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## Coming back from the bush: gender, youth and reintegration in northern Sierra Leone

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Coming back from the bush



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# Coming back from the bush

Gender, youth and reintegration in  
northern Sierra Leone

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## Preface

This book is the winner of the 2007 ASC/CODESRIA/NiZa Africa Thesis Award. The jury's report included the following comments:

The war in Sierra Leone lasted for 10 years and was characterized by egregious atrocities such as the mass killing of civilians, torture, sexual violence, the abduction of women and children, forced marriages, and the use of child soldiers. (...) Janneke chose to focus on the issue of the reintegration of young women who had been forced to join one of the fighting factions during the war as the 'bush wives' of combatants. What happened to these women when the conflict ended? What is the meaning of reintegration for these women in Sierra Leone from an anthropological perspective?

Janneke spent six months in northern Sierra Leone where she interviewed women who had been abducted and forced to marry combatants in the RUF rebel group. Based on these interviews, she wrote this fascinating and very original study. In addition to interviews, she became involved in the personal lives of some of the women she met. The jury was impressed by the high quality of both her theoretical and empirical research. This thesis is innovative and forces us to review our traditional scheme of thought.

Unlike many studies on gender in post-conflict situations, it does not treat women as passive victims. And it shows us through a meticulous but never boring study that the women have a voice, and have ideas and strategies about how to continue to survive and build a new life for themselves after the end of the war in Sierra Leone. Here we are far from the clichés in which African women in the aftermath of war are perceived as victims waiting for some sort of providential external assistance.

The thesis demonstrates how the social and cultural identity of these women as either daughters or wives influenced their decision to return or not to their former community and how they constantly have to negotiate their social identities in the community in order to integrate into new networks (by bonding and bridging). We should, however, bear in mind that these women's choices are made in a context of extreme poverty and amid the total destruction of the social fabric.

The study also highlights how post-conflict policies developed by NGOs, international organizations and national institutions are not always effective because they fail to understand the dynamics and persist in imposing what *they* think is right on their 'clients'. For instance, most of these bush wives were excluded from the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programme because it simply ignored the key social role they had played within the rebel movement and the way they had negotiated this role.

The thesis demonstrates how, contrary to popular belief, women *can* reintegrate by themselves and do not need to be reintegrated by anyone else. The best way to assist them is to understand this and listen to their voices. This requires humility and openness from all those involved. Janneke has undoubtedly shown this ability.



# Contents

List of abbreviations	<i>ix</i>
Acknowledgements	<i>x</i>
Map of Sierra Leone	<i>xii</i>

1	A PRELIMINARY EXPLORATION	<i>1</i>
	Introduction	<i>1</i>
	Prevalence and recruitment	<i>4</i>
	Perspectives on reintegration	<i>8</i>
	To continue...	<i>11</i>
2	SOCIAL ORGANIZATION, SOCIAL IDENTITY AND AGENCY: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	<i>13</i>
	Introduction	<i>13</i>
	Social organization	<i>14</i>
	Social identity	<i>16</i>
	Actor orientation and agency	<i>19</i>
	The play of reintegration	<i>22</i>
3	IN SIERRA LEONE: METHOD AND FIELDWORK	<i>25</i>
	Introduction	<i>25</i>
	Entering the field	<i>25</i>
	Betwixt and between	<i>27</i>
	Data collection	<i>28</i>
	Limitations and focus of the study	<i>31</i>
	Validity	<i>32</i>
4	“WE ARE YOUTH” YOUNG MEN BEFORE AND AFTER THE CONFLICT IN SIERRA LEONE	<i>37</i>
	Introduction	<i>37</i>
	Political-historical background	<i>39</i>
	Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration	<i>42</i>
	The Makeni motorbike drivers	<i>44</i>
	Meaning of youth in contemporary Sierra Leone	<i>46</i>



