 2003. p.54.

34 Chris Coulter, *Bush Wives and Girl Soldiers*, 2009.

35 Chris Coulter, *Bush Wives and Girl Soldiers: women's lives through war and peace in Sierra Leone*, 2009, Richard Maclure, Myriam Denov, "Reconstruction versus transformation: post-war education and the struggle for gender equity in Sierra Leone", in *International Journal of Educational Development*, Vol.29, 2009. Myriam Denov *Child Soldiers: Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010.

36 Paul Richards, "Young men and gender in war and post-war reconstruction: some comparative findings from Liberia and Sierra Leone" in I. Bannon and Maria Correia, eds., *The other half of gender: men's issues in development*, Washington World Bank, 2006.

government and animist religion. Kaplan contends that a combination of resource competition, weak government structures and inferior culture were all essential causes that contributed to conflict in Sierra Leone. Robert Kaplan's 'coming anarchy' thesis provides a poor explanation for war in Sierra Leone. In his influential article 'The Coming Anarchy' he characterises Sierra Leone as pre-modern and anarchical, stressing the lack of Christianity or Islam in moderating immoral behaviour.<sup>37</sup> Kaplan's argument that men's violence in Sierra Leone was the inevitable outcome of material conditions such as overpopulation and scarcity does not contextualise the social significance and role of violence. A great many regions suffer from similar maladies without resulting in the organized rape, or in young boys committing mass slaughter in the capitals.

To explain the lack of violence in some communities suffering from overpopulation and scarcity, Kaplan appeals to the 'strength' of different cultures as a protection against violence. Relying on masculine tropes of strength and dominance Kaplan states, "resurgent Islam and Turkic cultural identity have produced a civilization with natural muscle tone."<sup>38</sup> In contrast, Sierra Leone is characterised by "superficial Christianity...undermined by animist beliefs not suitable to a moral society, because they are based on irrational spirit power."<sup>39</sup> Kaplan characterises the violence of the RUF as apolitical, anarchical and tribal. Kaplan contrasts the apparently 'civilized' west to the tribal and violent third world, emphasising the most sensational and brutal aspects of conflict in Sierra Leone while de-emphasising the role of international forces in exacerbating conflict. Kaplan's description of violence in Sierra Leone as anarchic and irrational is not supported by the academic literature on armed forces. The violence of the RUF was loaded with political significance, particularly when placed within the context of protest masculinity. Despite the apparently anarchic quality of violence in Sierra Leone, the actions of combatants appear to have been centrally orchestrated by commanders. Violence often appears to have entailed a brutal form of political communication, and ideological warfare against the hegemonic social order in Sierra Leone.<sup>40</sup>

The second approach suggests that the RUF was motivated by grievances. This approach originates in the work of Paul Richards' 1996 book *Fighting for the Rainforest*.<sup>41</sup> Richards' work aims to rebut Kaplan's suggestion that conflict in Sierra Leone was caused by resource scarcity. Richards demonstrates clearly that resource scarcity was not a significant causal factor in Sierra Leone. Rather he charts the intellectual development of the RUF leadership in the Freetown student movements. He also suggests that the failing patrimonial system in Sierra Leone was a significant causal factor. Though there were sufficient resource in Sierra Leone these were being exploited by the existing political elite. Here Richards' account fits into the scholarship that argues civil wars are caused by political grievances. Richards introduces the argument that the motivations of the RUF were political rather than simple economic opportunism or cathartic violence. Paul Richards' original work in

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37 Robert Kaplan, 'The Coming Anarchy' 1994.

38 Robert Kaplan, 'The Coming Anarchy' 1994.

39 Robert Kaplan, 'The Coming Anarchy' 1994.

40 Danny Hoffman, "Dissent Politics and the War in Sierra Leone", *Africa Today*, Vol.52, No.3, 2006. p.13.

41 Paul Richards, *Fighting for the Rainforest*, Heinemann, 1996.

*Fighting for the Rainforest* did not have a significant focus on gender. Despite this, his later work has shown an increased focus on gender and masculinity.

