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Bush Path to Destruction: The Origin and Character of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF/SL)

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> We recruited 54 boys, mostly from Bugisu, and started training them at Nachingwea. Unfortunately, once again, these boys had not been well-selected. They had mostly been working in towns like Nairobi and had a*kiyaye* (lumpen proletariat) culture. They began misbehaving in the Frelimo camp and soon after their training, the Tanzanian government dispersed them.
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> I took personal charge of the Montepuez group and stayed with the boys during the training months in Mozambique because I feared that some of the recruits might be undisciplined *bayaye*, like those of 1973, and they might have caused us problems. With my presence in the camp, however, we were able to suppress most of their negative tendencies and attitudes.
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> (Yoweri Museveni, *Sowing the Mustard Seed : The Struggle for Freedom and Democracy in Uganda*, Macmillan, 1997, pp.85 and 90).

Introduction

When the Revolutionary United Front/Sierra Leone (RUF/SL) entered Kailahun District on 23 March 1991, few people took them seriously or even realised that a protracted and senseless war was in the making. The corrupt and inept government in Freetown was quick to label the movement the handiwork of Charles Taylor; the incursion, a spillover from the Liberian civil war. This erroneous representation of the movement and the war was echoed by the media, both local and foreign; it later appeared in one scholarly investigation as 'the border war' (Fyle 1994). Twelve months after the initial

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attack in Kailahun, a group of rebellious officers from the warfront trooped to Freetown, the seat of government, and literally seized power from the corrupt politicians amidst popular support from the masses.[1] Calling itself the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC), it declared its intention to end the war, revamp the economy, and put the nation on the path to multi-party democracy.

What is the relationship between these two events? What is the common link between the 'Revolution' (coup d'état) in Freetown and the 'Revolutionary' movement in the hinterland? What did the coup plotters, most of whom were in their twenties, share with those who had started the insurrection that gave them the opportunity to launch their 'revolution' in the city? Why did both movements borrow the same 'revolutionary' script? We provide answers to some of these questions by examining lumpen culture and youth resistance in Sierra Leone. For it is this oppositional culture which connects the 'revolution' in the hinterland (RUF) and the one in the city (NPRC). Both were products of a rebellious youth culture in search of a viable alternative — without a concrete agenda — to the bankrupt All Peoples Congress (APC) regime. To understand the historical and sociological processes which gave birth to the RUF, with which this paper is concerned, it is necessary to situate the investigation within the context of Sierra Leone's political culture, especially the glaring absence of a radical or viable alternative. It is this absence of a radical alternative or tradition, we argue, which paved the way for the bush path to destruction.

A Radical Tradition/Alternative?

The demise of the militant Youth League inaugurated by Sierra Leone's legendary Pan-Africanist cum revolutionary, I. T. A. Wallace Johnson, in 1939 did not immediately witness the end of radical labour/political agitation (Abdullah 1995; Denzer 1977). What it did was to close the formal avenues for radical political agitation through a series of concessions, in the form of constitutional arrangements, which eventually led to independence. Eliphas Mukunoweshuro has admirably mapped out the contours of this process of negotiation in his study of decolonisation in Sierra Leone (Mukonoweshuro 1993; Kilson 1966; Cartwright 1970). The sanitisation of politics, which was its outcome, did not adversely affect the labour movement. Labour activists

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1 No serious study has been done on the 1992 coup d'état but see the following: Fyle 1994, Zack-Williams and Riley 1993, Kandeh 1996.

inspired by the Youth League tradition of continuous agitation and strikes, such as Marcus Grant, Henry Georgestone and George Thomas, were influential in shaping the process of remaking the working class inaugurated by the colonial office and the labour department once Wallace-Johnson had been imprisoned and the organisation proscribed. The battle over an independent working class organisation and movement was the most important factor which shaped post-war politics and labour agitation in the mines and in the city of Freetown. The incorporation and subsequent cooptation of prominent labour leaders — Akinola Wright and Siaka Stevens — into positions of authority in the era of decolonisation did not blunt the radical edge of labour politics. This was evident in 1950 when strikes and riots rocked the iron ore mines, and again in 1952 when diamond miners in Yengema demanded a wage raise and shut down the mines for two weeks. In February 1955, Marcus Grant with the active support of Wallace-Johnson defied the colonial state and called a general strike which paralysed the city and forced colonial officials and employers to concede to workers' demand for a raise and the right to bargain directly with their employers.[2]

The Youth league tradition was, therefore, alive in the 1950s; but it did not assume a national dimension nor did it emerge as a coherent and organised force in post-colonial politics. Arguably, it was partly because of the subsequent defeat of the Youth League, and partly also because of Wallace-Johnson's exit to Ghana that radical politics or a leftist tradition was shunted out of Sierra Leone's political culture. Attempts to continue this radical tradition with a working class party — Sierra Leone Labour Party — were abandoned after the party was defeated in the 1957 elections.[3] Elsewhere on the west coast, notably Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal, a radical tradition was kept alive in the labour movement and in national politics. What, therefore, marked Sierra Leone's post-independence politics was not its tolerance of a leftist tradition — in the labour movement or in national politics — but its conservative orientation and uncritical support for the West. The APC's pretence at reviving the Youth League tradition —

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2 These issues are discussed in Ibrahim Abdullah, 'The Colonial State and Wage Labour in Post-War Sierra Leone: Attempts at Remaking the Working class, 1945-1960'; Ibrahim Abdullah and Ishmail Rashid, 'Uprising Discourses: Workers, Peasants, and the State, Sierra Leone, 1955-56', American Historical Association Conference, New York, 1997.

3 Marcus Grant and the other executive members of the Labour Party subsequently joined the victorious Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP).

Wallace-Johnson gave his blessing to the party — was betrayed by its ethnic composition and empty socialist rhetoric which initially fell on deaf ears.[4] It was only after the party made an impressive start in the 1962 general elections and then swept the polls in the 1964 city council elections that it was able to establish its credentials as a viable opposition. Siaka Stevens's trade union career, and the party's predominantly working and lower-middle class leadership, lent credence to its claim to radicalism. This was in sharp contrast to the SLPP which was dominated by the upper- and middle-class professionals and their 'traditional' allies, the Paramount Chiefs.[5]

But the APC in power was markedly different from the party in opposition or when it controlled the City Council. Perhaps because it was under the watchful eye of an SLPP government in power, the APC tenure at the Freetown City Council was relatively free of any blemish; it allowed for checks and balances. The APC government after 1968 was something else. Once it had successfully reduced the number of SLPP members in the House of Representatives through fraudulent and not so fraudulent election petitions, in which the judiciary fully acquiesced, the party quickly began to dismantle the national coalition cabinet that was instituted in 1968. This move signalled the beginning of the APC's consolidation of power, and opened the road to a one-party dictatorship (Lavalie 1985).

From 1970 when the first attempt to unseat the government was made by Brigadier John Bangura and others, to the alleged coup attempt involving Mohammed Sorie Forna and fourteen others, for which Foday Sankoh, the RUF leader, was jailed, to the fraudulent elections of 1973 and 1977, the party did all it could to stifle the opposition and consolidate its power. By 1978 when the one-party state was declared, the SLPP had become disabled due to the incessant arrest and detention of its members. The general atmosphere of violence against any form of organised opposition or dissent, and the simultaneous centralisation of power in the hands of the party and the Pa, as President Stevens was normally referred to, transformed the state and by implication politics into an affair for and by APC members and supporters.[6] This centralisation of politics made access to resources impossible for non-members; it made membership of the party a sine qua non to get by;

4 The party's red flag and socialist rhetoric were seen as symbols of its radical orientation.

5 For a detailed account of this period see John Cartwright, *Politics in Sierra Leone*, Toronto, 1970.

6 See APC, *The Rising Sun*, London, 1982.

exclusion literally meant death by attrition (Hayward 1989; Kandeh 1992; Zack-Williams 1990). There was nothing 'shadowy' or informal about this state. Its alleged 'shadow' character, to use William Reno's outlandish formulation, was neither literal nor metaphorical; the existence of the state or the informal networks which is the foundation of Reno's formulation was real to those who experienced it; and it meant death or total exclusion for those who challenged its power.[7] It was within this context that university students and the youth emerged as the informal opposition to the corrupt and decadent APC.