5	<i>“TAKEN INTO THE BUSH”</i>	
	YOUNG WOMEN INVOLVED IN THE CONFLICT IN SIERRA LEONE	51
	Introduction	51
	The construction of gender identity	52
	Gender-based violence in the context of conflict	58
	Women’s positioning and roles in conflict	61
	Forced marriage arrangements	63
	Gender-based exclusion from disarmament and demobilization	67
6	FINDING NEW WAYS: INDIVIDUAL INTEGRATION STRATEGIES	71
	Introduction	71
	Makeni: A place to be shared	73
	Reconsidering ‘bush’ marriage arrangements	77
	Coming home, going home?	79
	Surviving day by day: Assets, capabilities and entitlements	85
	Reciprocity and the necessity of new networks	89
7	FOLLOWING EXISTING PATHS: REINTEGRATING IN THE COMMUNITY	93
	Introduction	93
	A community drawn into and coming out of war	95
	Ex-combatants wives	101
8	COMING BACK FROM THE BUSH: FINAL ANALYSIS	108
	Introduction	108
	Youth, gender and the difference it makes	110
	Reintegration revisited	113
	Where to go from here	116
	References	119

## List of abbreviations

AFRC	Armed Forces Revolutionary Council
APC	All People's Party
CDF	Civil Defence Forces
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (Programme)
DFID	Department for International Development (UK)
ECOMOG	ECOWAS Monitoring Group
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
HRW	Human Rights Watch
NCDDR	National Committee for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
RUF	Revolutionary United Front
UN	United Nations
UNAMSIL	United Nations Assistance Mission Sierra Leone
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

## Acknowledgements

This thesis is about the social relations of women in Sierra Leone. These acknowledgements are about mine: the professional and personal relations from which I received the support, courage, critical reflection and inspiration that enabled me to actually finish this study with this particular thesis.

I am most indebted to Chris van der Borgh who agreed to supervise me on this entire project. Chris, you turned out to be a superb supervisor with plenty of patience and the right words at the right time. Our conversations got me going again every time I was desperately in need of some external input and reflection.

I also owe many thanks to Paul Richards. To secure my plans for conducting fieldwork in Sierra Leone, I contacted him with a request for support. His expressively communicated commitment and involvement regarding Sierra Leone motivated me to pursue my initial plans and ideas. The day I arrived at Sierra Leone international airport about nine months later it turned out that he had made arrangements for me to accompany a World Bank consultant into the field for a few days. "From there you are on your own," he said. I am very grateful for the way he contributed to my preparations and for creating this opportunity for me to make a jump start into the field.

I would like to thank Khadija Bah for letting me tag along for these first few days in Sierra Leone. Khadija and Malaikah, thank you for your vibrant friendship. Both professionally and personally you've become an inspiration to me. I want to thank Krijn Peters for helping me around with practical matters during my first days in Sierra Leone and for his interest in what I was doing later on. Many warm thanks for Maaiké, Jim and Jesse, whose house in Freetown was a home away from home for me. I would also like to mention Amy, Anne, Colin and Nishit who made Makeni a place for both work and pleasure for me.

I should emphasize that none of this could have been done without all the people I met in Sierra Leone: the young women who participated in this study, the Makeni motorbike drivers, everyone including the innocent bystander on the street who wanted to spend some of their time and share their thoughts with me, the people in the neighbourhood where I lived for six months and Sierra Leoneans working for various NGOs who were always willing to discuss relevant (and irrelevant but highly interesting) issues with me over a cup of palm wine. This study is not just about people in Sierra Leone, but it came about thanks to their contribution.

I would like to thank friends and family for their inexhaustible support. The day I left for Sierra Leone my parents gave me a small book to accompany me on my travels with the title “*Go and talk to strangers*”. Mum and Dad, thank you for your everlasting encouragement every time I come up with another ‘Africa plan’. I want to particularly thank Koen, my oldest brother, and Karen. With all your enthusiasm for my ideas you made it possible for me to do this exactly the way I wanted to. Without your contribution and support I would not have had the opportunity to spend six months in Sierra Leone and this thesis would not have been written. I want to thank Roger for editing this piece of writing regarding the use of English.

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## Map of Sierra Leone



Source: <http://www.crisisgroup.org>

## A preliminary exploration

### Introduction

“Do you know why we wear these?” the girl in the compound asks while she stirs the rice in the big blackened pot on the fire. She lifts up part of her *lappa*<sup>1</sup> and shows the tight cotton knee-length pants she is wearing underneath. “It’s because of the war, you know. We started wearing these so that if the rebels came to attack we were able to run ... we wear these so you do not get naked while running .... And now we got used to wearing them ...”

