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Understanding the Political and Cultural Dynamics of the Sierra Leone War: A Critique of Paul Richards's *Fighting for the Rain Forest*

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Overview

The closing years of the twentieth century have witnessed a spectacular rise in new modes of armed conflict which challenge standard conceptions of modern warfare. Most wars in the 1990s have been fought within countries rather than, as was hitherto the case, between states; the narratives or doctrines of the major world powers no longer define the ideologies and objectives of warring groups; small, highly mobile weapons, often supplied by illicit private dealers, seem to play a much bigger role than heavy conventional weapons in fuelling wars; combatants deliberately target civilians rather than armed opponents in prosecuting goals; and atrocities are freely committed as part of strategies aimed at publicising political statements. In countries that are rich in natural resources, such as diamonds, gold, timber, agricultural produce, drug-generating plants, and oil, the political goals of wars often interact with the multiple logics of resource appropriation, the drugs trade, the looting of private property, and vandalism. Such complicated outcomes have led many commentators to portray contemporary wars as being basically anarchical.

Paul Richards's book, *Fighting for the Rain Forest*, seeks to challenge these conceptions of war as they apply to Sierra Leone — a country that is located in the rain forest region of West Africa, and which boasts of rich mineral resources, forest products, export agricultural commodities and marine resources. Even though Sierra Leone's six years of war has been very

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viciously fought, with highly destructive effects, Richards argues that it has nonetheless been highly rational, rather than random and anarchic. He believes that the military methods of the armed groups have been very effective in achieving their objectives; and that the war should be understood as a 'performance' or political drama or discourse, 'in which techniques of terror compensate for lack of equipment'. He analyses Sierra Leone's war as a crisis of modernity, which has been caused by the failed patrimonial system of the All People's Congress that ruled the country for 24 years.

Richards states that Sierra Leone's youth are part of a modern, trans-Atlantic creolised culture, with a sophisticated understanding of world events and global cultural trends that are shaped by video, film, radio and the print media. He insists that the war is partly fought by the creative use of these media resources. Richards argues that the crisis of patrimonialism has had a devastating effect on schooling, social services, jobs, and national communications infrastructure, which have blighted the hopes of most young people for meaningful life in the cities. Young people have been condemned, instead, to a miserable and insecure life in agricultural farms or as labourers in diamond-digging camps. Richards maintains that the fact that the war is fought in the rain forest, means that it can only be understood by examining traditional conceptions and practices of forest resource management. He believes that the rebel movement, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), has a firm grasp of these traditions, and has effectively deployed its knowledge of them in prosecuting the war. This movement is said to be led by a group of 'highly educated' excluded intellectuals, many of whom have been living in Liberia as political exiles and economic refugees. They espouse Colonel Gaddafi's Green Book ideology, which is critical of the profit motive, and hold out the prospects for a new egalitarian society.

The book is divided into eight substantive chapters, an introduction, and a concluding chapter on war-peace transitions, which examines the prospects for peace and reconstruction. Reconstruction efforts, Richards states, should focus on local 'citizen action', on 'smart relief' rather than high profile assistance, and on the use of traditional cultural institutions and values — such as the accommodationist values of creolisation, initiation into secret societies, and the moral critique in the discourse on 'cannibalism' — which he believes have helped to stabilise these communities in the past.

Richards's book has many positive things to say about Sierra Leone, and seems genuinely interested in challenging widespread misconceptions of the country's war. His discussion of the dilemmas of youth, especially those located in the distressed regions of the forest, and who operate in an

environment of a shrinking state, opens up opportunities for further useful enquiry. His insights on the historical dynamics that linked the country's forest region to the world market, including the violent and exploitative exchanges that supported such linkages, are useful reminders about the problems which external influences have always posed to the livelihoods and physical security of rain forest communities. The brief sections on Pandebu (the last border village in Eastern Sierra Leone) and 'loose molecules', which deal with the formation of mixed diamond-mining communities in the border region, provide very insightful data and perspectives on the problems of social integration in that region. The information in these sections is based on field work material from a previous study on resources and subsistence strategies in the Gola Forest Reserve.

However, Richards's book is seriously flawed in several important ways. As this is the first book-length study of Sierra Leone's war, it is likely to be widely read by Sierra Leoneans and the public at large. It is important, therefore, to discuss these flaws, if only to ensure that future works on the subject do not repeat them. Firstly, driven by a need to prove that the Sierra Leone war is highly rational, Richards adopts only one logic — the RUF's logic of revolutionary change — to explain the dynamics of the war. The logics of resource exploitation, vandalism and random or barbaric violence are either ignored or not properly interrogated. Instead, the RUF is portrayed as a highly disciplined organisation, which seeks to transform society on the basis of what it says it will do in its published document, *Footpaths to Democracy.* Without any data to back up his claims, Richards concludes that the RUF was formed by a group of 'highly educated', excluded intellectuals who are capable of making rational decisions about their war goals and regulating the behaviour of their battlefield members. He does not investigate the social origins of the RUF cadre, which might have opened up other interpretations to the movement's chronic tendency to inflict blind terror on communities in the countryside. I discuss these complex issues under the first three sections of this review. The first section subjects Richards's rationalist framework to critical scrutiny; the second challenges his characterisation of the RUF as excluded intellectuals; and the third highlights the theoretical shortcomings and practical dangers of his analysis and conclusions about the RUF.

Second, Richards's book is flawed by his uncritical use of the concept of 'the crisis of patrimonialism' to explain the social realities that shaped the conditions for the war. He does not seem to have made any effort to check whether the general argument about an African patrimonial crisis, put forward by many Africanist scholars, fits the Sierra Leone data and reality. His failure to properly analyse the character of the Sierra Leone state means that he is

unable to concretely trace the political processes that made armed conflict and war an option in popular resistance to the authoritarian rule of the All People's Congress. Sections four and five of this review discuss these issues and suggest alternative ways of looking at the crisis and the political dynamics of the war.

Third, although Richards puts a lot of emphasis on the problems of youth, his analysis of youth culture is rather weak, and his conclusions about youth participation in the war are not always reliable: he is prone to hasty conclusions about, or far-fetched connections between, processes and events that have not been properly investigated. He also does not provide a differentiated understanding of Sierra Leone's youths: he is unable to distinguish between the strata of youth that are often called 'lumpens', or 'rarray man dem' in popular discourse, who are believed to be the driving force of the RUF's fighting machine, and other types of youth who, although disadvantaged, remain socially integrated into community and family institutions that guarantee social accountability. Richards uses survey data on the attitudes of non-war youth to make general conclusions about the effects of violent films and drugs on the youth in the RUF whom he has not interviewed. Section six provides a critique of this methodology for analysing youth culture and the conclusions about youth, the RUF, drugs and violence that he draws from his data.

Fourth, although Richards raises interesting issues for debate about war-peace transitions, his recommendations suffer from several basic problems. In his efforts to demonstrate the need to come to terms with local level initiatives, he ignores the point that some local activities, such as the 'attack trade' that he thinks should be privileged over 'high profile relief', have a potential to turn war into a way of life. Richards also demonstrates inadequate grasp of the social integration process that he refers to as 'creolisation' of the Upper Guinea Forest region and its role as a cultural resource for peace. Although he states the need to use traditional secret societies as a peace-building resource, he does not explain how this can be done in ways that will involve the participation of youth he has characterised as 'modernist' in behaviour and aspirations. And his recommendation of 'cannibalism' as an instrument to check patrimonialism is laughable. Since Richards flags the issue of patrimonialism throughout the text as a critical factor that triggered the war, one would have expected a more serious and systematic treatment of this problem than what he has offered his readers. These issues of war-peace transitions are discussed in section seven. I conclude the review with suggestions about ways of reforming the institutions

of state and society that may help the country to break out of the culture and logic of war.

Kaplan Versus Richards: A Case of Double Misconception?