Uprising Discourses: The Making of an Informal Opposition

The search for an alternative political space — not necessarily a radical one — to the SLPP did not emanate from the youth. Nor did the youth make any organised or independent contribution — based on their own agenda — towards the defeat of the SLPP. The immediate post-colonial period, from independence in 1961 to 1968, was characterised by a tussle for power between the two organised political machines: the SLPP and the APC. If the youths were involved, their role was simply one of foot soldiers. Their marginalisation was concretely expressed in the form of party youth wings (there were also women's wing); an arm of the party always peripheral to where real power was located. Their performance could therefore be read as a ritual; it always begins with a crisis situation, and their mobilisation as thugs to do the dirty work. Once the project is complete, they fall back to the status quo ante, as wings, waiting for yet another assignment. Examples of these youth 'activities' are the Ginger Hall massacre (Akibo Betts-led and inspired); the violence at Mobai, Kailahun bye-elections; the attack on Fourah Bay College (Kemoh Fadika-led and organised); the large scale violence at Kurubonla, Kabala (Kawusu-Conteh-led and organised); and the Sanda massacre (led and organised by Thaimu Bangura). These events now form part of the iconography of political violence in Sierra Leone. This reading of their political role does not mean that those who joined the so-called youth wing were all thugs or simply auxiliary troops. People like A. A. Seray-Wurie, Caleb Aubee, Alfred Akibo-Betts, Adewole and Olufemi John, Mohammed Samura, Kemoh Fadika and Kojo Randle started their political careers as members of the APC youth league. But their role was strictly limited to 'action oriented tasks' and occasional trips to communist countries.

7 William Reno originally formulated his concept of the shadow state with reference to Charles Taylor's so-called Greater Liberia.

It was only in the 1970s that the party gave those who were still in the fold a rightful place in the sun.[8]

An interesting angle to ponder is why youths. An obvious historical parallel is Wallace-Johnson's Youth League. Was this performance of youths a throwback to the youth league era of the 1930s? Siaka Stevens's admiration and respect for Wallace-Johnson is well known. Was this therefore a conscious attempt to re-enact that tradition by revisiting the youth league days? These questions on historical memory and performance are tantalising not least because Wallace-Johnson's activities were youth-centred: employed as well as unemployed youth. And he had argued in the heydays of youth league radicalism in the 1930s that the youth of Sierra Leone would one day assume the mantle of radical leadership and redeem 'the Athens of West Africa' in the eyes of the Black World and of humanity.[9] Is this therefore the Wallacian dream come true or is it a caricature? I would argue that the youth project which started unfolding under the APC in the 1960s, and which inevitably culminated in the emergence of the RUF/NPRC, does not constitute a re-enactment of the Wallacian script because it lacked the discipline and the maturity that Wallace-Johnson was known to constantly emphasize in his writings and speeches. Even so, it raises an interesting historical question: the role of historical memory(ies) in the construction of a radical project.

Paul Richards, a British anthropologist who has studied Sierra Leone's war, does come to grips with the role of youth in the drama surrounding the war and the continuation of the war (Richards 1995, 1996; Abdullah 1996c). But his heavy reliance on resources of the forest (he should have concentrated on the trees instead of the forest) to explain the war totally neglects the central political importance of rebellious youth culture, not youth, in shaping the process leading to the rebellion and the continuation of the war. This youth culture, which became visible in the post-1945 period, had its genealogy in the so-called 'rarray boy' culture.[10] It is a male-specific oppositional

8 The National Youth Movement (NYM) formed in 1963 was an important outlet for Freetown youths. It later became the nucleus of the APC youth league. Interview: Adewole John and Cecil Blake, both founding members. For a brief autobiographical sketch see Cecil Blake, *Through the Prism of African Nationalism: Reflective and Prospective Essays* , Freetown, 1990.

9 For Wallace-Johnson's view on this and other issues see La Ray Denzer, *I.T.A. Wallace-Johnson and the West African Youth League*

10 'Rarray boy' is a pejorative term for 'underclass' youth. It is also used in Nigeria with reference to rebellious youth culture. I have used the term 'lumpen' instead of rarray boy.

sub-culture which easily lends itself to violence. In Nigeria, these kinds of youth are referred to as *yan banga* and *jaguda boys* (or the now popular *area boys*) respectively; in Algeria, they are called *hittiste*; in Uganda they are generally referred to as *bayaye* — they are to be found in every city in Africa (El-Kenz 1996; Truilizi 1996; Museveni 1997). Their role in post-colonial politics, especially their discourse on empowerment/disempowerment, is only now beginning to attract scholarly attention.

In Sierra Leone, the first generation of 'rarray boys' acted as thugs for the politicians; they played this role because of their contradictory consciousness (Abdullah 1996a, 1996b; Opala 1994). Mostly unlettered, they were predominantly second generation residents in the city, whose abode, the *pote*, (a popular peri-urban area of relaxation for unemployed youths) was also a cultural/leisure space constructed around the *odelay* (masquerade).[11] They are known for their anti-social behaviour: drugs (marijuana), petty theft, and violence. Their periodic carnivals on public holidays are always held under the watchful eyes of the police; they needed permits for their carnivals, first from city officials and later from the police.[12] Their revelry and riotous behaviour alienated them from the city inhabitants: they were a good-for-nothing bunch who mainstream society believes should be best avoided.

This representation of lumpen culture began to change in the 1970s particularly when middle-class youths and other respectable groups became key players in this popular culture. The character and composition of the *pote* also began to change as *odelays* emerged as a more reputable element of the urban cultural landscape. Yet this change was replete with all the contradictory tendencies inherent in lumpens as a social category. Thus, whereas politicians were interested in taming and coopting this culture to ensure a ready supply of thugs to do their dirty work, the entry of middle-class youth and others in the *pote* as participants in the periodic carnivals, transformed the culture as well as the nature of the *pote* from an area for social misfit into one of political socialisation and counter cultural activities (Abdullah 1996a). A majority of the middle-class youth elements were still in high school but participated in the drug culture, and gradually acquired the mannerisms and iconography of the emerging popular culture.

11 The *pote* shares a lot in common with the *shebeens* in Southern Africa. See Michael O. West 1992.

12 For a study of 'odelay' as urban art see John Nunley, *Moving with the Face of the Devil: Art and Politics in Urban West Africa*, Urbana-Champaign, 1987. Nunley's study is silent on the politics and sociology of this oppositional culture.

Others dropped out of school entirely, following the footsteps of the original *rarray boys*. The entry of this new crop transformed the social composition of the *pote*. This change coincided with the coming of reggaé music and a decided turn to the political.

The influence of music was at first local: it was the rhythm of local rock musicians, drug and political talk. It started in 1971 with Purple Haze, a musical group in the city of Freetown; then came Super Combo from Bo, followed by Afric Jessips, Suberb Seven from Liberia, and Sabanoh '75. The reggae music of Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, Bunny Wailer and Jimmy Cliff, and the confrontational political lyrics of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti's Afro-beat added a further dimension to the repertoire of youth rebelliousness and non-conformity. Liberation struggles against settler colonialism also contributed to the development of this new oppositional culture. The *pote*, like the English pub, became an arena for discussions centred on what was popularly referred to as *DE SYSTEM*. Foday Sankoh, the RUF leader, echoed this 1970s' discourse in a recent interview: 'I said when I come out (from prison) I will organise the system'.[13] System *dread* became a slogan and a rallying call for alienated youths in the *potes*, mostly unemployed. The popularity of marijuana — the drug of choice — brought diverse groups to the *pote*. *Pote* language gradually began to filter into mainstream society. Lumpen youth culture was suddenly at the cutting edge in the development of the Krio language — the vocabulary expanding to incorporate *pote* terms from gambling, petty theft, and hustling. The transformation from *rarray boy* to *savis man* — as they subsequently became known — was complete with a new language and an iconography of resistance. This transformation was signified by the link between town and gown.