“This war was a demand for social change” was the answer I received many times when talking to people in Sierra Leone about what they thought the war in their country had been about. The civil war in Sierra Leone, a small West African country with a population of approximately five million and rich in natural resources, was brought to the world’s attention through images of child soldiers – drugged teenagers carrying machine guns – who were said to be responsible for widespread and cruel atrocities in the form of amputations and sexual violence. Directed by a couple of young men bearing a grudge against those in power they threw the country into ten years of devastatingly brutal conflict. And it was said, it was all about getting the diamonds. Both the image and the explanation are oversimplified. Contemporary African wars are more complicated than this. In the case of Sierra Leone, after ten years of fighting, the final peace agreement was signed and the war was officially declared over in January 2002.<sup>2</sup> The largest

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<sup>1</sup> *Lappa* is the Krio word for a piece of cotton cloth, often worn by women wrapped around their bodies as a skirt.

<sup>2</sup> The first peace accord between the Government of Sierra Leone and the RUF (Revolutionary United Front) was signed on 30 November 1996. The Lomé Accord, signed on 7 July 1999, was a second attempt to put the conflict on hold. It was not until January 2002 that the war was officially declared

UN peacekeeping force ever<sup>3</sup> was already installed and reconstruction, rehabilitation and reintegration could start.

It is not the aim of this thesis to give an overall explanation of the motives and rationale that fuelled this war. As the sub-title suggests, the general focus is on issues of gender, youth and reintegration in its aftermath. Young people, children and youth, male and female, were a significant part of the fighting forces during the war. Often pictured as innocent victims, they have attracted much attention from international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), multi-lateral organisations representing the international community and researchers from various academic disciplines. Psychologists, for example, are particularly interested in the effect of participation in violent conflict on individual psychological development and mental health. The human rights movement addresses the issue of using children in conflict, seeing it as a violation of their fundamental rights, and at the same time is trying hard to establish guidelines on how to treat children before the law, as perpetrators or victims (see, for example, HRW 2003; AI 2000; Ferme & Hoffmann 2002). In addition to these psychological and legal perspectives, this study aims to provide a social and cultural framework that focuses on reintegration defined as the re-establishment of social relations.

This thesis is based on the results of both a literature study and empirical data gathered during six months of fieldwork in northern Sierra Leone. Both the research and the writing have been done to fulfil the requirements of a Master's degree in Cultural and Social Anthropology at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. The central theme and objectives are rooted in my personal desire to conduct an anthropological study in the field of conflict resolution and peace building. I wanted to focus on finding some possible answers to the broad question of how people manage to live together and rebuild a society when conflict has broken down the social structure and groups within the community have become enemies. So one could say that my aim was to gain insight into the way a conflict can bring about social and cultural transformation.

It is tempting to consider youth participation as a symptom of the cruelty of rebel movements. For this study, however, I have chosen to adopt the view that it could also be seen as the outcome of cultural and social exclusion prior to the conflict and that this made the youth vulnerable to recruitment (see, for example, Richards 1995; Veale & Stavrou 2004). With particular reference to the

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over. This shows that a peace process often does not follow a straight line but develops in cycles, during which relapses into violence occur.

<sup>3</sup> On 22 October 1999 the UN Security Council authorized the establishment of UNAMSIL (UN Assistance Mission Sierra Leone). Eventually its maximum authorized strength was 17,500 including 260 military observers and 170 civilian police (Malan *et al.* 2003).

reintegration of youth, it is important to realize this if one wants to understand whether or not youth are reintegrating into situations that contributed to their participation in the first place. Reintegration studies are often linked to reintegration programmes. No matter how informative and valuable this kind of research is, it does not bring into focus those who fall outside these programmes, nor does it provide information on how reintegration actually proceeds after the programmes have finished. The focus in this thesis is therefore not on the policy discourse on reintegration but on reintegration as seen from the perspective of the individual who is reintegrating in relation to his/her social and cultural context.

The youth factor is present in much of the literature on the subject of civil conflict in Africa. However, it is clear from the literature that although the involvement of children in conflict is a legitimate concern, it is the social category of youth that tends to grow into a political force of influence and significance in Africa and therefore should be at the heart of reintegration programmes and peace building. The ambiguity or hybrid and somewhat vague characteristics of the social category of youth make it a special challenge to focus on if one wants to use the concept of social identities and explore the space for negotiation. What I found striking though is that youth is often presented as being gender-neutral and most studies on *youth* and conflict do not include a gender-specific perspective. While having registered this, it was not until I went into the field that I realized that the reintegration programmes in Sierra Leone also had been gender biased and, because of that, had to a large extent excluded women affiliated with the fighting forces in non-combatant roles. For this reason I decided to make their reintegration the central focus of this study. Two questions directed data collection and analysis in the field:

- (1) How do young women and girls who were previously associated with the fighting forces (re-)establish relations with the communities they now live in?
- (2) How do the social identities of youth and female gender affect the course of reintegration as seen from individual life experiences at a community level?