The third approach emphasises greed as the primary cause in Sierra Leone's war. This approach suggests that either the class composition of the combatants or simplistic opportunism caused combatants to begin a civil war.<sup>42</sup> Authors such as Ibrahim Abdullah have all emphasised the greed based approach to war in Sierra Leone.<sup>43</sup> Abdullah argues that the RUF's basic character was not motivated by political concerns. Instead he suggests that the RUF was primarily made up by 'lumpenproletariat' youths.<sup>44</sup> A similar critique has been developed by Yusuf Bangura that challenges Richard's suggestion that the actions of the RUF were motivated by political concerns.<sup>45</sup> The greed account suggests that the majority of recruits to the RUF were not student revolutionaries, but impoverished and opportunistic thugs who used the war to achieve economic gain.

### **Greed, Grievance and Male Entitlement:**

Both the greed and grievance accounts provide a part explanation for the RUF's character and practices. Despite this, they are not on their own sufficient. An understanding of RUF violence needs to be explained in relation to the construction of gender in Sierra Leone prior to the war. Acts of violence in war are not meaningless, random or truly indiscriminate. Some recent literature has attempted to understand the violence committed by the RUF. Many earlier accounts of war in Sierra Leone have sensationalised violence often describing their actions as indiscriminate, or characterised it as irrational brutality. Both greed and grievance accounts appeal to norms of men's entitlement. The RUF had significant grievances with Sierra Leone's government. However, these grievances were primarily focused on young men's exclusion from power and entitlement. The exploitative actions of the RUF suggest that their primary grievance was not with inequality in Sierra Leone, but with their own exclusion from power. The RUF's extensive efforts to gain control over economic production in Sierra Leone also betrays the fact that greed was an influencing factor. However, greed alone cannot explain the brutality with which the RUF attacked civilian populations or their abuse of Sierra Leone's most marginalised members or society. The RUF fought to satisfy a mythology of manhood that suggested men should be powerful and wealthy.

The targets chosen by the RUF and the tactics that they employed show a concerted effort to assert the combatants' masculinity. The RUF intentionally chose to target symbols of male power and dominance. Village chiefs and other esteemed

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42 Ibrahim Abdullah "I am a Rebel": Youth Culture and Violence in Sierra Leone *Makers and Breakers: Children and Youth in Postcolonial Africa*, Africa World Press, 2005.

43 Yusuf Bangura, 'The Political and Cultural Dynamics of the Sierra Leone War: a critique of Paul Richards', in Ibrahim Abdullah (ed.), *Between Democracy and Terror: the Sierra Leone civil war*, Codesria, Senegal, 2000.

44 Ibrahim Abdullah, "Bush Path to Destruction: the origin and character of the Revolutionary United Front/Sierra Leone, in *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 2, 1998.

45 Yusuf Bangura, 'The Political and Cultural Dynamics of the Sierra Leone War', 2000.

members of the community were directly targeted by the RUF.<sup>46</sup> These attacks often involved a harsh element of ritual humiliation.<sup>47</sup> Other targets that were systematically attacked included women and girls.<sup>48</sup> There was also a particular emphasis on virgins and women with whom it was taboo to have sex.<sup>49</sup> The RUF also worked to destroy civilian men's ability to be economically productive and fulfil their role as providers.<sup>50</sup> This was done through arson, amputation and forced displacement. These efforts rendered hegemonic men unable to fulfil their proscribed roles as providers and protectors. Conversely the RUF's flashy public displays of violence actively asserted their masculinity. Attacking civilians did little to achieve their expressed political goals. In contrast the model of warfare that they developed appears to have been in direct opposition to their professed political agenda of egalitarianism and an end to corruption. Though this violence is not aiming to achieve any clear political goal it is overly simplistic to describe it as irrational or indiscriminate killing. The violence committed shows a number of clear patterns and has clear logic when gender is directly referenced.

The targeting of elders demonstrates an effort to destabilise the existing male order in Sierra Leone. When entering into a village the RUF would often round up the community in a public space.<sup>51</sup> Once assembled the members of the RUF would try to locate the chief or other leading figures. Once this had been done these men would be publicly humiliated. The public nature of this humiliation was significant and in many cases members of the community were forced to watch, in others they were required to give praise, dance or clap their hands while the abuse was being conducted.<sup>52</sup> The form that humiliation took was diverse, but often took the form of sexual torture. Abuses that have been recorded include forcing an elderly chief to remove his clothing in front of family members and the community.<sup>53</sup> After this they were required to engage in humiliating practices such as running up and down as well as being publicly beaten or abused. These humiliations challenge the strength and authority of the existing hegemonic men and undermine their claims to power and authority.