Ishmail Rashid has explored the connections between this new lumpen culture and Fourah Bay College (FBC) students, a constituent college of the University of Sierra Leone. What comes out clearly in his work is the emergence of 'organic intellectuals', who were in the forefront articulating some form of change. In the 1970s the group included many high school drop-outs and some unfortunate GCE 'O' and 'A' level holders, who were mostly unemployed. Some later went to the university, but the majority joined the city's expanding army of unemployed who lingered mostly in *potes* and the numerous working class pubs. These groups were conversant with the political philosophy of some distinguished Africans; they knew in outline the

13 Interview, *Concord Times*, December, 1996, p.9.

history of the slave trade and the dehumanisation of the African which it entailed; they could make connections between the colonial past and the post-colonial present; and generally espouse some form of Pan-Africanism. *Pote* discussions were spiced with generous quotes from Marcus Garvey, Bob Marley, Kwame Nkrumah, Wallace-Johnson, and at times Haile Selassie. Some of these *pote* types had read a little bit of Kwame Nkrumah and Frantz Fanon, a bit of Che Guevara and Fidel Castro, and some undigested Marx and Lenin, thanks to Soviet Progress publishers.[14]

By the 1980s, university students, particularly those at Fourah Bay College (FBC), were a respectable bunch in the *pote*; they had become a reference group for their unfortunate brothers. Their role in the 1977 demonstrations enhanced their status *vis-à-vis* other groups in the *pote*. In the *pote's* code of honour, essentially an extension of the general clientelist relationship in the society, due regard was given to the *pote* 'savis man', who was also a student at FBC. Their unfortunate brothers listened to them as they preached, smoked and conscientised in the safe confines of the *pote*. It was within this milieu that the change from *savis man* to *man dem* took place. The camaraderie had come full circle; one love and brotherhood was the slogan of this new group of youths, evident in the popular support the 1977 demonstrations received from this youth constituency. From this vantage point the series of student protests in the 1980s become intelligible. The students, who were immersed in the rebellious youth culture, became the most articulate group to oppose the APC. They utilised the platform of student politics to launch an attack on APC rule and to call for radical change.

The 1977 student demonstrations were organised and led by students who were participants in this rebellious culture.[15] The Gardeners' club, much maligned by outsiders, was central to some of the demonstrations in the late 1970s and early 1980s.[16] By the early 1980s, other politically oriented student groups had emerged — The Green Book group, the Juche Idea of Kim III Sung, the Socialist Club and Pan-African Union (PANAFU). There is no evidence that these students were influenced by the ideas of Alvin Toffler, the

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14 Kwame Nkrumah's *Class Struggle in Africa* and Fidel Castro's *History Will Absolve Me* were popular texts.

15 In the interview referred to above, Foday Sankoh claimed to have been involved in the 1977 student demonstrations. There is no evidence to support this spurious claim.

16 Interviews with radical students at Fourah Bay College and Njala — the two campuses of the University of Sierra Leone — who were members of Gardeners and Future Shock clubs in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

American futurologist.[17] These new groups debated strictly political matters and saw the student union as an effective medium through which they could channel their grievances at the national level. They were different not only because of their decidedly political thrust but also because some of them eschewed the drug culture, a central pillar of this rebellious culture.[18]

The 1977 students demonstration was not the first time that students were involved in national politics. FBC students were involved in the APC-inspired agitation against the introduction of a one-party system under Sir Albert Margai. When the APC came to power in 1968, the populist Alfred Akibo-Betts sponsored the establishment of a youth league on campus. But like the lumpens before them, the students did not enter the political arena as independent actors; they were brought in as foot soldiers in the service of a mythical common agenda. The year 1977 was therefore the first time that FBC students, as a body, intervened in the political arena as an informal opposition with a clear-cut agenda. The initiative was taken by radical students, who did not anticipate the consequences of their actions. The demonstrations exposed the fragility of the APC regime; it was an extremely popular action. Siaka Stevens was forced to grant some concessions: a general election was called three months later. In spite of its limited gains, the demonstration was successful: it revealed the potential of organised protest by students.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, the APC government became involved in student politics by attempting to sponsor candidates. The move to draft noted radicals on campus did not succeed but it revealed the polarised nature of student politics as the nation entered the turbulent 1980s. The economic downturn in the early 1980s, partly fuelled by the lavish hosting of the 1980 OAU conference, and the dwindling mining revenues, exacerbated by rampant smuggling, affected the provision of scholarships for students as well as expenditure on health and other social services. The increase in the ranks of

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17 Paul Richards, in *Fighting for the Rain Forest,* suggests that Alvin Toffler's ideas were influential among radicals at Njala campus. This prompted him to make the rather spurious connection between the RUF's alleged emphasis on technology and its non-existent emancipatory project. Manan Deen and Francis Deen — two founding members of Future Shock — denied this influence. Francis was emphatic, 'I have never heard of this Toffler guy'! Interview, Oct.-Dec. 1996.

18 These new groups ranged from the politically serious to the unserious. The Juche group became identified with alcohol instead of socialism... 'Juche' was synonymous with beer drinking!.

the unemployed continued to shape the discourse in the *pote*. And the muted talk about revolution in 1977 gave way to open talk about revolution. How this revolution was to be prosecuted was never systematically discussed, nor were other options explored. But the talk about revolution, vague and distorted as it was, remained alive in the discourse of rebellious youths. Thus, the language shifted from *man dem* to comrade, and finally to brothers and sisters, symptomatic of an ideological change particularly amongst the *pote* revolutionaries in the numerous study groups in Freetown, Bo, Kenema, and Koidu. This change was evident in the political groups which had emerged at FBC campus in the early 1980s. Anti-imperialist slogans were now appropriated as part of this youth iconography.

Meanwhile, student-administration relations on FBC campus deteriorated. A student demonstration in January 1984 resulted in a three-month lockout. A commission of inquiry setup to look into the frequent complaints of students and conditions in the campus was favourable to students.[19] By 1985 the administration was determined to discipline students and keep state interference to a minimum. The appointment of an ex-police Chief, Jenkin Smith, as warden of students, reflected the change of policy.[20] It was in this context that a radical student union leadership emerged. The Mass Awareness and Participation (MAP) student union President, Alie Kabba, was elected unopposed while he was in Libya attending the annual Green Book celebration. The MAP was a loose coalition of radicals involving members of the Green Book study group, the Gardeners' Club, PANAFU, and the Socialist club. Its fierce rhetoric, bordering on adventurism, alarmed the college administration. The new student union government did not follow in the footsteps of previous student union leaderships who only commented on national issues during crisis situations. The former took the initiative, partly as a result of the popular youth culture of which it was part, to link up with youths in the city. Their publicity campaign spawned numerous anti-government posters and graffiti on campus and the city. A 'people's tribunal' adjudicated between students; it served as a check on anti-social behaviour. It was a popular union government based on an imaginary 'people's power'. These activities, along with rumours that the student

19 The Kutubu Commission report was never published.

20 This was the first time an ex-police Chief was appointed to the position of warden of students. His strict regime made the College administration very unpopular with the students.

leadership was being sponsored by the Libyans, did not endear it to the administration.

What remains unclear in the muddled accounts of several participants is the source of the wild campaign of disinformation about Libyan sponsorship and involvement in student politics.[21] Perhaps, Alie Kabba's trip to Libya prompted the charge about Libyan sponsorship. If this was the case, it was indeed a flimsy ground on which to base such a serious allegation. The trip was neither clandestine nor was Kabba the only student who travelled with the Sierra Leonean delegation. There were two faculty members on the delegation: Cleo Hanciles and Moses Dumbuya. Whatever the case, the charge of Libyan involvement was serious enough to provoke another student lockout.