Fighting for the Rain Forest is an elaborate critique of Robert Kaplan's influential article, 'The Coming Anarchy', which was published in the February 1994 edition of the popular American magazine, *The Atlantic Monthly*. Motivated by his previous journalistic reporting of the Balkan crisis, Kaplan sought to interpret the emerging post-Cold War order and warn of its consequences for world civilisation if nothing was done to protect areas that were still relatively free of some of its problems. He tapped into a wider current of Western fears about the dangers posed to social integration and global security by uncontrollable population pressures, environmental degradation, drug abuse, disease, crime and ethnic violence. He used Sierra Leone as an archetypal case to highlight the extent to which the forces for anarchy were already far advanced in some societies, which he thought might even be irreversible. In Sierra Leone, he believed, his key variables of disease, population explosion, environmental pollution, drugs, ethnic rivalry, and age-old African 'superstitious' beliefs have combined to produce several unsavoury outcomes: a bandit-driven war, youthful military rulers who display a shanty-town style of civic behaviour, and an increasingly strong articulation of an embedded African barbarity. In short, in the eyes of Kaplan, anarchy was already a fact of life in Sierra Leone.

Richards correctly questions this superficial reading of Sierra Leone's war and society. He devotes almost half of the book — four chapters — to disprove Kaplan's argument as it relates to population growth, environmental pressures, and media influences. He also highlights the fact, which most analysts of current African wars tend to miss, that the Sierra Leone war is not caused or driven by ethnic rivalry. Richards convincingly shows that Sierra Leone does not suffer from population pressure or an environmental crisis; and that its urban youth holds very modernist views about society and the world, using video, films and other types of media for self-improvement and not, as Kaplan and others believe, passively or as simple-minded copycats. Indeed, Kaplan would be surprised to learn that in the space of two years after the publication of his article, his archetypal anarchic society was successfully able to resist army rule, organise two consecutive national elections under unstable war conditions that ushered in a multi-party system of government; and that the bandit-rebels have signed a peace accord with a popularly elected government. Rather than lurching towards uncontrollable anarchy, what Sierra Leone's society demonstrates is a remarkable capacity

for self-generation, national accommodation, and a resilience to check the chaos that was threatened by a small minority of embittered and marginal war-drugged individuals.

However, despite his forceful and useful critique of the prophecy of the impending anarchy, Richards runs into trouble because of his fixation with Kaplan and his Western audience. In his effort to disprove Kaplan, he introduces a lot more confusion in the 'debate' on barbarism: i.e., by his superficial treatment of traditional values and institutions, his posing of questions that do not allow him to recognise aspects of barbarism that the rebel war has demonstrated, and his 'glorification' or misunderstanding of the violence or atrocities of the RUF. Given the fact that Kaplan did not do any serious research and never lived in the country to understand its history and dynamics, what he said about Sierra Leone could have been dismissed by Richards in one or two pages. Most Sierra Leoneans I know of who have read Kaplan do not take his broad views about the country seriously: they are hardly concerned about Richards's patronising call 'not to be worried about (the) expatriate intellectual misappropriation' of so-called African ideas from their African social contexts, or New Barbarism (p.163). Instead, Richards's fixation with Kaplan prevents him from probing deeply into the real dynamics of the war as they relate to society, politics and the economy. If one eliminates the issues that do not speak directly to the war, the book could actually have been reduced from its current length of about 200 pages to a full-length journal article of 30 or 40 pages.

Richards uses the concept of 'New Barbarism' to construct an alternative reading of the Sierra Leone situation. Where New Barbarism talks of mindless, random, anarchic or irrational violence, Richards posits rationality, organisation, discipline, and calculated visions of social change by a movement that is led by excluded, 'quite highly educated dissident' intellectuals (p.1). In other words, in the rationalist framework of Richards, the RUF is not a bandit group, but an organised movement with a clear political programme for radical social change. Richards's rationalist perspective suffers from three basic errors. Firstly, he does not explain the nature of the old barbarism, which would have helped his readers to assess the validity of the new type. In several locations in the text, Richards gives the impression that there is an authentic old barbarism, but he does not tell us what it is. The New Barbarism thesis becomes a convenient straw on which to weave his very limited material on the war and his more interesting work on the environment to produce a full-length book on the conflict.

Second, by treating all behaviour as rational, even in the most chaotic of conditions, the concept of rationality loses its heuristic value: it becomes difficult to say when a seemingly rational action is in fact irrational, when judged from the stand-point of competing alternatives and the information and resources that may be required to pursue other or more 'rational' outcomes. Every action, it seems, can be explained or justified as rational when seen from the limited standpoint of an actor, even if it can be shown that there are better alternatives to achieving the actors' preferred goal or objective. The cutting-off of hands to prevent adult villagers from voting may be a rational RUF strategy, as Richards insists, but one would have to stretch rationality to its limits to explain the logic behind the decision to subject to the same treatment 9 and 10-year-olds who do not vote.

The third problem relates to the deeply flawed view or assumption that rational actions cannot be barbaric. Simply because one can make rational connections between the RUF's strategy of cutting-off hands and the goal of preventing people from voting does not mean that the method used to achieve the goal of 'no-vote' is not barbaric. Yet, Richards's rationalist method prevents him from properly scrutinising the rational behaviour of the RUF. Haunted by Kaplan, his main preoccupation gets reduced to one goal: to show that RUF atrocities are rational and, therefore, not barbaric. Apartheid, Atlantic slavery, the Interahamwe call that led to the massacre of Tutsis, the Holocaust, Pol Pot's rule in Cambodia, and the cutting-off of Congolese people's hands by Belgian colonial officers, were all very rational responses to problems as perceived by the perpetrators, but they were also barbaric acts of violence against the victims and humanity. The failure to problematise the rationality of the RUF led to a rather poor grasp of the character of the RUF and the nature of its violence.

Mary Douglas's Excluded Intellectuals and the RUF's Violence

Richards's intellectual patron for understanding the RUF and the nature of its violence is Mary Douglas, a social anthropologist who has done general work on institutions, knowledge creation and the behaviour of socially excluded intellectuals. He quotes Douglas liberally in several locations of the book without questioning the relevance of what she has to say for the Sierra Leone situation. Douglas's work forms part of a growing literature on the social determinants of ideas and beliefs as they are articulated in different institutional settings. Excluded intellectuals often hold very abstract ideas and theories of social change, and are sometimes caught between two opposing realities: the pressures of mass equality, which capture the world of the underprivileged; and the social and political hierarchies that serve the rich and

powerful, and blight the hopes of radical intellectuals for purposeful egalitarian change.

Excluded intellectuals develop a discourse that rejects prevailing development orthodoxy, calling instead for radical transformations of society. Faced with arbitrary state power and repression, such intellectuals may become small sectarian groups, consumed by their own visions, texts, discourses and constant re-reading or 'deconstruction' of their societies. Exclusion and abstract intellectualism in the face of powerlessness may expose such groups to destructive violence, which itself may become a text to reinforce social bonds among group members as well as to discredit the legitimacy of the existing order. This reading of radical intellectuals and violence has been well analysed in several academic texts under the rubric of discourse theory. The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development also sponsored studies in the early 1990s on eight contemporary revolutionary social movements which have theorised violence as a central aspect of political struggle.

It is significant to note that these types of studies have focused on movements that are led by intellectuals (David Apter calls them 'cosmocrats'), who use violence strategically, and as organised discourse, to open up opportunities for revolutionary social transformations. One important logic of such violence is to delegitimise the state, by forcing it to reveal its inherently violent character to the public when it hits back violently at insurrectionary group members. Although not always successful, such movements often try not to provoke violence to the point where their message gets consumed by the violence, and the movements themselves become alienated from the wider public they seek to liberate. The radical revolutionary skeptics who Douglas and similar authors have in mind are 'educated and privileged' (Richards quoting Douglas, p.xxv), not semi-educated, partially tutored radicals, or individuals straddling the margins of society, who may be prone to random violence or weakly structured responses. Examples of the former are Lenin and the Bolshevik movement in Russia; Mao and the Chinese Communist Party; Che and his Latin American guerrillas; Ayatollah Khomenie and the Iranian mullahs; Cabral and the PAIGC in Guinea Bissau; Machel and Frelimo in Mozambique; and Guzman and the early Sendero Luminoso, or Shining Path movement, in Peru. One could also mention campus-based radical intellectuals who may be cut-off from mainstream national politics. The question is whether the social origins and intellectual content and quality of the RUF fit the Douglas-type model. In other words, how accurate is it to treat Foday Sankoh and his RUF comrades as 'excluded intellectuals'?