In other instances attacks against the hegemonic order was directed towards an intermediary. In many instances this was done by turning women's bodies into a battlefield. Women and girls were often attacked humiliating, emasculating and

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46 Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report Volume 3A*, Freetown, 2004. p.510

47 Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report Volume 3A*, 2004. p.529

48 Chris Coulter, *Bush Wives and Girl Soldiers*, 2009.

49 Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report Volume 3B*, 2004. p.86.

50 Myriam Denov, Richard Maclure, "I Didn't Want to Die so I Joined Them": structuration and the process of becoming boy soldiers in Sierra Leone" in *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol.18, No.1, 2006. p.129.

51 Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report Volume 3A*, Freetown, 2004. p.510

52 Human Rights Watch, *"We'll Kill You if You Cry"*, 2003. p.38.

53 Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report Volume 3A*, 2004. p.510



dominating a prominent man. Both men and women have reported many instances where a man's wife or daughter was raped with the male family member were forced to watch. These efforts undermine the mythology of a male protector, symbolically 'spoiling' his property (women) through the act of rape. This fundamentally undermined a key role for men in Sierra Leonean society, while at the same time establishing the dominance of rebels. The intentional targeting of women who it was taboo to sexually use was a powerful tool for the RUF in their efforts to assert male dominance and power.

The RUF broke down gerontocratic power structures by raping elderly women.<sup>54</sup> Prior to the war in Sierra Leone, Paul Richards reports that young rural men had severely limited marriage opportunities. Due to the struggling patrimonial system many young men were unable to afford the bride price necessary to get married.<sup>55</sup> In contrast to this, a small percentage of wealthy older men were able to marry many younger women due their monopolisation of economic resource.<sup>56</sup> This created a trend of older men having sexual control of many younger women or girls while young men were unable to obtain women for sexual activity. Upsetting this state of affairs the young men of the RUF raped many women in communities that they occupied. Explicitly disrespecting gerontocratic power it has been recorded that young boys would be encouraged to rape elderly women who were old enough to be their parents. Obtaining women for sexual use was already understood as a method of establishing men's authority and superior status.<sup>57</sup> The use of sexual violence for the RUF is an outgrowth of a system that encouraged men to use women as a signifier of their male authority and power.<sup>58</sup> The inversion of existing gender relations, where young men sexually abuse elderly women, challenged the existing social order that had excluded young men. During this time young men were given an understanding of masculinity that encouraged them to gain sexual access to women to demonstrate their manhood.

These tactics did not serve the strategic interests of the RUF. Extreme violence alienated the civilian population of Sierra Leone and destabilised civilian society. The brutality of the RUF meant that Civil Defence Forces developed in many regions, resisting the RUF and raiding their patrols. Despite forwarding an agenda of equality and justice, the RUF relied on slavery, forced displacement and the international black market. The brutality of their violence also created significant international attention on the conflict. This led to the eventual disarmament of the RUF with international forces entering Sierra Leone to install democracy. However, the violence committed by the RUF was not random or indiscriminate. The brutalisation of civilians shows a clear pattern and the command structure went to great extents socialising recruits to commit violence.

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54 Danny Hoffman, "Hunter Militias and the International Human Rights Discourse in Sierra Leone and Beyond", 2004. p.84.

55 Paul Richards, "To Fight or to Farm? Agrarian Dimensions of the Mano River Conflicts (Liberia and Sierra Leone)" in *African Affairs*, vol.104, 2005.

56 *ibid*

57 Chris Coulter, *Bush Wives and Girl Soldiers*, 2009. p.103.

58 William P. Murphy, "Military Patrimonialism and Child Soldier Clientism in the Liberian and Sierra Leonean Civil Wars", 2003. p.74

The actions of soldiers during war do not occur in a vacuum. The RUF was able to draw on pre-existing patriarchal resources when socialising their recruits to commit violence. Pre-existing notions of male power and authority were warped to fit the RUF's interests.<sup>59</sup> The process of socialising recruits indicates that the actions of RUF fighters were not inevitable, or random. Instead, the command meticulously socialised recruits to prime them for violence.<sup>60</sup> The construction of masculinity within the RUF has historical precedents that may help to explain its development. The first of these is the slave trade prior to the 20th century. The second is the patrimonial system in Sierra Leone. These two factors establish the necessary preconditions for protest masculinity to manifest during Sierra Leone's civil war.