In the world of NGO policy as well as in the literature, the victim-perpetrator dichotomy can still be found, with the victim usually being female and the perpetrator male. However, women do also take on the role of fighter in certain situations or they become part of a rebel movement through different non-combatant roles. In such cases, the community might consider them to be 'guilty by association' and the victim-perpetrator distinction is not as clear as it might initially seem. Informants' accounts in this study show that once captured and taken into the bush by rebels, women do not always comply with the role of passive victim. They develop survival strategies and take on different kinds of roles and tasks. By linking reintegration with social and cultural identities, I have



attempted to adopt a gender perspective in this particular process. The objective is to understand the ways women reintegrate in their community and in the wake of this process negotiate, reproduce and transform their gender identities and related social roles.

The relevance of this thesis lies in its exploration of the more or less autonomous or spontaneous reintegration of a group that has been to a large extent invisible until recently. It is primarily made up of young women who are affiliated in such a way with rebel movements that they often fall outside official policy or reintegration programmes. The central hypothesis is that people reintegrate into society in the aftermath of war, while the challenge is to understand how they do this in relation to the social and cultural context.

At the time of writing, the Special Court<sup>4</sup> in Sierra Leone has started legal proceedings. The enforcement of marriage between combatants in the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and captured young women is included in its indictments.<sup>5</sup> One of the reasons behind the setting up of the Special Court is that if those held responsible for the atrocities committed during the war are brought to trial, this will contribute to the process of social reconstruction and reconciliation. This thesis tries to shed some light on the way forced marriages might be understood from an actor-oriented perspective in the course of conflict and reintegration. In an attempt to refrain from making moral judgments, the data and analysis will show that, in the context of civil war, the distinction between victim and perpetrator, suppression and survival is often difficult to make and certainly not fixed or consistent.

Reintegration is a process influenced by many factors and occurs over a long period of time. A fieldwork period of six months can only try to capture part of this. It was never my intention to assess whether the reintegration process of these women succeeded or not but to provide insight into the way the process was continuing up until the time when I left the field. This means that while reading this thesis one should take into account the fact that the processes described are still ongoing. I certainly do not profess to be writing a thesis that is either inclusive or conclusive, but I do want to consider a highly relevant area of study.

## Prevalence and recruitment

Active involvement of young people in armed conflict is a worldwide phenomenon. According to estimates by *The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers*, over 120,000 children are participating in conflicts on the African continent. Some of the countries best known for using children in combat are Angola, the

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<sup>4</sup> The international tribunal for the Sierra Leone war.

<sup>5</sup> Personal communication with Prof. G.G.J. Knoops, 5 April 2004.

Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Uganda, Liberia and Sierra Leone.<sup>6</sup> The last two in particular caught the international community's attention with stories of amputations and other atrocities committed by children and teenagers dressed in rags and decorated with amulets who were carrying machine guns and were under the influence of magic rituals and drugs. The tendency to make a distinction between child soldiers and 'regular' combatants and the general indignation it provokes are related to the notion that fighting a war and participation in combat should be reserved for adults. Adulthood is therefore often defined by an absolute age bracket.

In the case of Sierra Leone, it is estimated that 5,000 children and teenagers were actually involved in the civil war as combatants and another 5,000 were used for related activities within the forces (Ibid.; Zack-Williams 2001: 73; Wessels 2002: 245). Although this focus on the use of children in conflict is recent – the recruitment of child soldiers is for the first time in history explicitly included in indictments by the Special Court in Sierra Leone – the phenomenon itself is not. In medieval Europe, children were trained as knights and in the 13<sup>th</sup> century they participated in the Crusades (Wessels 2002: 238). Children in African societies moved through different life phases that were marked by initiation rituals before entering adulthood. To become a warrior, one had to have reached the stage of an adult but that does not exclude the fact that adulthood was reached at an earlier age than that of 18, the current standard used by the international community. It is known that teenagers fought together with their fathers the same way they worked the land together (Wessels 2002: 238; Stavrou & Stewart 2000: 39-40). Comparative studies show that young people in contemporary armed conflict sometimes become involved from as young as eight years old (Peters & Richards 1998: 183; Wessels 2002: 246). It is also suggested that the increasing availability of small arms contributed to the use of children in conflict (Stohl 2002: 20-21). Children, teenagers and adolescents are no longer affected by war just as victims and, as the numbers show, their participation – either voluntarily or enforced – cannot be ignored.

