ABSTRACT
This article traces one of the logics of the ongoing war in the Mano River region of West Africa. It argues that, in the wake of humanitarian interventions in Sierra Leone, combatants who moved on to fight in Liberia were more likely to use attacks against civilians in their military strategy. It suggests, however, that such tactical military choices are to be understood in terms of local contexts of meaning, most notably about the nature of political power. The author’s own ethnographic work with the kamajor militia in Sierra Leone and with Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) in Liberia serves as the basis for this analysis, and he advocates a participant-observation field methodology for the study of contemporary conflict.

‘VIOLENCE’, writes the Sierra Leone scholar Yusuf Bangura, ‘does not have only one logic, but several.’ In what follows, I trace one of those logics of war in the African postcolony: from humanitarian interventions to attacks on civilian targets. In doing so, I make two points. First, that in the Mano River region of West Africa, humanitarian interventions have led combatants to employ atrocities against civilians increasingly as a military tactic, making the bodies and futures of non-combatants a crucial terrain of the frontline. Second, this logic can only be understood if we simultaneously consider the local context of meaning in which such tactics are deployed, most notably cultural constructions regarding the nature of political power.

Humanitarian interventions are now an integral component of African conflicts. Despite the legitimate criticisms of observers of African affairs

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that the international community is unwilling to engage the continent in meaningful ways, it is hard to imagine an inter- or intra-state conflict anywhere that is not shaped in part by the presence of peacekeepers, emergency relief or development operations, or by the possibility of such a presence. If it ever did, the modern African war-scape no longer exists in isolation.

The result has been significant changes in the way contemporary wars in Africa are conducted. There is nothing new in the argument that one of the unfortunate consequences of humanitarian interventions is that they risk providing material incentives and resources for combatants. This is conventional wisdom among both researchers and practitioners, even if there is no consensus regarding an appropriate response. Furthermore, global humanitarian discourse — the rhetoric of rights, democracy, etc. — is now a critical tool in the discursive arsenal of armed factions, regardless of their ideological or economic projects. Here I take up a slightly different way in which the interventions of the United Nations and multinational NGOs impact the dynamics of the war in West Africa’s Mano River region: as an organizing principle of military logic. In other words, I seek to demonstrate that the activities of humanitarian agencies have informed a new range of strategic military initiatives in this contemporary conflict.

This is a logic which works at cross purposes to the aims of those humanitarian interventions, leading to atrocities committed against civilians and against the infrastructure on which a post-conflict reconstruction would hope to build. This example suggests that, beyond merely perpetuating conflict, these interventions actually change the nature of many of today’s wars. Amputations, the displacement of refugees, ambushes of civilian convoys, and the shelling of sites known to be populated by civilians are increasingly important tactical manoeuvres for many fighting forces, both government and irregular. I suggest that, while not exactly new, such operations in the current period may be linked to the dynamics of the relationship between belligerents and those who intervene in the hope of stopping or stemming violence.

2. I am classifying under the umbrella term ‘humanitarian intervention’ a diverse range of operations conducted by state governments, NGOs, religious organizations, and international institutions. Clearly, these initiatives have vastly different motives and achieve many kinds of results. Nevertheless, my concern here is with broad trends that I see evidenced across the board.

I develop this thesis drawing on my own ethnographic research with the kamajor militia, which played a key role in the civil war in Sierra Leone and in the ongoing conflict in Liberia. As the term ‘ethnographic’ implies, my research method is that of a participant-observer, and I end this discussion by arguing that ethnographic methods are critical to understanding the real-world consequences of humanitarian intervention and to comprehending the alarming rates of civilian casualties in the contemporary logic of war.4

Also implied in the ethnographic project is a commitment to the importance of ‘culture’ in any of the myriad ways that term might be defined. As such, I see this as a complement to the work of scholars who seek a greater understanding of African conflicts and modes of violence by taking into account the worldviews and experiences of those involved. I am not, however, seeking to invoke ‘tradition’ as an explanatory framework, as though we could somehow isolate certain character traits or inherent dispositions that might decode the complexities of the state of crisis engulfing much of the continent. Rather, my concern is to explore the understandings and practices that result from the contemporary contact between militants and international organizations, and to situate these within a local, contemporaneous context of belief and meaning.