A Sierra Leonean historian, Ibrahim Abdullah, has written a very insightful paper entitled 'Bushpaths to Destruction: The Origins and Character of the RUF', in which the first major attempt has been made to understand the origins and social basis of the rebel movement (See Abdullah in this volume). Abdullah interviewed a large number of the key individuals who played active roles in the early formation of the movement. He combined this information with his long-standing work on the social history and culture of the marginal youths of Sierra Leone to offer very compelling insights into the character of the RUF. From Abdullah's account, we learn that the RUF does indeed have some intellectual origins: it emerged from the popular struggles of radical students, a large number of whom were expelled in 1985, following violent student demonstrations; three faculty members who were noted for their radical visions of social change also had their services terminated. A section of these students and one of the expelled lecturers ended up at the University of Legon in Ghana and undertook ideological and military training in Libya with a view to carrying out a social revolution in Sierra Leone.

Foday Sankoh, a retired corporal with limited education, who was imprisoned in the 1970s on an alleged coup plot, was recruited into a sub-group of a radical student-led movement, the Pan-African Union (PANAFU), which had some ties with the Ghana group. A major split occurred within PANAFU on the question of whether or not the movement should support the military training of cadre in Libya to carry out the anticipated Sierra Leone revolution. Sankoh joined the faction in Ghana that was led by ex-student leader and co-ordinator of the Libya operation, Alie Kabba. The Libya group later split up into various tendencies during and after the military training: some, including the leading individual of the group, Kabba, decided to pursue different careers out of Sierra Leone; several of those who returned home opted out of the military project; and Sankoh and a few others set up the RUF to pursue the goals of the revolution. Indeed, despite the split, the ideas and most of the statements in the RUF's main documents that explain its vision of social change were lifted verbatim from a paper which the Ghana radical group had written, and which PANAFU had discussed.

Abdullah's informants state that leading members of the Libya group theorised socially marginal, 'lumpen' individuals as essential elements or 'vanguards' in the strategies for the realisation of the Sierra Leone revolution; and that when PANAFU rejected the armed struggle road, recruitment for the Libya military project became a random exercise — i.e., anybody who expressed interest to go to Libya could do so irrespective of the ideological

status or competence of the individual. Not surprisingly, Abdullah finds that the majority of those who trained in Libya were either from the loosely structured 'lumpen' classes, or those with a troubled educational history. They were certainly not the Mary Douglas types of radical intellectuals who remained on the fringes of the political mainstream, but who could buy their way into the power structure if they so wished. Instead, the hard-core RUF 'intellectuals' is drawn from a stratum of Sierra Leonean society that is hooked on drugs, alcohol and street gambling. They have very limited education and are prone to gangster types of activities — sometimes acting as clients of strong 'men' in society or leading political figures and government officials.

Another Sierra Leonean academic, Patrick Muana, who has done pioneering work on a leading people's militia, the 'Kamajoisia', which has played a major role in checking the military advances of the RUF, confirms the point that most of the field commanders or 'wosus' of the RUF are drawn from a stratum of society that the Mendes refer to as *njiahungbia ngorngeisia* — unruly youth, or social misfits (Muana, this volume). Muana reports that these were 'semi-literate village school drop-outs', who despise traditional values and authority, and welcomed the violence of the RUF as an opportunity to settle local scores and reverse the alienating rural social order in their favour. Even Richards's discussion of the social dynamics and background of youth in the diamond-digging camps of the border region — many of whose youths joined the RUF — suggests that he is dealing with a similar phenomenon of 'lumpen culture' that Abdullah and Muana have described, even though he is unable to make the connection. It is important to note, as we assess the significance of these findings, that lumpens or marginals have been well theorised in Marxist literature as constituting poor material for progressive social change. Indeed, Amilcar Cabral, one of Africa's foremost revolutionary theorists, had warned in his writings on the social conditions of Guinea Bissau that liberation movements should not recruit lumpens for armed activities as they were likely to ignore commands and pursue agendas of vandalism.

It is now widely known that the very few educated individuals, Philip Palmer, Ibrahim Deen-Jalloh, Agnes Deen-Jalloh, Mustapha Alie Bangura and Mohammed Barrie joined or were coerced into the RUF when the war got underway: they played no role in shaping the ideology of the movement. They were captured in battle or abducted in raids, and subsequently converted into RUF fighters, spokespersons or administrators. Given the fact that Richards attaches great significance to the concept of 'excluded intellectuals' in explaining the RUF's violence, efforts should have been made to spell out

who the RUF leaders were, what their history or level of engagement with the movement was, and what kinds of revolutionary discourses informed actual RUF behaviour in the bush.

What we get instead are unverified assertions about the high level of education of the top leadership of the RUF, who are said to number about twenty or more members, and a few quotations from RUF documents, which, surely, were not written by the leading members themselves. Richards provides no evidence to support his claims about the presence of Sierra Leonean radical intellectual exiles in Liberia. There were Sierra Leoneans living on the Liberian side of the border who joined Sankoh to fight alongside Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia, and to form the RUF, but these were not intellectuals. The one individual whom Richards cites, Philip Palmer (p. 26), to support his argument, was said to have been gainfully employed in Liberia before he was overwhelmed by the Liberian war and recruited into the RUF. Those who knew him in his university days at Fourah Bay College say that he was never a member of any radical student movement. And Sankoh, the leader, can hardly pass as a highly educated, excluded intellectual. In short, his movement is not 'incorrigibly didactic', and he does not lead a 'group of embittered pedagogues' (p. 28).

Richards's RUF: The Big Lie?

The failure to problematise the RUF's rationality and use of specific types of violence leads to very serious errors in explaining what the RUF actually does in battle. One is left with the impression that Richards already had formed views about what the RUF ought to be, based on his uncritical appropriation of Douglas's concept of 'excluded intellectuals', and that what he then proceeded to do was to look for evidence that would support his characterisation of the RUF as an organised, disciplined, rational and goal-getting intellectually-driven movement. In chapters one and two, we are told that the RUF destroyed Njala University College as part of a rational plan to 'liberate' other internal 'exiles' or excluded intellectuals. One incident of record burning is enough to demonstrate the rationality of the action since those who did it may have wanted to disguise the fact that they never graduated. The wider issue of why the entire university was vandalised, literally destroyed, and emptied of its property was not a subject for serious analysis.

The attack on the rutile and bauxite mines in which buildings were burned and lots of property looted was rationalised by Richards as an anti-APC move, since the mines provided revenue for that party's patrimonial leaders. The fact that the APC was no longer in office when the attack took place, and that the mines' buildings were not only burned but that large amounts of

property was stolen by the RUF and some soldiers escapes attention in Richards's rationalist analysis. Richards later bemoans the failure of the RUF to convert the mines into 'insurgent' industries as other guerrilla movements have done elsewhere in the world, and questions the destruction of Njala in a context where educational standards are very low. But in the end, he concludes that the RUF's preferred choice of destructive acts should be seen as 'typical academic responses' (p. 27).

Richards also states that the RUF provided alternative bush camp education to the rotten or non-existent formal education in rural areas. Tattered revolutionary texts found in RUF camps are held up as proof of the alternative schooling that the RUF offered to youths whose educational aspirations had been aborted by the APC's failed patrimonial system. However, no effort is made to probe how this type of bush education compared with what many students who were captured in battle could have obtained in the schools which the RUF destroyed. Richards also reports 'neatly planned lines of huts in RUF camps' and interprets this to mean that the RUF seeks to provide 'model housing for all', citing the RUF document, *Footpaths to Democracy*, as proof (p. 54). The question of why the RUF always sets out to destroy or burn down village houses during its operations is never probed. Richards even claims that the RUF only destroys villages that are not defended (p. 55). But the issue of why any people's-oriented revolutionary movement should seek to destroy only 'undefended' villages is left unanswered. Furthermore, Richards tells us that Sankoh himself lacks presidential ambition (p. 55), is above politics, and that he runs the RUF through a collective leadership. This is rationalised as Green Book ideology, which preaches the importance of people's assemblies in decision making. It is indeed, very strange that no effort is made to examine alternative explanations to such claims — such as, for instance, the view that these claims could all be a smokescreen, which conceals a naked ambition for power, money and resources.