The events which led to the expulsion and suspension of some 41 students was connected to the alleged Libyan links with the student leadership. The students were accused of holding on to their keys during the Lent semester break because they intended to camp Libyan mercenaries in their hostels. Neither the college administration nor the government investigated the charge. What the college administration did was to invite the notorious State Security Division (SSD) gendarme on campus to literally 'flush' students from their hostels. When the college reopened, the administration was faced with a militant demonstration which subsequently engulfed the city. In the ensuing melee, the principal's car was set on fire. Three faculty members — Olu Gordon, Jimmy Kandeh and Cleo Hanciles — judged friendly to the students, lost their jobs. Olu Gordon and Cleo Hanciles were founding members and patrons of PANAFU. The student union president, Alie Kabba, and four other students — Haroun Boima, Olutumi Mark, Samuel Foyoh and Kai Banya — were arrested and detained for two months. They were later arranged and then released for allegedly burning the principal's car.

The action of the student radicals could be described as infantile. They were neither politically mature nor sufficiently well disciplined to realise the shortcomings of whatever leverage they imagined they might have on the administration or the state. They naively thought that mere rhetoric would deliver their puerile call for 'people's power'. Compared with the 1977 leadership, the 1985 leadership was more organised, though politically

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21 The newspaper accounts are silent on these issues.

immature as well. The 1985 group could not grasp the inherent limitations of student politics and the dead end of confrontational politics.[22] Elsewhere on the west coast, notably Nigeria and Ghana, this confrontational stance had taught students a bitter political lesson (Olugbade 1981; Oyedeji 1980). The unpopularity of the regime was a factor which shaped student militancy: the students enjoyed tremendous support on campus and in Freetown. But the utterances of Alie Kabba, the union president, was according to some of his closest advisers, too immature. The interview he granted to the BBC about the change — 'Mount Aureol will not be going to the State House this time; the State House will have to come up' — was in the words of one of his closest comrades 'a stupid mistake'.[23] Their expulsion from FBC ended a phase in the making of an informal youth opposition. Henceforth, the baton passed to the lumpen youths and their organic intellectuals (some graduates of Fourah Bay and Njala) in the numerous study groups and revolutionary cells in Freetown, Bo, Kenema and Koidu.

Why did student radicals, obviously far backward in comparison to their counterparts in Nigeria and Ghana, embrace the word of bland Pan-Africanism and Libya's Green Book ideology? Why did Gaddafi's Green Book 'take root' in Sierra Leone and not in other West African countries? The students in Nigeria and Ghana supported the anti-imperialist stance of Colonel Gaddafi and applauded Libya's uncompromising position on Africa's liberation and Third World independence. But they did not embrace the Colonel's message partly because they were wedded to marxian/dependency political economy analysis and, partly because they were critical of Gaddafi's 'Third Universal Theory'.[24] Furthermore, radical students in Nigeria did not theorise the role of students as vanguards of the revolution because of the existence of a recognised radical fringe in national politics and a radical labour movement. Their position on the Nigerian 'revolution' was always articulated from the vantage point of an alliance of progressive forces. The

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22 'Students do not make revolutions' was a popular saying during and after the 1977 demonstrations.

23 Interview with radical students, October, 1996.

24 The following works were influential: Claude Ake, *Revolutionary Pressures*, London, 1978; Dan Nabudere, *The Political Economy of Imperialism*, London, 1978; and some of the exchanges published in the Dar-es-Salaam journal *Utafiti* in the late 1970s. For a good summary of the debates on the Nigerian left see Narasingha P. Sil, 'Nigerian Intellectuals and Socialism: Retrospect and Prospect', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 31,3, 1993.

disastrous attempt by Isaac Boro, a student leader in the 1960s, had seemingly foreclosed this option for student radicals in Nigeria.

The poverty of the student movement in Sierra Leone with regard to ideology and the lack of a post-colonial radical tradition, was probably the principal factor in explaining the attractiveness of Gaddafi's Green Book.[25] Their failure to critique Gaddafi's ideas is indicative of their level of political consciousness. Thus, they did not attempt a critical analysis of Gaddafi's populism and could not make the obvious connections between the Green Book and Libya's foreign policy. No attempt was even made to understand the Colonel's support for Idi Amin or Gaddafi's claim to Chadian territory (Ogunbadejo 1986; Simons 1996). It is this lack of critical ideas — this failure to search for one based on a thorough analysis of the situation — which explains why pan-Africanism was uncritically appropriated; and why bland revolutionary pan-Africanism became an option. Pan-Africanism was therefore the ideational context within which the movement unfolded; Libya, the midwife of the 'Revolution' to be.

Ghana and Libya: The External Connection

The expelled student union president was not the first president to visit Libya. Abdul Gbla was the first student union president to visit the Libyan Arab Jama'riyya in 1983. But Gbla's visit was not clandestine; he was invited to participate in their annual revolutionary celebration. He went with two other students — Abdul Gabisi and Nurudeen Wilson — and two faculty members: Cleo Hanciles and Moses Dumbuya. Gbla received an executive treatment; he had a session with the Colonel and was specifically asked to stay after the celebrations. He, however, declined the offer because of fears of getting involved with the Libyans.[26]

The Libyans entered Sierra Leone in the mid-1970s and began to make in-roads into civil society by using religious as well as non-religious channels to establish a presence. They provided generous grants to Haja Aisha Sasso for the annual pilgrimage to Mecca; established links with the powerful and crafty diamond dealer, J.S. Mohammed, who arranged a state visit for Siaka Stevens (Stevens could not stand the Colonel and turned down the invitation to go to Benghazi); provided a printing press for the *Tablet* newspaper

25 Some of the radical students interviewed attribute this to youthful adventure; others thought it was the money. Interview with radical students, Freetown and the US, Oct.,-Dec., 1996.

26 Interview with Abdul Gbla, former student President, FBC, 1981-1982; Oct.-Nov., 1996.

through J.S. Mohammed; and sponsored Green Book study groups at FBC. They generally maintained a low profile, and gradually worked their way into State House. Their alleged bankrolling of the 1980 OAU conference in Freetown remains unsubstantiated.[27]

If the ex-student leader was not the first student president to visit Libya, how did he establish the link which eventually led to the training of Sierra Leoneans in Benghazi in 1987 and 1988? It is quite possible, based on interviews with student radicals who knew Alie Kabba, that he had visited Libya before 1985; his occasional disappearing acts lent credence to such beliefs. Why did the expelled students (who were allegedly provided with a generous grant to pursue their studies) choose Ghana, not Nigeria or Liberia — two other English-speaking countries in the region — to pursue their studies?[28] The choice of Ghana may not be unconnected with Jerry Rawlings's support for Libya, and therefore an ideal place to pursue their goal.[29] From the standpoint of the Libyans, the expelled students were in exile to prosecute the 'revolution'.

When Kabba and others were released from prison their first port of call was Conakry, Guinea. From Conakry, they travelled to Ghana. It was a People's Bureau official, as the Libyan embassies are known, who instructed them to proceed to Ghana where they subsequently gained admission to the University of Ghana at Legon.[30] As noted above, the choice of Ghana is significant. During this period the Libyans were busy trying to set up their African revolutionary army to pursue the Colonel's dream of controlling the Azou Strip in Chad. Ghana had a regime sympathetic to Libya's foreign policy; Jerry Rawlings's 'revolutionary' pretensions also endeared him to the Libyans. Libyan foreign policy was crafted in the 1980s in furtherance of a specific goal: 'Revolution'. Everything about Libyan foreign policy in West Africa in the 1980s therefore revolved around this idea. It was this aspect of Libyan foreign policy — revolution in West Africa — which interested individuals like Alie Kabba; and before him, Charles Taylor, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) warlord, and the confused Kukoi Samba

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27 Paul Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest*, alleges that the Libyans paid part of the cost for hosting the 1980 OAU Conference in Sierra Leone.