As far as the participation of children in conflict is concerned, the general assumption is that they are recruited because they are easier to manipulate. It is suggested that they can be programmed to do what is asked in fighting and to do it with less fear and reluctance. Their moral status is still to be developed (Honwana 1999: 6; Thompson 1999: 193) and children are easier to control than adults. They have more energy, are more vulnerable to propaganda and tend to obey orders. They have fewer skills and knowledge to survive on their own and it

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.child-soldier.org>, 11 May 2003. This particular figure is the most widely used regarding estimates of child combatants worldwide. Unfortunately, the kind of data it is based on is unclear.

is therefore less likely that they will try to escape (Thompson 1999: 193). In so-called bush wars, children have a physical advantage when moving about in densely overgrown areas (Richards 2002).

The actual form of recruitment is highly contextual and can be very different between countries, regions, conflicts and even the time or phase of a conflict. Nevertheless, it is possible to make a broad distinction between those who are captured and thus the victims of enforced recruitment and those who more or less voluntarily tag along with fighting groups. Apparent forced recruitment often happens during village raids, sometimes organized specifically for this purpose and during which land and material is destroyed, inhabitants are murdered or mutilated, and children and young people are taken. Sometimes the village chief is forced to hand over some of the village youth. Examples of these mostly cruel forms of recruitment come from the wars in Uganda, Angola and Mozambique. In Sierra Leone the youth was mainly recruited by the RUF and the CDF (Civil Defence Forces). Methods of recruitment varied depending on movement and local situation and both groups used forced recruitment and voluntary conscription. Forced recruitment through abduction was often combined with the branding of children. Sometimes they were forced to mutilate relatives before pulling back into the bush. Drugs such as marijuana and crack made fear disappear and made the combatants more aggressive. While in the bush, terror was used to make youth comply with the group.

Some of the recruits also tagged along more or less voluntarily in an attempt to survive, trying to find food, shelter and protection (Richards 1995, 2002; Peters & Richards 1998; Wessels 2002). This partially voluntary conscription of youth is another way they can become involved in armed conflict. But it is a kind of voluntarism that asks for a closer look. It should not be understood as a rational or conscious choice based on political aims or ideology, with a clear view of the consequences. Youth join as a means of survival in a given social reality. Richards (2002) calls this sort of person a *volunteer by circumstances* – the circumstances turn involvement in armed conflict or affiliation with a rebel movement into one of the options in life for youth. These circumstances involve peer group pressure as well as basic economic survival. Participation means access to clothing, food and protection (Wessels 2002: 246-247; Maxted 2003: 61-62). At the same time, young people are searching for alternatives for the breakdown in social networks and parental guidance in the course of conflict (Zack-Williams 2001: 78-79; Richards 2002). Children and youth are capable – at least to a certain extent – of making choices in order to survive within given social circumstances. These are choices that they often defend with a great deal of verve, as shown in interviews with (ex-)combatants in Sierra Leone (Peters &

Richards 1998).<sup>7</sup> Youths affiliated to one of the fighting forces in Sierra Leone give varying reasons for fighting, such as improvement of and better access to education (RUF) or defending their country (CDF). Their underlying motives are revenge or survival (Ibid.: 186-187; Peters 2004). Youth are pulled into violent conflict as a result of a combination of violent recruitment, survival strategies and personal motives. These youth are not simply victims of others, nor are their choices purely rational.

Although fewer in number, girls and young women are also found in the fighting forces, usually having been recruited in the same way as the boys. It has been suggested that voluntarily conscription is less common among girls because the role of combatant does not easily fit existing gender perspectives and therefore it is not a clear survival option for girls. Not much is known about the specific problems women and girls experience during and after violent conflict, especially women within the fighting forces and specifically *young* women or girls. Some researchers (e.g. McKay & Mazurana 2004) rightfully state that movies, documentaries and literature on the subject of child soldiers tend to present their information as gender-neutral, but are in fact implicitly gender-biased towards young men and boys, picturing women as helpless victims or placing them merely in their reproductive role. It is true that girls are often used in conflict for the same tasks as boys are, especially the young ones who are still seen as children. They are porters, messengers and look-outs (Machel 1996; Wessels 2002: 237).