The RUF's ultimate aim, Richards asserts, is 'to replace Sierra Leone's patrimonial system with a revolutionary egalitarian system' (p. 59). The redistribution of stolen goods to young recruits of the movement is seen as one indication of the movement's egalitarian beliefs. It may not have occurred to Richards that thieves can also redistribute goods to members and loyal friends and supporters in society; nor does he ponder the kind of rationality that lies behind the decision to forcibly and randomly loot the meagre wealth of poor ordinary villagers in order to create an egalitarian society; or the RUF rationality which says that young villagers should be seized and transformed

into modern slaves, subjected to forced labour on stolen RUF farms, and bullied to provide the material and social needs of RUF combatants.

Indeed, because of the fixation with rationality, Richards evades or glosses over crucial forms of RUF behaviour that would have helped to shed much light on the character of the organisation: the systematic rape of women, which most people know about, is not addressed; the central issue of drug abuse is treated in just one paragraph; the beheading and systematic maiming of victims is hardly discussed; and the problem of random looting of property escapes serious scrutiny. Richards's last line of defence in sticking to his rationalist explanation is to say that the RUF's acts of violence 'may signal desperation, not terror' (p. 25), and that the mass destruction of the countryside seeks to drive home the point that the wider society 'is dangerous and corrupt', and that victims of RUF violence may then realise that there is no home to return to until the final victory of the RUF and the reconstruction of society along the RUF's vision of egalitarian development (p. 30).

Throughout this strange 'post-modernist' reading of the RUF's violence, Richards pays little heed to the voices of ordinary participants and victims of such violence, who keep insisting that the rebels are 'evil people' (p. 147; and p. 92), and 'evil thugs' (p. 149) who 'threatened the people to make them give (up) their property' (p. 91). Such voices are not allowed full rein in the analysis even though they are in line with what most Sierra Leoneans think about the RUF. When a wide, indeed, impenetrable gulf exists between the rhetoric of a movement and the reality of its behaviour, it becomes mandatory for scholars to revise their analytical frameworks and confront the reality itself. Failure to take into account the stark social reality, or at least what the majority of victims think it is, risks turning the works of such scholars into simple propaganda texts.

The one significant message of the war is the overwhelming, nation-wide rejection of the RUF's practice, including in areas that it claims to enjoy some support. The displacement of about one and half million villagers from their homes and the failure of the RUF to consistently administer any territory of consequence in almost six years of war should serve as sufficient testimony to its unqualified unpopularity and failure to advance its 'revolutionary' project. The vast majority of rural and urban Sierra Leoneans detest the RUF. Indeed, how rational is a movement whose methods of revolutionary struggle have simply served to alienate the bulk of society from its so-called revolutionary agenda? This is a question that Richards does not confront. The more the RUF uses barbarism to spread its message, the more

it drives the people it wants to liberate to the very arms of the state that the movement claims it despises.

What Richards fails to do is to situate the political programme of the RUF in its proper socioeconomic context, which should have revealed that the combatants themselves are pulled by a complex of contradictory forces: the pursuit of the long-standing goals of political liberation; the opportunities which war provided to loot the resources of the forest and the property of villagers for personal and collective gain; a 'lumpen' type of unaccountable, free-wheeling behaviour, which drugs and other anti-social behaviour-inducing mechanisms have generated or sustained among RUF fighters; and a tit-for-tat exchange in atrocities between the RUF combatants and government soldiers. In other words, RUF violence does not have only one logic, but several: there is obviously the logic of political violence, aspects of which are covered in Richards's analysis; but this competes, coexists and interacts with the logics of banditry, hedonism and brutality.

Understanding Patrimonial Rule and State Contraction

Richards uses a large number of perspectives to explain the origins and dynamics of the Sierra Leone war. Unfortunately, several of the explanations — such as those relating to the quest for Greater Liberia, regional competition, and student revolutionary populism — are not pursued in the empirical areas of the text, and appear instead as add-ons intended to enrich the book's sophistication. Throughout the text, however, Richards tried to use the theory and practice of patrimonialism consistently enough as a key explanatory variable for the war. What he calls 'the crisis of patrimonialism' stands out as his most important framework for understanding the factors that led to the war. This, therefore, merits comments as part of the book's problem relates to Richards's inability to ground his analysis in concrete historical and political processes and explore the complex factors that made armed struggle and war an option of political resistance.

Briefly defined, patrimonialism is a system of resource distribution that ties recipients or clients to the strategic goals of benefactors or patrons. In the distribution of 'patrimony', or public resources, both patrons and clients attach more importance to personal loyalties than to the bureaucratic rules that should otherwise govern the allocation of such resources. According to Richards, patrimonialism in Sierra Leone owes its origins to the patron-client linkages that were developed during 'the days of direct extraction of forest resources', which spawned a culture in which the rich and successful protected and promoted their followers and friends (p. 35; this is, of course, highly questionable). In the modern context, 'big persons' at the apex of

power compete for the country's resources and distribute them to their followers. Richards singles out one aspect of patrimonial rule, such as the use of resources to resolve conflicts and outbid opponents, as indicative of the nature of patrimonial politics in Sierra Leone. This is illustrated by an anecdote about former president Siaka Stevens, who was said to have been comfortably installed at State House with 'a number of mobile generators', but who always reprimanded riotous students for not having told him about the shortage of light on their campuses, since he could have personally fixed the problem for them and prevented the riots.

Richards believes that patrimonialism thrives in natural resource-rich countries, since the formal mining companies would be responsible for the difficult tasks of state provisioning (such as communication, schooling and health services) in the 'enclave areas', leaving the politicians or rulers to collect rents for their personal use (he seems to forget that pre-crisis Nigeria and other oil-producing countries with fairly large social provisioning and development programmes exist). Such patron-client arrangements, he insists, can easily lead to a depletion of state revenues, which can only be sustained by foreign aid. Richards states that 'African patrimonial systems of rule grew vigorously under Cold War conditions' as African client leaders played off one Cold War leader against another. But patrimonialism, he asserts, faced a double crisis in the 1990s: a crisis of raw material prices and sharp reductions in foreign aid.

This double crisis created a crisis of legitimacy: the state shrank, both physically ('in terms of communications facilities') and sociologically ('in terms of the groups it can afford to patronise'). Education and social services collapsed, and salaries were unpaid or insufficient to cover living costs, giving the president and a few senior figures in government considerable powers to determine who got access to the limited resources that remained. The crisis affected the 'next generation' located at one end point of the patrimonial chain, who could not afford to pay school fees. Unable to generate resources to help clients to pay such fees, the leader or chief patron, ex-president Joseph Momoh, declared education to be a privilege and not a right. 'A dangerous vacuum' was created, which the RUF then sought to fill by providing alternatives to patrimonialism.