28 The four expelled students enrolled at Legon University reportedly received $6000 each from the United Nations.

29 Burkina Faso, a French-speaking country, would have been another possibility because of the Libyan presence.

30 Interview with some of the expelled students, Freetown and the US, Oct.-Dec., 1996.

Sanyang (known as Dr. Manning), who proclaimed a dictatorship of the proletariat in the Gambia in 1981.[31]

The Libyan connection brought in some money — to further the 'revolution' — which made it possible for the expelled students in Ghana to provide sponsorship for four others who joined them the following year, bringing the number to eight. Kabba was known to be a frequent visitor to the People's Bureau in Accra; he made numerous trips to Libya, and occasionally to Guinea. It was during this period that he met Charles Taylor of the NPFL who had been imprisoned in the United States and Ghana, Kukoi Samba Sanyang, and other so-called revolutionaries who criss-crossed the Ghana-Burkina-Faso-Libya revolutionary triangle (Tarr 1993; Ellis 1995). Kabba's relationship with these types validated his 'revolutionary' credentials. This was important because the Libyans are notorious for dealing with a single individual. We know very little about their relationship with the Irish Republican Army (IRA). What is known about Libyan connections with revolutionary organisations in Africa suggests that they always operate through a contact person. It is through this contact person that they channel funds and issue directives about 'revolutionary assignments'. This was the type of relationship they had with the several Chadian factions they supported in the 1970s and 1980s; with Museveni's National Resistance Movement (NRM); and Kwame Toure's All African People's Revolutionary Party (AAPRP). The onus of communicating with the organisation therefore rests with the individual. In a situation where there were no formal organisational structures or even an organisation, as was the case with the Sierra Leonean group, such individual risked being accused of embezzlement and corruption. Such was the case with the ex-student leader through whom the Libyans channelled whatever resources they had for the Sierra Leonean project.

What the Libyans did not understand, or rather did not want to understand, was the fact that the ex-student leader had no constituency outside FBC campus. Perhaps because the Libyans have never experienced or made a social revolution, they were incapable of distinguishing between inflammatory student rhetoric and a revolutionary movement in the making. It is also possible that they recruited only those who would be willing to do their dirty work. The story that students in Ghana were doing 'revolutionary' work in an anti-imperialist organisation which they wanted the Libyans to sponsor was a

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31 For an account of the centrality of Ghana and Burkina Faso as a haven for 'revolutionaries' in the 1980s see Tarr 1993, Ellis 1995.

cover to get the funds coming from the Colonel. This view is supported by those who went to Libya as well as those who were in Ghana.[32] In spite of this, the Libyans still channelled the resources for the Sierra Leonean project through Kabba. When he was given a 'revolutionary' assignment to attack US targets in Freetown, Kabba could not get the job done. When he tried to subcontract the job to PANAFU, by promising monetary support, his proposal was turned down. And when it was time to deliver recruits for military training in Libya in 1987, Kabba and his group in Ghana had no alternative but to turn to Freetown.[33]

By the time the recruitment exercise commenced there was no programme of action nor was there any guideline on the procedure and mechanism for recruitment. The students in Ghana did not espouse a concrete political philosophy which would have provided a theoretical guide for their commitment to armed struggle nor did they operate through any formal political structure or organisation. They remained, throughout their stay in Ghana, an informal political group linked together by their common experience of expulsion and their commitment to radical change. There was, therefore, no common ideological platform nor was there an acceptable political programme besides acquiring military training. The period from April 1985 (when students were expelled from FBC) to July-August 1987 (when Sierra Leoneans started leaving for military training) saw a shift in the composition of the radical groups in the city of Freetown and elsewhere. Student unionism had been proscribed at FBC so that the centre of operation for the radicals became the city of Freetown, Bo, Kenema and to a lesser extent Koidu. This shift catapulted those radicals operating in 'revolutionary' cells in the forefront of the movement for radical change. It was therefore to these groups, especially PANAFU, that the students in Ghana turned for recruits when they were ready to embark on the bush path to destruction.

The expelled students and others who called themselves 'revolutionaries' were not the first to initiate a call to arms nor where they the first to emphasize the need for military training. In 1967 the APC had established training camps in Guinea under the command of the then Col. John Bangura, and after the 1977 student demonstrations, the insurgency alternative was

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32 Interviews with some of the expelled students and those who went to Libya to train in 1987/88. Freetown and the USA, Oct.-Dec., 1996.

33 It was after Kabba graduated from Legon in 1987 that the recruitment of Sierra Leoneans for military training started.

freely discussed in radical circles. In the early 1980s, some victims of APC repression in Pujehun District — the Ndorgborwusui — had expressed an interest to arm themselves as a form of protection against state-sponsored terrorism.[34] What the student group and their allies appropriated was therefore the collective property of the growing army of potential insurgents/dissidents. Armed struggle had become part of the folklore of the revolution to be. The major difference is that it would not be an ex-military officer (Col. Bangura had been discharged in the army by the SLPP regime) who would co-ordinate the new call to arms. By a curious irony it turned out to be an ex-corporal in the signal unit who had been convicted for his involvement in a coup attempt that would champion this ancient call to arms and pursue it to its logical conclusion: the overthrow of the system.

The call came from Accra, Ghana, in June/July 1987. Before then, the issue of recruitment had been debated in Accra, where some of the expelled students reportedly expressed preference for the *pote* types. This was severely criticised (but never rejected) on the grounds of political consciousness and the need to do more political work. Since they had not sufficiently done their homework among the masses, this option was considered dangerous. Back in Freetown, a special session of the PANAFU congress reluctantly tabled the issue. The majority decided against an adventuristic enterprise in the name of revolution. This decision led to a split in the union between those who supported the move to go to Libya and those who were against. Those in favour were in the minority; they were eventually expelled from the movement. Among these were Abu Kanu (Commander BK), a founding member of Future Shock club and a graduate of Njala University College, and Rashid Mansaray, an activist from Freetown east end, who had left the country in 1986 to join the MPLA in the fight against UNITA in Angola, only to be told to return home and pursue the struggle in his own country. Abu Kanu, Rashid Mansaray and others left Freetown in July 1987, via Conakry and Accra, for Benghazi, Libya.

Another group, which included Foday Sankoh, left in August 1987. Sankoh's group included recruits from Freetown and the provinces. A group consisting mostly of high school students from St. Edwards arrived in January 1988. The different dates in their arrival had something to do with the availability of funds and the difficulties of convincing would-be recruits of the necessity to undertake military training. Politically conscious individuals were

34 The Ndorgborwusui rebellion was the first rural uprising against the APC.

not specifically targeted as recruits. For once PANAFU had rejected the idea of participating as an organisation, the project became an individual enterprise: any man (no attempt was made to recruit women) who felt the urge to acquire insurgency training in the service of the 'revolution.' This inevitably opened the way for the recruitment of lumpens. It is therefore not coincidental that only three of those who went to Libya had any form of employment.[35] Paul Richards's imaginary construct about excluded intellectuals in the RUF remains a nonsensical proposition not supported by evidence.[36] The ex-student leader who was in charge of disbursing funds never disclosed the amount available; nor did the Libyans listen to the incessant complaints from the Sierra Leonean contingent about his handling of the situation.[37] But the problem did not start in Libya; it started in Ghana even before the first recruits arrived.

Kabba's control of the purse, his clandestine and not so clandestine connections with People's Bureau officials in Accra, and his reported unbridled ambition to be the spokesperson of the 'revolution' had begun to sow seeds of discord within the student group in Ghana as early as 1986.[38] His central position as the 'peripatetic co-ordinator' of the project was because of his link with the Libyans.[39] When Kabba reportedly told his comrades that he would not undertake military training for medical reasons, they were therefore suspicious.[40] Others questioned his sincerity and commitment which on one occasion led to physical confrontation.

There was no concrete programme about what was to be done once the military training was over; nor was there any debate about the programme of action to be adopted. The only available document — *The Basic Document of the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone (RUF/SL): The Second Liberation of Africa* copiously quoted in the RUF propaganda booklet *Footpaths to Democracy : Towards a New Sierra Leone*, Vol. I — was essentially a critique of the neo-colonial regime. It was originally a PANAFU call for a popular democratic front (PDF), which was subsequently redrafted

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35 There was one high school teacher, an engineer, and Sankoh who was a photographer.
36 See Yusuf Bagura this volume.
37 Sankoh has consistently indicated that he parted company with this group because of their interests in money. See *Concord Times*, December, 1996.
38 Interviews with some of the expelled students and those who went to Libya to acquire insurgency training.
39 These are Alie Kabba's words.
40 According to Kabba this issue was never discussed.

and edited by Abu Kanu and Rashid Mansaray to reflect the armed phase of the 'revolution'. Parts of it were butchered to appear as Foday Sankoh's words. But the document had nothing to do with Sankoh or the RUF; it predated the formation of the RUF. It was appropriated by Sankoh and his vanguard after they entered Kailahun in 1991.[41] The document was produced in Ghana before the departure for military training in Libya.