However, existing notions on gender-related labour and gender relations are frequently reconstructed within the social relations in such a rebel movement or group (West 2000). This results in boys and men taking a dominant position and girls and women taking on additional domestic and reproductive tasks. Girls are therefore more prone to becoming victims of sexual exploitation and forced marriages, the latter with higher-ranked men. In Mozambique, RENAMU 'gave away' girls to fighters as a reward for good behaviour (Thompson 1999: 193). Schafer (2001: 232-233) states that in Mozambique a distinction was made in attitudes towards women attached to a specific group and women associated with the opponent. The former were protected and relationships between combatants and civilian women were discouraged. The opponent's women, on the other hand, were at risk of becoming victims of gender-based violence. The Sierra Leonean women at the centre of this thesis were all involved in some sort of relationship with the men who had captured them. Because of various forms of sexual abuse, girls are at higher risk and face serious health problems related to

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<sup>7</sup> In his novel *Allah n'est pas obligé*, Kourouma (2000/2001) describes the life of young Birahima who travels from Ivory Coast to Sierra Leone in search of his aunt while keeping himself alive as a child fighter. Although it is fiction, the story appears to be an attempt to show how this might influence the way their lives are shaped.

pregnancy, HIV infection and other sexually transmitted diseases. In the coming chapters I argue that the fact that they were captured as children or young girls and were subsequently forced into a relationship with men in the rebel movement during the war has made them more mature in a cultural sense, which means their social and cultural reintegration can be even more problematic.

## Perspectives on reintegration

Reintegration can be explained as the reinsertion of a part into a whole, or the process of recovery in a well-functioning unity. The reintegration of combatants means their transfer from the field of military or fighting forces to any other social domain or category. For the individual, it refers to the transformation from combatant to civilian and moving from fighting forces back into a community of civilians. In contemporary civil wars, the distinction between civilians and combatants is not always clear, nor is the distinction between perpetrator and victim which, I believe, complicates the process and meaning of reintegration.

Once an armed conflict has formally ended, reconstruction and reintegration can start. Ball (1996: 615-617) states that activities in a post-conflict context are directed towards three main fields. First there is society's institutional rehabilitation, such as the reinstallation of governmental administration. The second direction is restoring national security and order. This includes the demobilization of former combatants and often the reform of the military and police forces. The third domain of attention is socio-economic recovery, which includes the reconstruction of basic infrastructure like health care, education, water and sanitation, and telecommunication networks. It also includes the social reinsertion of various groups like refugees and ex-combatants. In this framework Ball (1997: 86-91) uses reintegration in a very strict sense. She employs the term to refer to the reinsertion of former combatants into society and their regaining of financial independence by productive labour. In practice, this means demobilization and providing ex-combatants with food, clothing, shelter, possibly land, tools and starting capital. In the long term, one could also include education and training, credit facilities and employment projects. Everything is put in motion to take combatants out of the military and place them back in civilian structures. Obviously this can only work if there is some sort of two-way traffic between ex-combatants and the communities they are returning to. This can be achieved by organizing reintegration programmes in such a way that they benefit communities as well as individual combatants.

What has to be done in relation to peace building is linked to the kind of peace that is envisaged. Negative peace, by which we mean the absence of violence, can be achieved by preventing a conflict from relapsing and by stopping combatants from picking, up their guns. This means giving priority to disarm-

ment and demobilization. Positive peace targets the root causes of a conflict. To create sustainable peace, processes of social reconstruction and reconciliation play an important role as well as the overall recovery of society and social change in relation to the possible underlying causes of the conflict (Miall *et al.* 1999: 186-188). This approach more explicitly points towards psychosocial recovery in addition to material rehabilitation.

Three main issues emerge in the literature regarding the reintegration of teenagers and child soldiers. First, there is the importance of providing a social-economic base for reintegration, which is little different for children than for adult combatants. They need to be provided with shelter, food, clothing, education and, depending on their age, with economically productive work (Honwana 2002: 76-77).