Richards's analysis, which taps into common sense explanations and current discourses of the African crisis, captures some features of the Sierra Leone state and political economy, and is correct in concluding that state contraction or collapse creates possibilities for social unrest or war. However, there are several problems with his analysis of patrimonialism, which fails to explain

the kinds of state practices that forced some categories of Sierra Leone's youth to consider war or armed struggle a distinct option of political resistance. Richards is a bit slack in his efforts to transpose broadly held views about the African crisis to the Sierra Leone situation without ensuring that the socioeconomic data of Sierra Leone fit the wider argument. Sierra Leone does, indeed, suffer from a fiscal crisis, and the crisis in raw material prices and output (even closure or depletion of some minerals), including a heavy debt burden, is an important contributory factor to this crisis. Nationally-generated government revenue did take a plunge in the 1980s. However, the same cannot be said for foreign aid flows. Even though global official development assistance (ODA) has suffered a contraction of about 6 per cent in the period of the 1990s (Action Aid 1995), this decline has not negatively affected Sierra Leone's receipt of aid flows. Aid receipts have gone up consistently every year since 1987, except for 1990, which saw a sharp drop. In other words, official development assistance to Sierra Leone went up from US$ 68 million or 7.3 per cent of GNP in 1987 to US$ 99 million or 10.6 per cent of GNP in 1989; it dropped to US$ 66m or 8.1 per cent of GNP in 1990; but shot up to US$108m or 10.8 per cent of GNP in 1991; US$ 134m or 14.5 per cent of GNP in 1992; US$192m or 29.7 per cent of GNP in 1993; and US$ 276m or 42.7 per cent of GNP in 1994 (UNDP).[1]

Contrary to Richards's assertion that Sierra Leone is a victim of the ending of the Cold War in Africa (p. 36) and the drop in global ODA flows to developing countries, the picture we get instead is that of a country that has become astonishingly aid-dependent in the 1990s when the Cold War is supposed to have ended. It is important to note also that Sierra Leone never 'threatened to switch allegiance between communism and capitalism' in order to maximise aid from the 'Western and Soviet systems' (p. 36). The APC was not a 'Soviet-style one-party' regime, and did not have 'workerist associations' (p. 40). In other words, the APC was never a revolutionary vanguard party, and lacked the kinds of organisational structures that tied the Communist Party in the USSR to associations in civil society. Labour, army, and police leaders were made members of parliament under the APC's one-party regime, but this was part of a strategy to prevent unions, army

1 Note the radical decline of GDP in the 1990s. No doubt, the war and the disruption of formal productive activities may have contributed to this decline. It is possible, however, that much of the unofficial economic transactions, which gained prominence even before the war, may have been unrecorded.

officers and the police from disturbing the APC order. The party's organisational strength was only felt during periods of electoral competition or civil protests. Soviet aid to Sierra Leone came mainly in the form of scholarships, a large number of which went to members and friends of the APC Youth League. Instead, in addition to its links with Western countries, Sierra Leone cultivated closer ties with China, and used the latter's vigorous efforts to break its isolation from the rest of the world, to access financial and technical resources, and to develop trade links between the two countries. Indeed, by the early 1980s, China had become the third most important trading partner of Sierra Leone. The failure to properly contextualise Sierra Leone's crisis throws into considerable doubt the veracity of what Richards believes to be a patrimonial crisis.

It is important to note that the revenue crisis of the 1980s was partly linked to the informalisation of key industries like diamonds, and the collapse of the iron ore mines, both of which had previously provided much of the state's official revenue. This informalisation of public resources, which was later extended to other sectors like fisheries and gold, weakened government's capacity to collect revenue from state enterprises. For sectors which required heavy capital investment, such as rutile and bauxite extraction, formal large-scale production was allowed, but as Richards correctly notes, state functionaries and company officials set official rents at well below market values with 'unaccountable sums disappearing into patrimonial pockets'. The key point is that leading politicians became dominant figures in the process of destroying the formal institutions for resource extraction, the management of public sector enterprises, and the regulatory regime that had ensured the transfer of revenues from such ventures to the state. The value of diamonds alone that were traded unofficially in international markets has been estimated to run into hundreds of millions of dollars a year.

If Richards's argument is that government officials were chief patrons in this thriving informalised market for Sierra Leone's resources, it becomes hard to accept his view that there was a 'patrimonial crisis' in Sierra Leone. The picture that emerges instead is that of a fiscal crisis, which affects general state administration and provisioning, and the fortunes of those who depend upon the state for their livelihood. In other words, the poverty of the state is positively correlated with the affluence of the 'patrimonial' groups. These groups, as most Sierra Leoneans know, were insensitive to the plight of those who operated outside of the 'patrimonial networks', and who, therefore, had been badly affected or humiliated by the informalisation of the country's resources and the astonishing contraction of the state. Rising foreign aid receipts in the 1990s attempted to make up for the lost mining and parastatal

revenues, which now went into so-called 'patrimonial' pockets. Indeed, Momoh and his government waged a successful campaign in the UN system to redefine the status of the country — i.e., from that of a low income country to an LLDC (least of the less developed countries) in order to qualify for more concessionary loans and grants.

These efforts were pursued at a time when the APC government was busy dismantling the formal structures for effective revenue generation in both the public and private sectors, and selling off at a discount even some of the country's highly prized foreign assets to party supporters and foreign friends. The logic of the political class seemed to have been that the international community should be responsible for the welfare of the average Sierra Leonean, while government leaders, business groups and their supporters helped themselves to the country's rich resources. Patrimonialism was never threatened by such arrangements. Indeed, it was strengthened by them, as chief patrons or rulers passed on the burdens of national social provisioning and development to foreign aid agencies. Those who were outside of the so-called patrimonial system never stood a chance of benefiting from it. It is, indeed, unclear how marginal youth and Richards's excluded intellectuals could have benefited or suffered losses from the patrimonial system if they were not part of the patrimonial networks. From all accounts, these disadvantaged groups and other broad sections of the society suffered from the consequences of the crisis of the state and the deepening of the gains of patrimonialism — not from the crisis of patrimonialism.

Part of Richards's problem is the rather fuzzy way in which he applies the concept of patrimonialism to the Sierra Leone — indeed African — state. The African state has been poorly theorised in the works of most Africanists who have used the concept of neo-patrimonialism as a short cut to describe everything that the state in Africa does. As Thandika Mkandawire, the former Executive Secretary of the pan-African institution for the promotion of social science research in Africa (CODESRIA), once noted, Africanists who rely on the concept of neo-patrimonialism to describe the African state will have to explain why patrimonialism produced high rates of economic growth in most African countries in the 1960s and part of the 1970s, but dismal growth rates in the 1980s. Did patrimonialism suddenly emerge as a problem in the 1980s and 1990s? And why did patrimonialism allow one-party and military regimes to flourish in much of Africa in the 1960s and 1970s, and not in the 1990s? The point, of course, is that the constant recourse to the concept of neo-patrimonialism could hide what is really very fuzzy thinking or lack of knowledge about the behaviour of African states and their actual dynamics. Those who use the concept of patrimonialism to explain the African crisis

should, at least, be able to concretely identify the patrimonial groups — both the patrons and the clients — and changes in the volume and patterns of resource distribution among group members for their explanation to be credible.

Authoritarian Rule, Patrimonialism and the Politics of War

Patrimonial arrangements constituted only one aspect of the problem of the Sierra Leone state. A full understanding of the political environment that created the conditions for the war requires analysis of other factors. Four such factors are worth mentioning. The first is the uncompromising and systematic centralisation of power under the governing All People's Congress, which gained power in 1968, following its victory in the elections of 1967 and a brief period of military rule. Despite much resistance from opposition political parties, the press and civic groups, full centralisation was achieved in 1978 when the APC made itself the sole political party in the country. The second factor was the equally systematic effort to destroy all forms of civic opposition — the labour unions, student unions, and the press — through repression, intimidation, and cooptation. Exit options, such as foreign migration, which grew in leaps and bounds in the 1970s and 1980s, reinforced the conditions for the shrinking of the civic arena and helped to reduce the political pressure on the government.

The third factor is the concentration of power in the capital and the neglect, or indeed, truncation, of development in rural areas. The concentration of power in the capital made it relatively easy for the ruling party and government to effectively deal with individual dissent or organised opposition. As part of the project to concentrate power in the capital, the district councils that provided a semblance of decentralised rule during colonialism and the first few years of independence were dismantled; and paramount chiefs became pawns of the government, which proceeded to make and unmake chiefs without regard for traditional procedures or democratic principles. Indeed, the only rule that governed decisions about who should be made chief was loyalty to the ruling party.

The fourth factor is the selective, but deliberate and undisciplined use of state violence to defend the APC order at specific conjunctures when it was challenged. A violence-prone para-military force, the Internal Security Unit (later State Security Division) was created; and politicians used the services of 'lumpen' or marginal elements of society to deal with party opponents and opposition civic groups. The language of violence as an instrument of political competition was freely used and justified in public speeches by leading members of the political leadership. The end result was a highly

repressive, anti-developmental political system, which rewarded sycophancy (or what Sierra Leoneans like to refer to as 'lay belleh'), and punished honesty, hard work, patriotism and independent thought. Works by Ibrahim Abdullah and Ishmail Rashid, a student activist in the 1980s, have shown that it is the political regime that came out of these processes, in the context of a shrinking state system and blocked opportunities, that provided the conditions for the birth of revolutionary dissident activities and, ultimately, the formation of the RUF.