Perhaps, the tragedy of the 'revolution' to be has to do with the fact that those who recruited Foday Sankoh underestimated his capacity to think and act politically. Sankoh was recruited by a PANAFU member, Ebiyemi Reader, who was active in Freetown in the late 1970s. He left for the hinterland after a key member of his group departed for Cuba around 1980. It was when Ebiyemi Reader, an eclectic organic intellectual, settled in the diamond area after a stint in Guinea-Bissau and Guinea-Conakry, and organised a 'revolutionary' cell, that he discovered Foday Sankoh.[42] Sankoh became associated with his group, attended meetings and started, for the first time, to acquaint himself with pan-Africanism. But Sankoh was not interested in reading. He was an action oriented individual who was impatient with the slow process of acquiring knowledge and understanding of the situation, which a revolutionary project entails. Put in another way, Sankoh was a militarist.[43] Before this period his world view did not go beyond the Sierra Leonean border; his ideas remained that of an angry man who had an axe to grind because of his imprisonment. His critique of what was popularly referred to as *DE SYSTEM* was still party and personality centred. Yet, he was willing to listen and eager to learn. His age and involvement with youths, some of whom could have been his children, earned him some respect and sympathy — Hence the reference to him as Pa Foday or Papei. There is evidence that Sankoh did not abandon the possibility of seizing power through another military coup. His idea of revolution, if he had any before this period, was to seize power by any conceivable means. So when the call to troop to

41 The document became part of the propaganda material of the RUF to be when Abu Kanu and Rashid Mansaray teamed up with Sankoh after their return to Sierra Leone in 1988. For excerpts from this document see *Foothpaths to Democracy: Towards a New Sierra Leone*, Vol. I (no date). Alie Kabba has claimed authorship of this document.

42 In the *Concord Times* interview Sankoh claimed to have started a study group in Bo. This is not correct.

43 He also claimed that he wanted to use PANAFU in 1986 but 'they were only concerned about South Africa and the rest of the world, forgetting that we have our own local problems'. This is also doubtful because it was through PANAFU that Sankoh was able to make the trip to Libya. See *Concord Times* interview.

Tripoli came from Accra, Sankoh willingly joined the crowd. What the others did not realise was that they were paving the way for Sankoh who had waited for just this kind of opportunity.[44]

Majority of the recruits were opposed to Kabba's decision to skip military training — cowardice and deceit some charged — on health grounds. It was, however, impossible to put up any organised opposition because the Sierra Leonean contingent was scattered in the various camps that littered Benghazi. It was only Kabba who knew where all the groups were; he alone could locate people in their respective camps. The issue took a dramatic turn when Alie Kabba refused to grant Sankoh exemption from military training on health grounds. Even though Sankoh pleaded that he be excused on the same grounds — he had problems from a previous surgery — Kabba refused. As a military man, Sankoh knew what he was talking about. But he did not win the battle; he had to give in because the odds were against him. Kabba on the other hand was able to skip training because he was in a position of strength.

When Kabba subsequently installed a 'revolutionary' high command, supposedly to direct the Sierra Leonean contingent, it was stoutly opposed by the majority of the recruits. The charge that he wanted to establish himself as the spokesperson of the movement was echoed; others simply repeated what they had been told about his undemocratic practices; while others made it clear they were not interested in pursuing the project any longer. In the ensuing confusion, attempts to get Kabba to account for money he supposedly got for the whole recruitment project proved impossible. There was even talk of eliminating those who decided that the project was not worth pursuing. In the end the motley collection of 'revolutionaries' who went to Benghazi, about thirty-five, some say fifty, left Libya frustrated and divided.[45] Some decided to forget about the experience; others decided to pursue the goal of 'revolution'. The return trip from Libya ended a phase in the bush path to destruction.

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44 Interview with PANAFU members and those who went to Libya in 1987/88. In his attempt to write his own story Sankoh claimed he left for military training in 1986. Again, this is incorrect.

45 Sankoh alleges that 150 youths were trained outside Sierra Leone. This figure is a gross exaggeration. Perhaps he is referring to those who were trained in Liberia. According to him 'we were eleven at first and I later sent about 150 men'. The number of Sierra Leoneans who went to Libya between 1987/88 were not more than fifty. Alie Kabba said about two dozen went.

The Making of a Lumpen Movement

All those who went to Libya, and who later became involved in the RUF, including Sankoh, returned to Sierra Leone before the launching of the armed struggle. Attempts were made to recruit and train cadres in the Yele area; this was however abandoned because it was considered risky. Up to this point Sankoh had not emerged as the leader of the movement; there was no organisation; instead, it was a loose collection of individuals who had returned from military training in Benghazi. 'At the beginning, there was no leadership. All of us were all (*sic*) organisers',[46] Sankoh revealed in a recent interview. Among those who returned to Sierra Leone determined to pursue the 'revolution' were Foday Sankoh, Abu Kanu and Rashid Mansaray. They formed a closed-knit group in the city, met periodically to discuss strategy, and embarked upon another recruitment drive. This time, it was decided that they should leave Freetown and settle in the provinces. It was this move to the provinces which opened the link between the RUF to be and the NPFL in Liberia. From the time they left Benghazi in 1988 to the period when they entered Sierra Leone as armed combatants, this trio travelled extensively in Sierra Leone and Liberia exploring avenues through which they could further their 'revolutionary' objectives. It was during one of these trips that they allegedly came into contact with NPFL officials.

According to one source, Sankoh met Charles Taylor in Libya in 1987, who then invited him to join the NPFL. This account does appear credible because the NPFL was originally constituted as a pan-African movement with membership open to all Africans. The Gambian, Kukoi Samba, was a founding member and vice-president of the NPFL. What remains uncertain is that the meeting took place at all. For Charles Taylor had parted company with the Libyans around June 1987. This was even before Sankoh and others went to Libya. Charles Taylor did meet other Sierra Leoneans in Libya and Ghana in 1986, and again in early 1987. If the meeting did take place in Libya why did Sankoh fail to take up the offer at a time when he needed it? This would have been an opportunity for Sankoh to establish his independence when it was apparent that the Libyans were backing the expelled student leader and were not going to provide the arms and ammunition needed to launch the 'revolution'. If Sankoh had met Taylor in Libya, he

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46 Sankoh was referring to 1986 when in fact this is true of the period after 1988. See *Concord Times* interview.

would definitely have turned up at Po, Burkina Faso, where the majority of the NPFL fighters were trained. There is no evidence that Sierra Leoneans were trained in Burkina Faso. Sankoh, the master strategist, would hardly have missed such an opportunity. The other account, that they came into contact with an NPFL official in Freetown, where Taylor had been detained with a Burkinabe passport, seems to confirm what subsequently happened.[47]

By mid-1989 a deal had been sealed between the two groups : Foday Sankoh and his group would help Charles Taylor 'liberate' Liberia, after which he would provide them with a base to launch their 'revolution'. After this informal alliance, the *Basic Document* — was amended to reflect the change. The historical relevance of the name 'Revolutionary United Front/Sierra Leone' is intriguing. Wallace-Johnson's West African Youth League was always the West African Youth League/Sierra Leone. Whether this was done at the instigation of Charles Taylor or whether it was a leaf from the Wallacian script is not clear. Yet it remains an aspect of the pan-Africanist image with which the organisation wants to be identified. There is no evidence that any Sierra Leonean took part in the initial NPFL attack on Nimba county in December 1989. What we do know is that Sankoh, Kanu, and Mansaray were in Freetown up to a week before the initial attack at Bomaru to convince those who had gone to Libya to join the RUF. Their activities alarmed some PANAFU members who threatened to report their presence to the police.[48] By November 1990, some members of this group, notably Kanu and Mansaray, had seen action as NPFL combatants.