### **Patrimonialism and Youth Revolt**

Research conducted by Paul Richards, Danny Hoffman, and William Murphy suggests that the practices of the RUF are strongly influenced by the patrimonial system in Sierra Leone. Ex-RUF members have reported that their inability to fulfil expected societal roles was a core grievance. Richards' interviews with RUF members in the post-war period found that recruits were unable to obtain the full status of manhood.<sup>61</sup> In rural areas young men were particularly grieved at an inability to get married. Elder patricians maintained a harsh monopoly over agricultural land.<sup>62</sup> Due to this, young men were unable to develop sufficient wealth to pay for bride price. This resulted in resources being centred on a few elder men who married multiple younger women.<sup>63</sup> This excluded young men from sexual access to women and from economic enrichment. Many young men felt victimised by the elderly, unable to fulfil the hegemonic notions of masculinity that society had placed on them. Richards' interviewees portray a clear sense of injustice at the situation with one explaining "our chiefs and some elders were doing wrong to our young...some preferred to go and join the RUF, either to take revenge or to protect themselves."<sup>64</sup>

Richards concludes that the conflict should therefore be interpreted as a youth revolt, analogous to a slave revolt. RUF recruits certainly did have substantial grievances with the patrimonial system in Sierra Leone. This is particularly the case for the leadership of the RUF, many of who were exiled by the state in the 1980s. Despite this, it is a correct assertion to suggest that the RUF represented a 'youth' revolt. The RUF began as and remained a heavily male dominated organisation. Within the RUF the substantial female membership was subjected to a wide range of injustices. Chris Coulter's research with female ex-combatants from the RUF suggests that women and girls interests were not served by their participation.<sup>65</sup> Many female recruits were subjected to brutal sexual abuse and slavery. They were also exploited

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59 Danny Hoffman *The War Machines: Young men and violence in Sierra Leone and Liberia*, Duke University Press Books, Durham, 2011. p.60.

60 P.W. Singer, *Children at War*, Pantheon Books, New York, 2005. p.74-104.

61 Paul Richards, "To Fight or to Farm? Agrarian Dimensions of the Mano River Conflicts (Liberia and Sierra Leone)" in *African Affairs*, vol.104, 2005.

62 Krijn Peter *War and the Crisis of Youth*, 2011. p.2.

63 Chris Coulter, *Bush Wives and Girl Soldiers*, 2009. p.43.

64 Paul Richards, "To Fight or to Farm? Agrarian Dimensions of the Mano River Conflicts (Liberia and Sierra Leone)" in *African Affairs*, vol.104, 2005.

65 Chris Coulter, *Bush Wives and Girl Soldiers*, 2009.

for their physical labour by male peers who felt entitled to be serviced by members of the opposite sex. Myriam Denov's research also suggests that women and girls were actively excluded from group solidarity within the RUF.<sup>66</sup> Due to the exploitation of women and girls in the RUF it is an overstatement to suggest the RUF represents a youth revolt against the patrimonial system. Rather it is a revolt against a particular group of men being excluded from the patriarchal dividends.

#### **Implications and limitations:**

Though there is some promising work that focuses on the socialisation of recruits in the RUF the majority of this literature is focused on child soldiers. This is a significant limitation for trying to understand the implications of gender in the RUF and in broader contexts. Gender roles often play out very differently for children and adults. Therefore using a body of literature that primarily focuses on the experiences of children limits its generalisability. Additionally a great deal of work focuses on the most sensational aspects of violence in Sierra Leone, such as drug use, amputation and sadistic forms of torture. All of these aspects are important but can occlude other common practices such as the use of rape. There are also limits to our knowledge of the subject matter due to the intense stigma placed on combatants in the post-conflict era. Additionally very little literature that deals with gender provides any direct focus on masculinity. These aspects provide substantial limitations to understanding the use of violence by the RUF. Despite this, the exploration of existing literature from a gendered perspective remains informative for trying to understand the actions of the RUF.

Understanding the dynamics of greed and grievance from a gendered perspective provides a promising avenue for looking at civil conflict more broadly. The analysis of civil conflicts in terms of greed and grievance is not unique to the Sierra Leonean context. When greed and grievance is framed by and understanding of how perceptions of male entitlement are constructed this served to destabilise other gender neutral accounts. This provides a critical basis for looking at men's behaviour in civil war zones from an explicitly pro-feminist framework that sees men's actions as the result of social construction rather than an inevitable consequence of material conditions.

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