What follows rests on a few assumptions. First, that although the targeting of civilians for military attack is not new, it takes on a character, logic, and importance inextricably bound to this period of massive humanitarian and post-conflict interventions. Statistical evidence for this is hard to muster. Civilian casualties are a difficult phenomenon to measure, to tabulate, or even to define. Much of my own evidence for such a shift is anecdotal. As I take up below, the combatants with whom I have worked themselves indicate a tactical shift in figuring the place of civilians in the logic of war, and my purpose in this article is to understand the mechanics of that shift and its epistemological dimensions. Even so, there is statistical support for the idea that, at least in West Africa, non-combatants are increasingly figuring in the strategic logic of war. To cite one example, a series of Human Rights Watch reports on the fighting in Sierra Leone suggest that the Civil Defence Forces or CDF (of which the kamajors were the most powerful and numerous of the militias) committed relatively fewer
abuses than any of the other participating factions. By contrast, when many of the same fighters joined LURD (Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy), they became involved with a force that is considerably more active in using abuses against civilians as a tool of war. My contention is that this tactical shift is at least in part attributable to the legacy of humanitarian intervention in Sierra Leone.

Second, I maintain that wars in even the most ‘out-of-the-way’ places are fought by combatants keenly aware of developments elsewhere in the world. Through the global media — television, radio and the Internet; through informal information networks instituted by global diasporas and migrations; and through contact with global humanitarian organizations which bring with them personnel and experiences of multiple conflict zones, there is no war on earth today that is not informed by the knowledge of wars elsewhere. Whether composed of professional soldiers or irregular combatants, there is no fighting force that does not locate itself in the context of others and does not strategically employ its knowledge (accurate or otherwise) of the dynamics of other conflicts.

Finally, though equally important, is the presumption that humanitarian assistance and intervention cannot and should not end. This is not a call for retreat. The disastrous consequences of withdrawal are evident from the 1994 Rwanda genocide and the Liberia debacle of the early 1990s. Tracing the impact of humanitarian operations is a form of critique; it should not be construed as a condemnation.

The Mano River war

In this section, I briefly trace the history of the conflicts in Sierra Leone and Liberia, including the resulting humanitarian response and the socio-economic context in which those resources were deployed. Understanding the dynamics of the recent history of the region provides background to the subsequent section of this article: the way that intervention was interpreted by combatants and the lessons learned from it.

The current war in Liberia is largely an outgrowth of the decade of fighting in Sierra Leone, which was itself an extension of the Liberian

5. Human Rights Watch, ‘Sowing terror: atrocities against civilians in Sierra Leone’, 10, 3(a) (July, 1998); Human Rights Watch, ‘Sierra Leone: getting away with murder, mutilation, and rape’, 11, 3(a) (July, 1999). Although their findings have not been made public at the time of writing, investigators with both the Special Court for war crimes and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission have suggested that the level of atrocities committed by the CDF may be higher than previously thought. It seems highly unlikely, however, that these bodies will uncover a sufficient number of heretofore unknown cases of violations to reverse the overall conclusions of the earlier investigations.

conflict begun in 1989. Charles Taylor’s efforts to overthrow Liberian President Samuel Doe resulted in widespread fighting throughout that country until a temporary lull with Taylor’s election to the Liberian presidency in 1997. In the meantime, Taylor supported the March 1991 insurgency of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) led by Foday Sankoh in neighbouring Sierra Leone. That support continued until the official declaration of the end of hostilities in January 2002, by which time Taylor was under threat from Guinea-supported insurgents made up of Liberian dissidents and mercenaries from Sierra Leone (LURD). Later, Taylor was also threatened from the east by a Côte d’Ivoire-backed faction (Movement for Democracy in Liberia, MODEL). Only on 11 August 2003 was Taylor removed from power after a three-month siege of the capital.7