From the time they left Libya to the period when they entered Kailahun, the group did not organise an election, nor was there a central committee. The loose organisation was headed by a collective leadership of three: Sankoh, Mansaray and Kanu. It was generally agreed that Sankoh would be the spokesperson for the group. When on 23 March 1991 the Revolutionary United Front entered Bomaru in Kailahun District it was Sankoh who announced to the world what the RUF was all about. By then *The Basic Document* had become the RUF manifesto, with Sankoh as leader.

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47 It was this NPFL official who introduced Sankoh to Charles Taylor who had just been released from detention in Freetown in 1988. Sankoh even claimed that they 'should have actually started in 1988 or 1989' but 'because there was no outlet and inlet (entrance and exit) that was why our struggle was delayed'. See *Concord Times* interview, Dec., 1996.

48 Rashid Mansaray reportedly bought all the available maps in the government bookstore. Interview with some PANAFU members and those who were in Libya.

The insurgency force from Liberia was composed of three distinct groups: those who had acquired military training in Libya — predominantly urban lumpens — and had seen action with the NPFL as combatants; a second group of Sierra Leoneans, resident in Liberia, mostly lumpens; and a third group of hard core NPFL fighters from Liberia, on loan to the RUF. Contrary to Paul Richards's account, the Sierra Leoneans recruited in Liberia were not 'political exiles and economic refugees' (Richards 1995). The so-called 'Sierra Leonean migrant workers some of whom joined us to cross the border to start our liberation campaign' were in reality lumpen Sierra Leoneans resident in Liberia.[49] This social composition of the invading force is significant in understanding the character of the RUF and the bush path to destruction.

The Character of the Revolutionary United Front

How revolutionary is a revolutionary movement which slaughters and terrorises the very people it claims to be liberating? What yardstick do we use to judge a movement which claims to be revolutionary without revolutionaries? To understand the character of the RUF, we need to look at the social composition of the 'RUFfians', their policies, their actions and their pronouncements. We need to go beyond their rhetoric and examine the contradictions in their pronouncements and actions; the silences, and the (mis)representations, about themselves and their programme. The wanton destruction of life, the hacking of limbs and the slitting of pregnant women was so disturbing that Foday Sankoh was compelled to make a special plea: 'Yes, we have committed atrocities. One day we shall stand before the people and ask for forgiveness' (Amnesty International 1996). In whose name were those atrocities committed?

The Revolutionary United Front is a peculiar organisation. It does not share any of the characteristics — ideology and organisation — and discipline which marks revolutionary movements in Africa or elsewhere in the world except the use of violence to attain power. The RUF is similar to RENAMO which was formed as a counter-revolutionary force to sabotage the Mozambican revolution and whose *bandido* activities did not cease when Dlakama and his leadership were compelled to reinvent themselves as

49 *Foothpaths to Democracy: Toward a New Sierra Leone*, p.7. Interview with Sierra Leoneans who returned after the NPFL attack on Monrovia, Freetown, Oct., 1996.

liberation fighters and democrats (Young 1990). Unlike RENAMO, the RUF started as a 'revolutionary' movement. What connects the two is the wanton violence on women and children, the systematic destruction of the economy, and the general terror in the countryside.

Paul Richards's assessment of the movement leaves too many substantive issues unanswered. His comparison with the Shining Path also neglects the historical contexts within which the two movements evolved. The Shining Path was formed by radical intellectuals who were inspired by Mao. There are no radical intellectuals in the RUF nor has the movement established any meaningful relationship with the peasantry based on the acceptance of a common programme produced within the context of a revolutionary dialogue. What marks the RUF is the chronic lack of cadres imbued with any revolutionary ideology. Its lumpen base has made it impossible for the movement to attract support from any social group. It is not surprising that the only movement with revolutionary pretensions comparable to the RUF happens to be the NPFL. This is not coincidental: they are products of the same cultural milieu; their membership is recruited from the same lumpen groups; and they employ the same tactics — indiscriminate use of drugs, forced induction and violence — to further their goal of capturing power. The torture and eventual murder of Sergeant Doe by the former NPFL commander, Yormie Johnson; and the mutilation, murder and rape of innocent women and children by the RUF, are acts that are incompatible with a revolutionary project. These 'revolutionary' acts, one would argue, were committed again and again precisely because of the social composition of these movements and the lack of a concrete programme of societal transformation. A lumpen social movement breeds a lumpen revolution.

The RUF's *Footpaths to Democracy: Toward a New Sierra Leone* contains words and phrases lifted from Mao Zedong and Amilcar Cabral. Hurriedly drafted in London and tossed back to the Zogoda — the RUF headquarters in the Sierra Leone rain forest — for approval, it was subsequently reformatted complete with the RUF anthem and generous quotes from the head of ideology, Foday Sankoh.[50] 'We moved deeper into the comforting bosom of our mother earth — the forest' ... 'The forest welcomed us and gave us succour and sustenance' ... 'Why we continue to fight' are taken from Mao

50 This is a propaganda document hurriedly put together by Addai Sebo of the International Alert, the conflict resolution group based in London. The second volume is yet to be published.

and Cabral. If the RUF cadres or leadership had read Mao and Cabral they would have related to the peasantry in a different manner; if they had read Cabral they would not have recruited lumpens. For Cabral had cautioned, based on the PAIGC experience in Guinea-Bissau, against the recruitment of lumpens in revolutionary organisations. It is tempting to attribute this to Frantz Fanon who is quoted on the first page of *Foothpaths to Democracy.* But this would be reading too much.[51]

There is, one would maintain, no revolutionary theory which guided the practice of the movement. If there was/is any theory, it evolved on an *ad hoc* basis as a result of their experiences in the forest. The RUF document acknowledges this: 'Initially we fought a semi-conventional war relying heavily on vehicles for mobility. This method proved fatal against the combined fire power of Nigeria, Guinea and Ghana ... Frankly, we were beaten and on the run ... We dispersed into smaller units, whatever of our fighting force.... We now relied on light weapons and on our feet, brains and knowledge of the countryside'.[52] If the RUF leadership was immersed in any revolutionary theory and practice it would have come to grips with the basics in guerrilla warfare, and thus avoid a 'semi-conventional war'. A semi-conventional war in a context where people are not politically organised could only lead to collective self-destruction. The RUF could have acquired its fighting skills on the battle field, but it did not learn how to relate to the people in the area under its control. Thus, instead of implementing a revolutionary programme it embarked on a campaign of terror in the countryside. This aspect of the RUF begins to explain why the peasantry, the natural ally of most revolutionary movements in the so-called Third World, deserted the movement. It is, therefore, not surprising that in the predominantly rural Mende South-East, the major theatre of war, the RUF cadres are referred to as the *Njiahungbia Ngonga,* meaning riff raffs/lumpens/unruly youths.[53] The bulk of the current RUF battle front commanders are lumpens from the rural south-east. These include Capt. Mark Lamin, Major Sam 'Maskita' Bockarie, and Major Morris Kallon.

The so-called communitarian principles, which Richards alleges that the RUF established in the enclaves under its control, has nothing to do with

51 The quotation 'Each generation must out of relative obscurity discover its mission, fulfils it or betrays it' is taken from Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth,* the chapter 'On National Culture'.

52 *Footpaths to Democracy: Toward a New Sierra Leone,* pp.10-11.