Secondly, a great deal of attention has been paid to the actual experiences young people went through during the conflict and the possible traumatization these may have induced. This is often what triggers the discussion on the use of western psychology and the notion of individual psychological trauma in the African context. There is a difference between the common use of the word trauma, by which in general we mean the experience of a shocking event which may have a negative effect on our psychological well-being and what is referred to as the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This is the expression used in psychiatry to describe a serious condition that can occur when coping mechanisms fail and the experience and memories of a disturbing event keep haunting someone, causing stress to such an extent that it affects their total well-being and functioning. It is evident that child soldiers have experienced situations that will affect their psychological well-being. They have often witnessed extreme acts of violence, either as the perpetrator or as a victim. They have lost important people in their lives and found themselves in a situation where basic survival has been their first priority. Girls and young women have often become the victims of gender-based violence but this does not mean they all necessarily develop PTSD. Drawing on case studies in Angola and Mozambique, Gibbs (1997), Thompson (1999) and Honwana (1999) all warn of the pitfalls of indiscriminately copying western notions of trauma. These notions take the individual and his/her individual experiences as the central focal point. Gibbs (1999) argues that coping with the experiences of war in Mozambique took place within the interaction between the individual and the community. Jackson (2004: 71-72) concluded, when visiting Sierra Leone during the aftermath of the war: "Rather, suffering was seen as something shared, and healing was sought not through therapy but in things. Not through words, but deeds. Fees to send children to school. Cement and roofing iron to rebuild houses. Grain. Micro-credit. Food. Medicines."

To bring the use of western notions of trauma into question does not suggest there is such a thing as immunity from the effects of certain events on the psychological well-being of people who have long lived in a context of violence. It is about acknowledging that the meanings these experiences are given are closely related to the cultural context in which they occur (West 2000: 181). It is also an attempt not to step into the pitfall of medicalizing an entire population. A detailed discussion of trauma goes beyond the scope of this thesis. It is important, however, to state that the subject is often considered in relation to the reintegration of child soldiers, probably because the issue becomes important at the same time. Post-trauma treatment often starts when child soldiers are being disconnected from the fighting forces. Of course, psychological well-being and coping with experiences of war have their place in the post-conflict recovery of a country and its people but, in my opinion, reintegration cannot be reduced to only a psychological dimension. While psychology defines post-conflict processes in individual objectives, reintegration should imply an interaction between individual and community.

The third central issue in the literature on the reintegration of children and youth combatants is a focus on the moment of reinsertion in the community. This is the short time period during which the child is disconnected from the fighting forces and handed over to the community he/she came from. To a large extent, experiences of conflict are dealt with by active participation in society's reconstruction, sometimes supported by rituals. This is precisely why Machel (1996: 55) argues in favour of placing children and youth at the centre of reintegration processes and adjusting the process to their specific needs. Attention for children and youth in reintegration might be expected to be present in the policies and programmes designed for this process. However, Human Rights Watch (HRW 2003) stated that child soldiers and youth ex-combatants are more or less absent in the demobilization and reintegration programmes in Angola. Furthermore, women and girls often miss connection with these programmes (Shepler 2002; de Watteville 2002; McKay & Mazurana 2004).

Studies on culturally specific ways of reintegrating youth combatants into local communities in Angola and Mozambique show that individuals are located in a chain of generations and in the history of the community. The community as a whole therefore carries responsibility for the fact that their children ended up in this situation. Rituals aimed at the construction of a symbolic break with recent events sometimes support this. They also are meant to confirm relations with the present and generate purification and reconciliation (Nordstrom 1997: 145-147; Gibbs 1997; Honwana 1999: 10-12). It remains unclear how widespread and common these rituals actually are in countries in post-war conditions.

As mentioned earlier, most research carried out on the reintegration of child soldiers has been done within reintegration programmes and projects. This might explain why so much attention has been given to their experiences during the conflict and the way they deal with these. Attention on reintegration appears to be focused predominantly on the moment of return to a community. What happens after reunification or some time after the end of war remains under-represented in the literature on child soldiers in Africa. Some researchers do mention processes of negotiation and redefining these children's identities (Honwana 1999) but how communities perceive these children and young women over a longer period of time seems to be beyond the horizon of NGOs and academics.