As this brief history suggests, many of the same players have operated in both nations, and events in those countries have influenced and been influenced by Guinea, Burkina Faso and Côte d’Ivoire as well as Libya, Britain, South Africa and the United States. The kamajor militia with which much of my fieldwork was conducted is now an important component of LURD, and was itself heavily dependent on combat veterans from the original Liberian war. Connected to Liberia through kinship, trade and refugee networks that crisscross the national boundary, many kamajors saw joining the fighting in Liberia as a natural next step when post-conflict opportunities in Sierra Leone proved to be few, or when their commanders or patrons ordered them to go. Some combatants were trained by the South African mercenary outfit Executive Outcomes, received training and support from the British government, and have at the very least benefited from the military assistance of the United States to various West African states. In contrast to the stereotype of the small-scale, context-less African conflict, the fighting in Sierra Leone and Liberia is part of a regional war with global connections.

As the conflict and combatants move from zone to zone, they take with them a knowledge of the role international media organizations such as the British Broadcasting Corporation and humanitarian agencies such as the United Nations World Food Programme and Médecins sans Frontières

played in previous manifestations of the conflict. The militia members with whom I worked were avid consumers of media outlets such as the BBC’s ‘Focus on Africa’, the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation’s news and chat programmes, and whenever possible the Freetown newspapers. Public discussions of contemporary news from the continent were commonplace. As a result, the kamajors were remarkably knowledgeable and curious about African affairs and the relationship between Africa and the rest of the world, and interested in locating themselves within a broad continental and global context.

There was a common discussion I had with members of the kamajor militia when they discovered I had worked as a photojournalist covering other African civil wars. Inevitably, we played the name game: Angola, Sudan, Mozambique, Somalia, DR Congo. Are we, the kamajors asked, more dangerous than UNITA? More deadly than the SPLA? Worse than RENAMO? There was an impressive knowledge of the dynamics of other African conflicts, not only on the part of the leadership but among much of the rank and file, and a considerable interest in locating their own movement within the pantheon of other African struggles. One tenet of this travelling knowledge of other African movements was that, when the international community responds to African crises, the more atrocious the conflict, the greater the level of aid.

By any measure, the wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia were atrocious. Accurate estimates are impossible, but the death toll from a decade of war in Sierra Leone was probably close to 75,000, with 2 million persons displaced and some 20,000 mutilated. Between 1989 and 1997, anywhere from 60,000 to 200,000 Liberians are said to have died. The dollar figure on damage to infrastructure and property is incalculable, as is the legacy of amputees and the devastation of military campaigns with such descriptive titles as the RUF’s 1999 ‘Operation No Living Thing’.

The response, if never quite sufficient, has nevertheless been large. The international community’s investment in the peace process was estimated to have exceeded $2 billion by mid-2002. The UN peacekeeping force in Sierra Leone was the largest in the world when the war was declared over

9. The lower figure is from Ellis, The Mask of Anarchy. The figure of 200,000 is frequently cited without attribution in media coverage of the Liberia conflict, especially during the recent siege of Monrovia.
10. Large, at least, by African standards. In contrast, the ongoing occupation of Iraq is estimated by the Defense Department to cost the US alone approximately $1 billion per week.
in January 2002, with some 17,000 personnel on the ground.\textsuperscript{12} The budget for the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) campaign was approximately $30 million, covering the cost of collecting armaments from the various irregular factions in the conflict, providing some direct material incentives to former combatants in the form of small household items, and most importantly training in an elected field, including animal husbandry, welding, cloth dying or farming. In a few instances, ex-combatants whose education had been interrupted by the fighting were promised school fees as a component of their disarmament package. The UN's operations budget exceeds $500 million for the period from 1 July 2003 to 30 June 2004, down from $700 million the year before.\textsuperscript{13} Added to this sum is the substantial investment of international NGOs (the International Committee of the Red Cross alone had a 2002 budget of $14.5 million\textsuperscript{14}), much of it destined for projects meant to train and socially integrate ex-combatants in the hope that further conflict can be prevented if alienated young people are given a more hopeful and prosperous future.