53 See Patrick Muana in this volume.

Green Book ideology. Such populists pronouncements as 'Every member of the community has rights to basic needs (food, housing, health, and transport)' (Richards 1996) are consistent with the demands of movements like the RUF seeking to sell themselves as popular movements. Actions such as the redistribution of 'food, drugs, clothes and shoes from 'liberated' government sources' (Richards 1996) do not in themselves constitute revolutionary practice. These should be seen as populist propaganda rather than influences from the Green Book. If the RUF has any ideology that ideology is definitely not one shaped by the Green Book. Its populist rhetoric backed by some *ad hoc* measures — such as the change from semi-conventional to guerrilla warfare — were designed as survival tactics to win support from the very public it terrorises. Richards's assumption that the Green Book was influential in shaping the views of student radicals led him to look for Green Book signs that were markedly absent in the RUF. Ironically, none of the student radicals whom Richards claimed were influenced by the Green Book joined the RUF.[54]

When the RUF first entered Sierra Leone in 1991, the movement was divided into two sections: vanguards and special forces. The former were sub-divided into two: those who trained in Libya in 1987/88 and lumpen Sierra Leoneans recruited in Liberia. The first group included Sankoh himself, Abu Kanu and Rashid Mansaray. Vanguard members sat on the war council, which was constituted before they entered the country in 1991, and were in charge of administrative day-to-day affairs, including intelligence in the areas under their control. The special forces were those NPFL fighters on loan to the RUF. They were directly under the control of Rashid Mansaray who was very popular and had distinguished himself as a combatant with the NPFL before 1991. The erstwhile commander-in-chief, Mohammed Tarawalie (Zino), was also with this group. Foday Sankoh was and still is the head of ideology. This organisational set up was reconstituted after the special forces of the NPFL were recalled in 1993. The reorganised RUF was still headed by the elite vanguard followed by the *wosus*, those who were recruited and trained in the Kailahun and Pujehun areas before the departure of the special forces. They are now the dominant group in the movement. Below them are the

54 This is not to say that the *Green Book* has nothing to offer. For the political and philosophical relevance of the *Green Book* see Cecil Blake and Saleh K. Abu-Osba, eds., *Libya: Terrorist or Terrorised*, Ontario, 1982.

standbys, mainly captives and conscripts, followed by the under age combatants.

If the initial wanton violence against innocent civilians, which the RUF concedes, 'became a nightmarish experience for our civil population' (mainly women and children), was attributed to the special forces on loan from the NPFL, why did the violence continue after they left?[55] An explanation for the continued violence and mutilation of innocent civilians has to be sought in the composition of the movement, its lack of discipline, its indiscriminate use of drugs (of all sorts), and the absence of a concrete programme besides vague populist formulations about foreigners and rural development. The first major crack within the RUF was connected with the indiscriminate violence and terror against civilians in areas under their control.

In August 1992, Abu Kanu (Commander BK) was executed by firing squad for failure to follow instructions (FFI) and conniving with the enemy. The following November, Rashid Mansaray, another leading vanguard commander, was executed for technical sabotage — failure to defend a strategic position against the enemy. He was tried in front of the last two-storey building on the Koindu-Kailahun road and shot by firing squad. These trumped up charges were masterminded by Sankoh to get them out of the way. They were the only top-ranking members who were with Foday Sankoh before the formation of the RUF; they were popular with the cadres and could have contested the position of leadership if there was a general congress or a popular assembly. They were also among the two leading strategists in the movement.

There is evidence that Abu Kanu and Rashid Mansaray were not happy with the random violence that RUF forces were committing in the name of the 'revolution'. An ex-PANAFU member in the Sierra Leone army reported that the area under Kanu's control was generally peaceful and well organised; he reached out to explain what the RUF was about to the peasants and was not engaged in unnecessary violence against civilians. Rashid Mansaray's opposition to the indiscriminate killing of innocent civilians was one of the reasons why he was executed. This was confirmed by his second-in-command who served as provost to I.H. Deen-Jalloh, the former head of RUF intelligence. Stories about the slitting of pregnant women and the raping of

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55 *Footpaths to Democracy*, p.8. According to this document they departed in May 1992. Interviews with captured RUF fighters however suggest that they left in 1993; others insisted that there were Liberians and Burkinabes as late as October, 1996.

young girls, some of whom were forcibly taken as 'wives', were common.[56] Once the movement had established some presence with the help of Charles Taylor, and Sankoh had acquired some modicum of respectability with his new found pan-Africanist credentials, he had no need for these vanguards anymore.

Those who subsequently became key players in the movement were those who did not know Papei, as Sankoh was called before 1991, or the prehistory of the RUF. Philip Palmer, Faiya Musa, I.H. Deen-Jalloh, Gibril Massaquoi, Bockarie Maskita, Mark Lamin and the former public relations officer Abubakar Sankoh, joined the movement after they returned from Libya or after they attacked and occupied Bomaru in 1991. It is indeed strange that a movement which claims to be revolutionary not only failed to attract popular support from radicals in and out of Sierra Leone but also failed to receive support from the very people in whose name it allegedly took up arms.

Youth Culture and Violence

The involvement of youths in political violence is not particularly new. The *veranda* boys of the Convention Peoples Party (CPP) in Ghana — they were not violent — are, arguably, lumpens. By lumpens, I refer to the large unemployed and unemployable youths, mostly male, who live by their wits or who have one foot in what is generally referred to as the informal or underground economy. This group provided some of the fighting force, not the original trainees, for the Mulele rebellion in the Congo in the 1960s, the MPLA and FRELIMO in Angola and Mozambique, ZANU and ZAPU in Zimbabwe, the fighters of Guokouni Waddei and Hisen Habre in Chad, the UPC in the Cameroons, the warlords in Liberia and the Revolutionary United Front.[57]

Whereas the 'classical' liberation movements had policy guidelines with respect to the recruitment and training of lumpens, the new movements — with the sole exception of Museveni's NRM — are more concerned with having people who could wield weapons in the name of 'revolution'.[58] The lack of discipline and a clear-cut ideology begins to explain why the RUF

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56 Interview with underage girls captured, abused and molested by the RUF; Oct., 1996.

57 For the recruitment policies of one of the classical liberation movements in Africa see Josiah Tungamirai, 'Recruitment to ZANLA: Building up a War Machine' in *Soldiers in Zimbabwe's Liberation War*, by Ngwabi Bebe and Terence Ranger, eds. London, 1995.

58 For Museveni's NRM see *Sowing the Mustard Seed* ; Mahmoud Mamdani, 'Uganda Today', *Ufahamu*, 15,3, 1986-1987.

tolerated all sorts of terror and anarchy in the name of revolution. Another important difference is the influx of more teenagers as lumpens; a true reflection of Africa's economy in this age of economic recession and structural adjustment. This new development has significantly narrowed the age differential between the leadership of these movements and the rank and file. In the case of the RUF, with the exception of Foday Sankoh and a few others who were not in the original group, the bulk of the leadership and membership are below thirty-five. This is also true of the NPFL in Liberia.

In his perceptive analyses of the social structure in Guinea-Bissau, the late Amilcar Cabral laid bare the considerations which informed the recruitment efforts of the PAIGC in Guinea-Bissau, and identified this particular group as the crucial link between the urban-rural network so important to the success of the PAIGC. But Cabral, as usual, was careful not to generalise; he mapped out the specificity of the situation in Guinea; he did not provide a blueprint for activists (Cabral 1969). Cabral was referring to the same group which Frantz Fanon had singled out as the only revolutionary force in the continent: the lumpen proletariat. Fanon's analysis ran counter to orthodox Marxists who had nothing but contempt for lumpens — an idea which stems directly from Marx's obsession with proletarian consciousness and revolution (Fanon 1961). This line of inquiry was pursued by some British-based Africanists in the 1970s. They argued that the lumpen proletariat is incapable of taking political action on its own because it always ends up fighting the battles of others in the political realm (Cohen and Michael 1973).

But the so-called second independence struggles tell a different story, at least in the Sierra Leonean context. The Revolutionary United Front is not only a product of lumpen culture but its membership is also lumpen. It took political action and proclaimed a 'revolution' which reflect the true character of its lumpen base. The movement does not possess the revolutionary drive nor the maturity to undertake a concrete analysis of the situation, which comes with a revolutionary project. It has no revolutionary intellectuals and the radical students who originally spearheaded the call to arms are not involved in the project. Lacking an alternative source of arms (the Soviet Union is no more), it had to depend on exploiting the resources available in its area of operation to pursue its 'revolution'. Its failure to win the sympathy of the very people it claims to be fighting for compelled it to recruit its army from lumpens and juveniles, two vulnerable groups to whom their bush path to destruction appeared more appealing. It is this lack of a clear-cut programme, the wanton use of violence for violence sake, and the absence of a well-articulated ideology, which disqualifies some of these second independence movements as a vehicle for progressive change in Africa.

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