If Richards had focused on these issues, some of which he recognised but described rather sketchily in only two pages (pp. 40-42), it might have been possible for him to tell a different and more interesting story, and save some of his material on environmental and population issues for other intellectual pursuits. Indeed, the failure to pay sufficient attention to the country's political history, culture and dynamics meant that critical issues that relate to the politics of the war itself were only barely mentioned or totally ignored. Indeed, significant insights about the politics of the war had become public knowledge by the time the book was ready for the press in January, 1996, which was subsequently revised after the May 1996 e-mail Leonenet debate on his article, 'Rebellion in Sierra Leone and Liberia'.

Readers would have liked to learn something about the structure, social background, values and strategies of the official military and how they relate to, and conflict with, those of the RUF. It is well known, for instance, that the military recruited a large number of 'lumpens' or 'rarray man dem' to prosecute the war against the RUF without checking their work records or social backgrounds. The army rapidly expanded in size by about five-fold during this period. Both the RUF and the military basically recruited individuals with similar social backgrounds to fight the war. And the drug culture was central to the social practices of both soldiers and rebels in the war front. This may explain why innocent civilians became the main victims of both warring parties. It would have been interesting to pursue the view that part of the barbarism that the RUF displayed in the field was a response to similar methods of war practices from soldiers in the front-line. Also related to the issue of the politics of the war is the question of how the war spread beyond the border zones to engulf practically every region of the country. Richards should have examined the political and military logic that facilitated this transformation.

It is important to note that there was a very passionate debate in the country when the RUF rebellion engulfed the whole country. It was widely believed that some sections of the army colluded with the RUF to achieve

this goal. Several military officers were even implicated by the military government and imprisoned for such acts of sabotage. By 1994, the military regime that was warmly welcomed by Sierra Leoneans for overthrowing the rotten APC government had lost much of its support as people came to associate it with the problems of the war. Indeed, a very important national conference at Bintumani Conference Centre in Freetown in July 1994, in which the military government solicited the views of all paramount chiefs about how to end the war, demonstrated the wide gulf that had emerged between the state and traditional rulers, including, possibly, their subjects: paramount chiefs from the war zones made categorical demands to withdraw the soldiers from the war front as they were absolutely convinced that soldiers or 'sobels' (soldiers-turned-rebels), as some of them came to be called, were partly responsible for the atrocities in the war.

This popular perception of the war process, as Patrick Muana tells us, was significant in the formation and growth of the 'Kamajoisia' militia movement as an antidote to the terror of both the RUF and the soldiers. It was also significant in understanding why the military regime was unable to pressure the chiefs in the war zone and the rest of the population to extend its stay in power in the events leading to the elections of February 1996. Most of these issues have been widely discussed by home-based Sierra Leoneans and covered extensively in the national press, but Richards does not seem to take the national press seriously, perhaps because of his belief that at times it contains 'more opinion than factually based news' (p. 113). He discussed the national press in only one short paragraph in the chapter on youth and the media, even though it is obvious that large sections of the youth population read these papers regularly as a source of news, opinions, entertainment, and education — in several ways, perhaps, using the national print media in the same 'skeptical but constructive way' that Richards talks about in his discussion of films and videos. Richards makes no reference to any discussion or reporting of the war in the national newspapers in his very extensive bibliography.

It is also well known that the RUF war fed, or ignited, deep-seated local conflicts in the war zones. It has been reported that 'rebels' sometimes selected which houses to burn and who first to kill, based on information supplied by willing or coerced local residents seeking to settle scores with their opponents in the local communities, whose politics had been influenced by the strategies of the ruling national political party. Richards briefly discussed one clear instance of this dynamic, the 'Ndogboyosoi' revolt in Pujehun, which he labelled 'rebellion from below', but treated it as one among several interpretations of the war, rather than as a key aspect of the

process of war itself. One would have liked to see how the tendency to use the war to settle local scores was articulated in such well-known cases as the RUF's brief take-over of, for instance, Koidu, Kailahun, Pujehun, Kabala, Yele, Mile 91 and Masingbi. A discussion of local political institutions and processes would have made more sense than the selective and superficial treatment of aspects of traditional local culture, which Richards even detaches from the politics of local communities.

Youth, Violence and War

Richards is correct in singling out the deepening crisis of youth and its exclusion from the social mainstream as important factors in explaining the early appeal of the RUF among certain strata of youth, and why the movement has been able to retain a core membership of loyal cadre, despite the serious setbacks it has suffered in the war. The political statement of the RUF, which, as we have seen, was drawn up by expelled radical university students, appealed to the concerns of youth and other disadvantaged groups in popular struggles to dismantle the corrupt APC regime and institute a just and democratic polity that would protect the basic needs of Sierra Leoneans. Those who hammered out the programme may have been partly influenced by Gaddafi's Green Book ideology, but it is doubtful that Gaddafi's text was that important in shaping the world view or programme of the movement itself. The ideas it propounds are drawn from a range of populist discourses that were current among many Left-wing university-based groups in the 1970s and 1980s. Richards's attempt to read Green Book ideology into every RUF action demonstrates a poor grasp of student politics and actual RUF field practices.

Sierra Leone does have a phenomenal youth crisis and Richards's book demonstrates this very vividly. Indeed, much of the narrative revolves around the problems and perceptions of youth as they relate to issues of livelihood, employment, education, media messages, the environment, and general survival strategies in the forest economy. Richards provides very useful insights when he discusses youth problems in border areas that he has previously worked on, which relate to his research project on ecology, culture and social systems. The three detailed individual testimonies in chapter four throw much light on the dilemmas of young people on the margins of society, and the role which violence has played in the history of forest communities. This violence, as each one of the narratives maintains, has always been driven by external forces or 'big men', anxious to exploit and destroy the forest's rich resources — such as the conversion of humans into slaves in the Atlantic trade, the depletion of the rain forest by timber merchants and colonial

officials interested in the region's high quality mahogany tree products, the near annihilation of elephants whose tusks were in great demand in Europe to make ivory keyboards for the pianos that adorned the homes of Victorian families, and the networks of unequal exchange that currently tie young migrant diamond diggers to powerful patrons in the urban areas.

However, in his efforts to give substance and flavour to his narrative, Richards displays a basic weakness in his method of work: he is too quick to establish connections and to indulge in unguarded speculation, often on the basis of very limited information or isolated experiences that may not have been properly investigated. This tends to do much damage to the credibility of the issues on which he seems to have much firmer information. Several illustrations will help to substantiate this point. In his treatment of the history of the Liberia-Sierra Leone border region, the status and social reach of the nineteenth century warrior Kai Londo's polity, Luawa chiefdom, featured prominently as a major source of perennial instability in the region.

Richards concludes on the basis of the evidence of just one individual from Liberia, who complained to him about the colonial border policy of the British, which split village communities and strengthened the power of Kai Londo's successors against groups in Liberia, that there was a strong call for a Greater Liberia among bush fighters that would encompass part of the old Luawa polity in Sierra Leone. This call is then said to serve as an 'advance for the NPFL, or RUF, or both' armed groups (p. 48), implying that the invasion of Eastern Sierra Leone in 1991 by the RUF and NPFL, which started the war, may have had something to do with this demand for the creation of a Greater Liberia. What started as a nice little story that was adapted from Arthur Abraham's study of nineteenth century politics on the border zone of Liberia and Sierra Leone turned out instead to be an effort to force conceptions of Greater Liberia on the Sierra Leone war. Richards is not bothered about the extent to which this appeal for Greater Liberia resonates among the majority of youth on both sides of the border and whether, in fact, it forms an important part of the strategies of both the RUF and the NPFL.