This is a significant sum of money in a nation consistently at or near the bottom in the UN \textit{Human Development Report}. Especially for young men, the economy of Sierra Leone offers few prospects. Those which are available (such as labouring in the eastern diamond fields, participating in the traffic in drugs and weapons or working as mercenaries elsewhere in West Africa) are highly insecure at best. Such economic marginalization is made all the more glaring by the trappings of wealth that accompany the international presence: the ubiquitous white Toyota Land Cruisers, as well as bars, hotels, and restaurants priced for those earning dollars instead of Sierra Leonean leones. The logos, banners, and advertisements for the hundreds of NGOs operating in Sierra Leone, together with the massive UN presence, are constantly visible, permeating the everyday existence of urban life and radiating deep into rural communities. On the whole, the impression is one of considerable wealth and almost limitless resources — for those who know how to access them.

\textsuperscript{12} That number has since been substantially drawn down; in May 2003 the force numbered 13,100, and December 2004 has been set as the target date for full withdrawal. When the full complement of 15,000 troops is deployed in Liberia, that nation will probably boast the largest ongoing operation. See International Crisis Group, \textit{Sierra Leone: The state of security and governance}, Africa Report No. 67 (Freetown and Brussels, 2 September 2003); International Crisis Group, \textit{Liberia: Security challenges}, Africa Report No. 71 (Freetown and Brussels, 3 November 2003).
\textsuperscript{13} United Nations General Assembly, Agenda items 126 and 134, Fifty-seventh session A/57/772/Add.3, 7 May 2003.
\textsuperscript{14} http://www.icrc.org.
The lessons of war

With so much evident wealth in the country, members of the kamajor militia were keenly interested in how that wealth was distributed — and most importantly, why so little seemed to go to them. It was an article of faith among militia members that the lion’s share of these resources was funnelled to former combatants of the RUF. The reasoning, they suggested, was that the international community was terrified of an RUF return to hostilities, with its iconic images of amputations and other atrocities against civilians. Despite the fact that the kamajors had fought on the side of the government and were unquestionably (in their own minds) ‘harder’ fighters, it was the RUF that was rewarded with incentive packages, jobs training and reintegration benefits, while the kamajors and the CDF organization to which they belonged were given short shrift. Members of the CDF were aware that it was images of amputated civilian limbs and narratives of wanton destruction by the rebels which had prompted intervention. Despite their own clever — and largely successful — efforts to manipulate the media and foreign observers by playing up their hunter ethos and volatile image, the kamajors recognized that it was the threat of an RUF return to the bush that was most feared and would signify the failure of the peace process.

The perception was one of an international community prepared to go to great lengths (and considerable expense) to ensure opportunities for those they feared most. At work here is a creative misreading on the part of fighting factions. Sierra Leone’s DDR campaign was not, as the kamajors and other CDF factions maintained, skewed to the benefit of the RUF. In fact, the final disarmament figures show that a majority of those disarmed were CDF irregulars.15 Nevertheless, the perception of bias was real, and the lesson learned was simple. Those who were most feared, who committed the worst abuses, would be those who received the greatest rewards. The result was a shift in tactics as kamajors and Liberian dissidents came together to form LURD and push the fighting towards Monrovia. Kamajors interviewed in April 2002 in Freetown and in Liberia suggested that the ethical codes which had governed their war-time behaviour in Sierra Leone — and limited atrocities — may not apply across the border.16 A kamajor and LURD combatant

15. Of the 72,490 combatants disarmed, 37,377 were identified as CDF — the largest single group in the proceedings (John Prendergast, International Crisis Group, Testimony to the American Congress, 2002, http://www.intl-crisis-group.org/projects/showreport.cfm?reportid=657). There was also a perception that many of the NGOs, notably the Red Cross, were assisting the RUF.
16. Mariane Ferme and I have suggested elsewhere that this lower incidence of civilian atrocities may be connected to the militia’s early hunter ethos and a locally meaningful discourse of rights and responsibilities that is not so radically different from the global discourse of human rights employed by the UN and multinational NGOs. See Ferme and Hoffman, ‘Combattants irreguliers’.
interviewed in October 2001 by Human Rights Watch similarly marked a shift when he asserted that ‘The CDF has generally treated civilians well, but we’re not going [to Liberia] as rebels — we’re going as mercenaries.’