Another instance of hasty connections relates to the popular film, *First Blood*, and its likely effects on the behaviour of youth in Sierra Leone. The film is said by Richards to speak 'eloquently to young people in Sierra Leone fearing a collapse of patrimonial support in an era of state recession' (p. 58). Such a conclusion is drawn even though Richards provides no evidence that the young people who watched the film were part of the patrimonial system that he bemoans. And Rambo, the key character in the film, is likened to another Sierra Leonean 'youth trickster of Mende tradition', Musa Wo, who is

said to be a 'harbinger of fruitful innovation' in Mendeland, and whose stories are said to caution elders not to forget the 'energy and cunning' of the young. Richards then concludes that based on this experience of youth creativity that the destructive act of war by the 'young tricksters' of the RUF is 'to establish a national debate about a new and fairer patrimonialism' (p.59). There are many more of such types of unfounded speculation, which are likely to raise the eyebrows of readers who are familiar with the Sierra Leone scene.

The chapter on youth exposure to modern media addresses interesting issues on films, video and violence, but Richards equates the opinions of the bulk of the youth who have not been exposed to war with those of war combatants, whose views on the uses and abuses of video are clearly not sought in the survey. The fact that the former may creatively use film and video for peaceful imaginative and social pursuits does not mean, as Richards believes, that rebels do not 'feed Rambo films to their young conscripts as incitement to mindless violence' (p. 114). Richards fails to make a distinction between youths in war and youths in peace, and the likely effects of violent films on their different social experiences.

It is important to stress the point that the vast majority of Sierra Leone's youth are not war-prone. Most young people are linked to wider social structures that bind them to broadly shared community values and family-based systems of accountability. These social values and systems may have experienced considerable strain as a result of economic crisis, state contraction and war, but they have played a significant role in denying the RUF the bulk of the support it would have enjoyed from this group. The question Richards does not ask is why the majority of youth, including those in desperately poor situations, have not been attracted to the RUF's rhetoric of revolutionary change. My guess is that they have seen or heard about much of the RUF's violence to know that the RUF's project does not offer the path to stable youth salvation.

The vast majority of Sierra Leone's youth are anti-RUF. They sustain life as traders, artisans, farmers, apprentices, labourers, workers, tailors, dancers, dramatists, domestic and office helpers, etc. in the now over-crowded cities and small rural towns. They are to be distinguished from youths with loosely structured relations of work and family life: lumpens who, as Ibrahim Abdullah's study suggests, are the driving force of the RUF project, even if other types of youth may have been coerced or recruited into the movement. Richards does not pay special attention to this category of youth as the foundation of the RUF movement.

Furthermore, one would be wary to embrace his conclusion, on the basis of an opinion survey whose methodology is not even explained, that the youth have a capacity 'to devise imaginative solutions to the challenges posed by the global epidemic of drugs and violence' (p. 114), and that 'videos of violence may not be such a cause for alarm as some Western commentators choose to think' (p.104). Richards does not state what these imaginative solutions are, since his concern is to debunk the New Barbarism thesis. It is as if owning up to some drawbacks in youth behaviour would strengthen the case for New Barbarism! It ought to be stressed that lumpens abuse drugs and are prone to random violence in pursuit of objectives. And other non-lumpen categories of youth who are affected by drugs and excessive exposure to violent films may experience, and at the same time pose, serious social problems. These problems are not unique to Sierra Leone's or Africa's youth: they cut across most countries in the world, including in Western societies where they may have reached epidemic proportions. It does not help the search for solutions to these global problems to deny the fact that they constitute a problem for Sierra Leone's youth.

War-Peace Transitions

Let me now examine Richards's recommendations on conflict resolution and peace-building initiatives. Richards puts much emphasis on the need to assist the efforts of 'citizen action' in rebuilding Sierra Leone's society, and cites cases where local efforts at peace building are already manifesting themselves in the Bo region. Peace, as he correctly states, has to come from within, and from the efforts of local people. This is based on the view that international assistance may not be very forthcoming to provide the kinds of resources that would make the project of post-war reconstruction less painful. Even when such assistance is provided, he warns that it should be used strategically and not liberally: it should come in the form of 'smart relief', which should shift the focus of relief from bulk food items to 'knowledge-intensive assistance', such as the provision of seed systems, genetic information and farmer intervention; this should be supported by systems of broadcasting to facilitate constructive debates in local areas about war-peace transitions.

Relying on Alex de Waal's and Mike Duffield's works on famines and the shortcomings of international agencies in providing relief in famine-prone and war-torn countries, Richards argues that the current international obsession with 'high profile' relief may weaken the emerging peace-enhancing 'attack trade' regime in war-affected regions: 'attack trade' regimes are trade deals which local people strike with combatants as a survival and commercial strategy that is suited to environments of protracted insurgency. In any case,

he believes that by concentrating resources in particular areas, high profile relief has a potential to attract rebel attention and prolong wars. Richards's alternative is to make 'attack traders' contractors for the supply of relief items to refugee feeding programmes. It does not occur to him that 'attack trade' has a strong potential to endlessly feed wars, and legitimise war itself as a way of life in the regions where such trade occurs — the cases of Colombia, Afghanistan, Cambodia, Liberia and Angola, where 'attack trade' has turned war into huge commercial ventures escape his attention.

Richards identifies three Sierra Leonean traditions that he believes will help to contain the war and promote peace-building efforts. The first is what he calls the 'creolisation' of the Upper Guinea Forest region, of which Sierra Leone is a part. He highlights two types of creolisation: the creolisation that is a product of the Atlantic slave trade, which saw the resettlement of large numbers of Africans from different ethnic and regional backgrounds in Freetown, and which gave rise to Krio as a lingua franca in Sierra Leone; the other type of creolisation relates to what he refers to as the pre-colonial, largely sixteenth century, process of the 'Mandigization' of the forest communities — leading to the adoption of a simplified 'trade version' of Manika as lingua franca, even suggesting a Manika root for the Krio language. Creolisation, he asserts, promotes cultural convergence and accommodation, checks conflicts, and provides the necessary cultural resources for the management of peace and stability. The concept of creolisation is an emerging fad among Western anthropologists and linguists, who have been anxious to move the debate on African social formations away from the old concept of 'tribe' that has been shown to have no empirical validity to one that now recognises the inter-penetration of cultures and languages. Richards latches on to this debate without adequate work on its implications for the Sierra Leone experience, and draws very contentious conclusions about the peace-yielding properties of creolisation.

It is obviously the case that the Krio language is the lingua franca of Sierra Leone. It serves as an important medium of communication among the country's youth. The language itself has been highly enriched by a number of Sierra Leonean and other African languages. Having a common language that most people understand may help to promote social integration but it does not necessarily prevent or solve conflicts. If use of a common language is a significant constraint to war, the world would not have witnessed the genocidal carnage in Rwanda, Burundi and Bosnia, as the warring communities in those countries speak the same language. What Richards fails to analyse are the complex layers of social relations and contradictions that structure the behaviour of those who use the Krio language. The emergence

of Krio as a lingua franca has not eliminated other forms of ethnic identities and associations. Indeed, because of the wide use of the language, there are now several versions of Krio, which tend to reflect the ethnic origins and social or class status of the users. Besides, as a result of the systematic politicisation of ethnicity, beginning from the decolonisation period, the 'natural' process of 'Krioisation', which was previously associated with exposure to Western thought and practice, has considerably slowed down, if it has not been actually reversed.

Today, in Freetown, in addition to a large number of youth who still speak their ethnic languages in addition to Krio, there are many young people whose parents come from the provinces who speak no other language than Krio (they are probably a much larger group now than those who use the language as a mark of their identity) but who do not identify themselves as Krio. If ethnicity has not been politicised, the youth who speak only Krio should have automatically identified themselves as Krio, since they share fairly common values and aspirations with those who identify themselves as such. Instead, the former identify themselves on the basis of their parents' identities even though they may not understand the institutions and values that are associated with such parental identities.