Sitting in an outdoor café in Conakry, Guinea, General Joe outlined for me LURD’s strategy for simultaneously winning the war with Charles Taylor, instituting a new political regime, and jump-starting the post-war Liberian economy. The key, he said, was to hit Monrovia with devastating force. It would not be enough to take the Liberian capital; the city would have to be all but destroyed. If LURD hit the city hard enough, he said, the international community would have no choice but to rush in, shouting ‘stop the killing, stop the shooting, and all that bullshit’. As subsequent acts have shown, hitting Monrovia hard clearly meant targeting both the physical infrastructure of the city and its civilian populace.

Gen. Joe’s comments echoed a conversation I had with a field commander in Bo, Sierra Leone in April 2002 as he prepared his men for either renewed deployment in Sierra Leone or in northwest Liberia, depending on political developments in Freetown, Conakry and Monrovia. Combatants with the RUF rebels in Sierra Leone, this commander told me, engaged in some of the most vicious atrocities of the war, and as a result had been ‘rewarded’ by an international community prepared to take any measures to ensure that they would not return to the bush and renewed hostilities. In contrast, the CDF had fought to restore the democratically elected government of Tejan Kabbah, and received nothing in return. If there was a return to hostilities in Sierra Leone, or when they moved into Liberia to join the effort to overthrow Charles Taylor, a military campaign that equaled the ferocity of the RUF — a campaign that targeted civilians rather than the opposing military, which included the displacement of the civilian populace and if necessary the mutilation of non-combatants — would be the only strategy guaranteed to produce the necessary international aid to secure combatants a post-conflict future. In an age of dramatic violence, only more dramatic violence would do.

A year later, the strategy outlined by Joe and his counterpart was evident on the ground in Liberia. By the time of Taylor’s departure in mid-August, three months of fighting in the capital had claimed over 1,000 lives, with the shelling of places of civilian refuge (churches, schools, the US embassy...)

17. From an unpublished Human Rights Watch interview. The reference to the CDF as ‘rebels’ was common among combatants, especially in the late stages of the war, and implied irregular status but not necessarily illegitimacy or opposition to either the government or the civilian populace. In fact, the interviewee in this instance invokes a sense of divine calling and just warfare common among Kamajors in Sierra Leone: ‘And as you know, rebels are next to God . . . ’ Mercenaries, by implication, are not bound by the same codes.

18. Joe Wylie is usually described as LURD’s military strategist and has represented LURD both to the US government and to ECOWAS in the Ghana peace talks.
compound) the most prominent form of ‘military’ engagement.¹⁹ One of the hallmarks of LURD throughout the war has been hit-and-run attacks on targets deep in enemy territory that could not possibly be held for any length of time and offered little military advantage, but represented highly visible ‘soft’ targets. Aid workers still in Monrovia during the siege report that incidents of rape — already a common weapon against the non-combatant populace — dramatically increased.²⁰ Both the United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs and Human Rights Watch have asserted that, in the words of the latter, all parties to the conflict ‘systematically violate their obligations under international law’.²¹

A LURD combatant interviewed in October 2001 by a Human Rights Watch investigator offered a succinct summary of what seems still to be the operational logic:

[W]e know how civilians are. We also know any government won’t wake up and any mission won’t succeed unless there are civilian casualties. During any war civilians have to die and suffer; that’s just the way it is.²²

Like direct attacks, displacement and the humanitarian interventions it generates have similarly become integral to strategic war-time violence, as underscored by another conversation I had with General Joe. He described for me an encounter with a young woman in the US who accused LURD of displacing Liberian civilians in their push for the capital. What she did not understand, he said, was that civilians are better-off when they are displaced. As a refugee you receive bulgur wheat, you get shelter, and you are protected — a considerably more secure existence than the hardscrabble life of a Liberian farmer, especially at a time of war. The equation of refugee status with assistance was automatic. The implication is that displacement of civilians is something that occurs with the mechanisms of refugee assistance always already in mind. As a category of persons, ‘refugees’ do not exist without the institutions dedicated to dealing with them. They have no independent identity apart from the vast mechanism of humanitarian assistance that swings into action with its (perceived) extensive resource base to cater to their needs.

Similarly, when a highly placed LURD commander speaking in Freetown in September 2003 described his plans for a post-conflict position in the

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¹⁹. This is the number quoted most often in both the Associated Press and The New York Times coverage of the siege of Monrovia since the most intense fighting ended with the arrival of Nigerian peacekeepers.
²². From unpublished Human Rights Watch interview.
new Liberia, he took for granted the interventions of the development apparatus. His goal, he said, was a position in the parastatal sector; in the government ministries one would be too closely scrutinized by the international donors who fund reconstruction. By contrast, in the ports or telecommunications sectors, one was free to ‘accumulate resources’ without oversight. That these international donors would be there was assumed a priori. The devastation to the country was sufficient to guarantee it.

Even for non-combatants, war is a process to which the actions of multinational institutions are integral. Representative here are the perceptions of a woman in Kenema, eastern Sierra Leone, who had been displaced multiple times by the fighting in that country as well as across the border in Liberia. Fatmata,23 a well educated nurse, described in detail the differences between her treatment at the hands of the Red Cross in Liberia and in Sierra Leone. Her rights as a refugee, she said, were repeatedly violated by the local Sierra Leone staff, an issue she intended to take up with the Geneva headquarters on the forthcoming annual Day of the Refugee. Corruption within the ICRC bureaucracy on the Sierra Leone side meant that she was denied the provisions to which she was entitled as a refugee, a status that had achieved the level of a fundamental identity regardless of which side of the border she was on. Much like a national citizenship, her ‘refugee-ness’ entailed certain inalienable rights and invoked a bureaucratic infrastructure to which she could appeal and through which her needs would be met. The processes of deterritorialization of the nation-state and reterritorialization according to a different order of sovereignty are evocative of the way Hardt and Negri have cast globalization as a new form of empire, dependent in this instance on a state of constant emergency and war.24 At the very least, they suggest the impossibility of disaggregating the exercise of violence from the institutions meant to stem that violence in the modern landscape of war.

Understanding the war

Having established that humanitarian interventions structure a certain military logic, I turn now to the implications for the way we research and analyze African warfare. On the surface, it is possible to read here an elementary logic of cost-benefit analysis. This is indeed a hard calculus in which the lives of non-combatants seem to be of negligible value. Combatants

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23. A pseudonym.
often shrugged off inquiries regarding civilian atrocities with the excuse that ‘it was war’, as though a state of conflict rendered irrelevant questions of ethics, morality, or accountability. But my purpose in raising the role of humanitarian organizations in structuring military strategy is not to suggest a straightforward relation of cause and effect. Atrocities against civilians cannot be understood simply as the calculations of military elites ordering their subordinates to action as one might plan an ambush or order a march. To return to the Bangura quotation at the beginning of this article, ‘violence does not have only one logic, but several’. What I have outlined needs to be seen as one thread in a complicated web of forces which work together in what we might loosely refer to as a culture or, to use a more anthropologically precise term, a *habitus* of war.25

One of the other logics at work here is the logic of power in this region of Africa. As the Sierra Leonean commander explained it, a ‘hearts and minds’ guerrilla campaign, aimed at mobilizing popular support, had little purchase in a West African context.26 Support, he argued, was a matter of strength rather than common purpose. At one point in our conversation, he indicated a nearby house. Would it be better, he asked, to let a fire in that house burn it to the ground, or would it be better to force the neighbours to assist in fighting the blaze so that everyone’s house did not burn? When I suggested that it would be even more effective if the neighbours willingly assisted in the effort, he scoffed at my naiveté. In a subsequent conversation, he summarized his position:

That [targeting civilians] is one of the major tools in guerrilla warfare. Because when the guerrilla is fighting, he is less equipped, he has less manpower. He’s going to use tactics to put fear into the civilian populace and send the signal to the government that it can’t protect its people . . . It is one of the tools the guerrilla uses. Fear and intimidation.