An urban culture has emerged that is a product of the experiences of the various groups (literally all ethnic groups) that have shaped the everyday dynamics of the city. This culture cannot be reduced to that of any one ethnicity, or even the old type of Krio ethnicity. Instead, it embraces several aspects of these other types, as users incorporate or borrow whatever that is found useful for urban social integration and communication. This urban culture continues to co-exist with the relatively separate cultures, traditions and languages of the other ethnicities in the city. While there is a high level of social integration, particularly among the youth, politics tends to be strongly influenced by the pulls of ethnicity as opposed to the pulls of 'creolisation' or even of the new urban culture.

We encounter similar problems when we examine Richards's thesis on 'Mandigization' as creolisation. Here, Richards tries to force ideas on the Sierra Leone social reality that are largely relevant to other countries' cultural and linguistic experiences. It is true that the Madingo language and culture have had positive effects on several communities and languages in West Africa, including in Sierra Leone. Madingo competes with Fula as the language that is spoken in most countries in the region. Fula, however, failed to develop as lingua franca in any West African country, and is spoken largely by individuals who identify themselves as Fula. Fula was even

overwhelmed and absorbed by the Hausa language in Nigeria despite the fact that it was Fulani intellectuals and religious militants who sacked the traditional Hausa states and established the Sokoto Caliphate in 1804, which incorporated Hausaland and other contiguous areas. It is useful to note also that even though variants of the Madingo language are a trade-based lingua franca in several West African countries, Hausa is still the most widely spoken language in the region — claiming, perhaps, about 50 million or so speakers; and that there may even be more Yoruba (perhaps 20 or more million) and Igbo speakers (at least 15 million) than Madingo speakers.

The version of Madingo, Dioula, that Richards correctly cites, as a trade language in parts of the sub-region, is not used as lingua franca in Sierra Leone. Even though Madingo and Mende, which is the lingua franca of the East and South of Sierra Leone, are part of the Mande group of languages, Mende and Madingo are not mutually intelligible. Only Madingo, Kono, Koranko and Vai are mutually intelligible. The regional reach of Madingo, popularised by traders, Islamic teachers, praise singers and musical entertainers, has meant that many of the languages of Sierra Leone are flavoured with Madingo words. The word for a rich person in a non-related language, Temne, for instance, is 'yolla', possibly derived from the Madingo word, 'Dioula', meaning trader.

There has been a high level of cross-fertilisation of cultures and ideas among the various ethnic groups in the country. But Madingo can hardly be said to be the dominant influence in this process of social integration. Instead, it would seem that most groups have benefited from a long process of mutually beneficial cultural exchanges. Because of the strong hold of Mende in the South and East, and Temne in the North, Dioula could not serve the same purposes in Sierra Leone as it did, for instance, in Côte d'Ivoire and parts of Liberia. Instead, Madingo traders, teachers, artisans and musicians were absorbed into the expansive cultures of the Temnes and Mendes. This process of incorporating individuals into the cultures of dominant ethnicities is not unique to the Upper Guinea Forest region. It is a world-wide process in the formation of nations. Indeed, all African countries today have one or a few local languages that have emerged as lingua franca.

The same experience that Richards describes as creolisation holds for the development of, for instance, Arabic in the Middle East, Swahili in East Africa, English in the UK and in America, Spanish and Portuguese in Latin America, Italian in Italy, Lingala and Swahili in Zaire, Wolof in Senegal, Twi in Ghana, and Amharic in Ethiopia. In other words, the concept of 'creolisation' loses its heuristic value once it is shown that all modern

societies in the world have multi-ethnic and multi-lingual origins. This reality of shared history has not eliminated the scourge of war from our planet. Rather than creolisation being a crucial factor in checking the violence in Sierra Leone, it is rather the shared national experience of, and refusal to be intimidated by, RUF brutality that has kept the country together. We have also been lucky that the RUF movement was inspired by a radical youth vision of pan-Africanism and national unity — not ethnic divisions. Lumpens, we should also note, are generally not moved by ethnicity unless if they are employed by politicians to settle ethnic scores. On top of this must be added the rapid rate of regime turn-over, which made it difficult for some of the ethnic interests that were already building up around state leaders to consolidate their grip on power, and colour the popular discourses on the war.

The second tradition which Richards thinks will enhance the prospects for peace is that of the initiation of young men and women into Bondo/Sande and Poro secrete societies. He argues that these societies could play useful roles in civil defence and act as forums for debate on issues of war and peace, and training of youth in post-war reconstruction activities. Useful as these suggestions may be, Richards does not show how they could be achieved for a youth population that he has already projected as holding strong 'modernist' views and aspirations about society. Furthermore, while Richards recognises the positive values of these societies, adherents may find it disturbing to relate to the connections that he draws between the initiation rituals of these societies and the seizure of young people in forest areas for initiation into the RUF movement. He believes that both the RUF's and the communities' initiation activities form part of the same process of initiation of young people in 'bush schools' to 'adult ways'. He ignores the crucial distinction between traditional forms of initiation, which are forms of socialisation that enjoy community support, and the RUF type which is plainly terroristic, and which may have the consequences of destroying community institutions and values.

Richards's third traditional resource for peace building is 'cannibalism', which he thinks acts as an anti-dote to, or a 'moral critique' of, patrimonialism. He extracts sets of supernatural beliefs that are common in traditional societies to discuss how weaker clients can use ideas of 'cannibalism' to challenge the power of patrons or 'big men' in society. 'Cannibalism' refers to a deeply held belief in most traditional communities that certain types of people have supernatural powers to turn into animals — say leopards, baboons or crocodiles — to bewitch or 'eat' people whom they do not like. Richards assumes that this belief is restricted only to patron-client commercial relations, and that it is only weak patrons that have the power to

change into animals to bewitch clients. He also assumes that the wider society that loses from the modern system of patrimonial rule can invoke the traditional moral critique of cannibalism, by accusing modern patrons of practising cannibalism, thereby denting their legitimacy and capacity to rule.

The reality is that these beliefs cover all facets of social relations; and society has developed ways of dealing with them — such as employing the services of traditional experts such as 'soothsayers, 'murray man dem', and 'medicine men' to expose the activities of those who possess such qualities; and personal or family-based initiatives involving use of 'medicines', 'lasmami', and traditional power-enhancing devices such as amulets to repel such evil forces in the spirit world. However, it is difficult to see how the so-called 'cannibalism' method could act as a check on present day patrimonialism, especially when modern-day patrons know that these ideas lack empirical foundations, and when they have the means to employ the services of 'medicine men' or 'murray man dem' to counter the power of the so-called 'cannibals', or accusations of cannibalism. Reading this kind of stuff from someone who thinks that the crisis of patrimonialism is the most important cause of the war, creates the impression that Richards does not actually understand the society that he writes about.

Conclusion

Patrimonialism exists in varying degrees in all societies, irrespective of the character of their economic systems, levels of development, or political culture. In other words, personal ties, contacts, or networks, constitute inherent aspects of social relations, and influence the behaviour of public institutions. High levels of bureaucratisation can act as an important check on such personal ties and relations, but it does not eliminate them. The problem basically arises when formal bureaucratic rules become subordinated to 'patrimonial' arrangements or vested interests, making it difficult for those who are cut-off from, or do not want to be included in, the 'patrimonial' networks to benefit from the services of the state, and hold leaders accountable to their policies. Something of the nature of this problem took root in Sierra Leone under the long rule of the APC, whose leaders abused the formal rules of governance and converted a large proportion of the country's resources into private or informal property regimes, which they then controlled or profited from. Sierra Leoneans paid a heavy price for the triumph of this informalised, inefficient, and authoritarian order.

The challenge in post-war reconstruction, it seems, is not to aim for a 'patrimonial-free' polity — which is clearly unachievable — but to ensure that vested interests, or patrimonial groups, where they emerge, are

transparently regulated and held accountable to their public behaviour; and that the state system is structured in ways that can allow it to meet the minimum demands of groups who entirely depend upon it for such things as education, health, clean water, electricity, jobs and incomes. Issues of decentralisation; rural, grassroots development; the empowerment of local-level civic initiatives; the restoration and defence of healthy political competition; the protection of civil liberties and community values; and the de-linking of the state's coercive institutions from its past culture of violence should form important aspects of the strategies for a stable and equitable post-war society.

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