Throughout the Mano River region, the *habitus* of war has pushed that logic to extremes. The power to kill or to maim is also the power to protect; therefore, ‘the people’ would seek protection from the force which demonstrated the greater power over life and death. Mbembe’s writings on power as spectacle and the capriciousness of elite mandates argue that crisis and contradiction constitute ‘a distinctive regime of violence’ characteristic of

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26. There is a certain irony here. The kamajor militia owes much of its success to grassroots efforts in the early days of the movement to provide recruits, material resources and local knowledge against the RUF and the state army personnel who colluded with them. See Muana, ‘The Kamajor militia’. 
government in the African postcolony. Power is not a latent force that can be exercised or held in check; it exists only in its dramatization and is evaluated according to its capacity for excessive (and often deliberately incoherent) public display. In the West African war-scape, that regime of violence was instituted in a very direct and often indistinguishable manner by militarized forces of the state, its surrogates (such as the kamajors), and those in opposition to it. Skewing the Weberian formulation that the sovereign renders all other forms of violence illegitimate, political power rests here with those whose capacity for violence can be taken to the greatest levels of excess.

Coupled with the lessons learned from humanitarian interventions in Sierra Leone, this understanding of the dynamics of power attributes a sophisticated (if nonetheless disturbing) rationality to a war which involves more confrontations between belligerents and non-combatants than between combatants themselves. At the very least, this refutes the logic of findings such as the 1997 UN report on irregular combatants which erroneously suggested that ‘irregular forces have little regard for the norms of international law and do not distinguish between combatants and non-combatants...’ Clearly, the lives and fates of civilians and non-combatants matter greatly to the various fighting factions, even if they do not share the UN’s philosophy of how that future should figure in the mathematics of war.

Let me repeat, however, that this is a rationality inseparable from its context of local belief and meaning. Only by considering the way combatants sought to benefit from humanitarian interventions in the light of culturally constructed notions about the nature of power, for example, can we explain the number of instances in which LURD commanders have executed their own men for perpetrating human rights violations, while at the same time encouraging those very same abuses. There is contradiction here only to the extent that political power in the African postcolony is by its very nature contradictory.

Similarly, by evaluating the role of humanitarian interventions in the light of the context in which they are received, we can begin to account for the fact that the UN and international NGOs are rarely accorded in practice the neutrality that is so central to their institutional ethos. I have argued

29. Cases of internal ‘military justice’ such as executions for rape and looting were relayed to me on numerous occasions by LURD members who seemed to be simultaneously invoking the organization’s respect for human rights and its fearsome extra-judicial capacity for violence. Stories of internal punishment executions have also surfaced in the latest fighting in Monrovia.
above that the activities of the UN and various NGOs were perceived by the CDF as largely sympathetic to the RUF. I suspect that many within the RUF felt the bias leaned the other way. This stands in marked contrast to the objective detachment which many expatriate personnel assume is granted to them *a priori* by those they seek to assist. For people in the region, however, power is exercised by multinational humanitarian organizations in the same way as it is exercised by governments, by multinational corporations, and by big-man patronage networks in-country and throughout the diaspora — according to a logic of paybacks, favoritism and strategic alliances. General Joe brought this point home to me when I asked him how he could be so certain that the UN would take on the task of rebuilding a post-war Monrovia. They would, he said, because wealthy Liberian expatriates had friends in the UN bureaucracy — friends who could get things done with UN money.

Beyond locally meaningful constructs regarding the nature of political power, one might also look to concepts of the body and its symbolism to account for the specific acts of war-time violence, or to the operation of occult forces as meaningfully impacting the violent relations of the conflict zone. The extent to which initiation into the kamajor society had become synonymous with the initiation into Mende manhood suggests that the motivation to participate in violence can never be considered outside the realm of the social. So does the fact that so many youth with whom I spoke were unable to dissociate their participation in the conflict from their relationship to patrons on whom they depended for both economic and social livelihoods (making the distinction between the two a largely arbitrary one) — patrons who either ordered their young ‘clients’ to fight or who served as their commanders within the various militias. In short, we can understand the way humanitarian interventions shape a certain logic of the Mano River conflict only if we do not reduce that logic to a set of calculations divorced from the cultural context in which they occur.

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30. For more on patrimonialism and patronage forms of governance in Africa generally, see Jean-François Bayart, *The State in Africa: The politics of the belly* (Longman Publishing, New York, 1993); for specific discussions regarding the Sierra Leonean context, see Reno *Corruption and State Politics* and Richards, *Fighting for the Rainforest*.


32. For more on the intersection of gender, initiation, and the Liberia war see Mats Utas, *Sweet Battlefields: Youth and the Liberian civil war* (Uppsala University Dissertations in Cultural Anthropology, Uppsala, 2003).
Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that increased attacks on civilians in the Mano River war extending throughout Sierra Leone and Liberia are linked to the practices of humanitarian organizations that sought to limit abuses by investing heavily in post-conflict efforts to prevent combatants from renewing hostilities. Ironically, these interventions seem to have convinced those fighters who have moved to other fronts within the region that attacking civilians makes a certain tactical sense. I have suggested, however, that we cannot reduce this connection to a simple determinism divorced from any cultural context. Although I have focused here on the militia fighters who made up the kamajor faction in Sierra Leone and LURD in Liberia, one could similarly describe the practices of the RUF or the Liberian security forces, though presumably the forces which we see at work in their war-time activity would be somewhat different. Particularly in the case of the pro-Taylor factions in Liberia, atrocities committed during the Monrovia siege may have less to do with an expectation of post-conflict benefits than with an extreme version of what Bayart alludes to in his theorization of a ‘politics of the belly’ — a frantic, almost gluttonous effort to capitalize on a palpably narrow window of opportunity to benefit from one’s position. In the case of Taylor’s forces, the imminence of the President’s downfall and an end to their own ‘legitimate’ use of force may have generated in Taylor’s men an almost frenzied drive to excess. Here again, however, we find a meaningful explanation in these war-time practices only if we attend to them in locally significant ways.

I have approached these issues via a methodological route more familiar to cultural anthropologists than to other disciplines in the social sciences. By its nature, participant-observation is a field method which produces data more qualitative than statistical. It takes seriously what participants say about their own experiences of contemporary African warfare. I have sifted through the comments of combatants themselves for clues as to why atrocities against civilians are seemingly becoming a more integral component of the logic of war. If it is true that the calculations governing military strategies are dependent on local cultural contexts, then we need to employ field methods which can illuminate this most subjective of variables. This is not an exclusively theoretical project, and I find this an important research approach to the study of war and violence for a number of reasons with practical policy implications as well.

Elsewhere, I have suggested that it increasingly falls to academics to serve as witnesses and ‘expert’ commentators on the events of conflict zones, a role that necessitates an on-the-ground presence for both observational and

authoritative legitimacy. Humanitarian interventions in Africa, like theoretical treatments of the continent, too often suffer from the wholesale importation of strategies and models discerned from elsewhere. It is worth repeating that establishing a link between emergency institutions and increasing violence is not an excuse to abandon the project of international assistance. It does suggest that, among other possible reforms, we should place less emphasis on strategies exclusively aimed at preventing combatant re-militarization and look more at strategies that consider irregulars within a social context. What is certain is that it is only when we pay attention to meaningful particularities that interventions in the future will be made more effective.


35. I would suggest that the demonization so common in media treatments of contemporary African youth combatants — a portrayal of young African men in particular as somehow inherently, pathologically violent — has also led international agencies to focus too much of their energy and resources on these actors within the socio-political landscape of the post-colony.