### To continue...

This thesis continues with Chapter 2, which focuses on the theoretical framework that supports the analysis of reintegration as a social process of (re-) establishing relations. In Chapter 3 I elaborate on several issues regarding my fieldwork, the methods used and some of the ethical choices I made. The following two chapters are an exploration of the two social identities that feature in this study and the influence they might have on reintegration. Chapter 4 looks at the meaning of the social identity 'youth' in relation to violent conflict in Sierra Leone and post-conflict transformation. In Chapter 5 the focus is on gender and the position of women and their roles in the context of violent conflict. Chapters 6 and 7 concentrate on reintegration as it evolves in day-to-day life of individual women in an urban and rural context. In Chapter 8 I conclude this thesis and answer the question about the meaning of gender and youth for reintegration in Sierra Leone. In addition, I explain what this study has shown about two characteristics of reintegration from an anthropological perspective.

To ensure that the participants' privacy is protected in this thesis, I have either altered people's names or just left them out completely from the interview fragments. Because the village in which I gathered additional data is a small community, I have chosen not to mention its name at all. I took all the photographs included in this thesis during my fieldwork period in Sierra Leone. However, none of the people in these pictures have actively participated in my research.





Gara Tie-Dye



## Social organization, social identity and agency: Theoretical framework

### Introduction

Reintegration was defined in the previous chapter as a dynamic process that revolves around the (re-)establishment of relations between the individual and social networks, and contains – implicitly or explicitly – a negotiation of social and cultural identities. This process implies interaction between the individual who is reintegrating and the community of relevance. People do not reintegrate into society as such. As individuals, they form relationships with other individuals, creating or participating in groups and networks based on the individual and his/her social identity. Between these groups and networks, relations exist through which the society's social fabric – social structure composed of cross-cutting social relations between people and groups of people – is woven. In the wake of conflict and post-conflict reintegration, elements of social structure are either reproduced or transformed by participants in the process and corresponding cultural meanings are confirmed or altered. An anthropological point of view of reintegration trying to grasp the individual's interaction with the social and cultural context includes cultural discourse on relevant social networks, social categories and social identities, as well as the individual's agency.

This chapter offers a theoretical exploration of the central elements in such a perspective on reintegration. The aim is to clarify the meaning of social organization, social identity and agency in a post-conflict context and to use these notions in an analytical model of social and cultural reintegration processes. Although in this thesis reintegration and its implied interaction is looked at from

the individual's position in relation to his/her surrounding community and society (the individual who reintegrates into a larger entity), I elaborate on these elements in reverse order in this chapter. The following section explores some features of social organization that are of relevance in a post-conflict context and reintegration processes. In the next section the focus is on the connection between the individual and the social and cultural context through the construction of social and cultural identities. The following section aims at balancing structure and actor orientation by introducing the concept of agency. In the final section, the theoretical themes are related to reintegration and placed in an analytical model used to consider the empirical data.

## Social organization

During a civil war much of a society's social fabric is damaged and later needs to be restored. The word 'restoration' reflects the wish that is often expressed, once a crisis has come to an end, of getting things back to normal. Although my interest in this thesis is indeed in the relationship between social fabric and the way it is affected by civil conflict, I prefer to use the word 'transformation' to indicate these social changes. This choice reflects more than semantic issues. It is an attempt to acknowledge the social reality that, after prolonged civil conflict, society can never go back to the way it was before. At the same time, it denotes a neutral movement and thus rejects a static understanding of the social organization of a society. The use of the word transformation reflects a dynamic perception of social processes free of a moral opinion on whether the changes these processes induce are either desired or unwanted.

While the social fabric is transformed due to civil conflict and because social relations between different groups are jeopardized, broken or become hostile, what is indeed lost or damaged as a result is commonly referred to as social capital (e.g. Colletta & Cullen 2000). Using social capital as a concept itself in qualitative studies is problematic because it "has not been nailed down sufficiently to be useable" (Dasgupta & Serageldin 1999: xi). While it emerged from cooperation between economics and social sciences as an attempt to explore the interaction between the way society works and the way the economy works, social capital as a concept has been adopted by many and given different meanings depending on what one wants to explore (Ibid.: 7). The general consensus, however, appears to be that social capital refers to a social organization's potential to generate collective action (Richards *et al.* 2004: 7) or "mutually beneficial collective action" (Uphoff 2000: 1876). Social capital is often perceived as the abstract production of social networks and social relations (Woolcock 1998: 153). Hence, social capital benefits not only the individual but also the collective it arises from. One element that frequently remains unclear when defining social

capital is whether it refers to the social relations themselves or to what these relations mediate (Ibid.: 156).

Further elaboration on the debate on social capital and its conceptual meaning will not contribute substantially to this study and the term social capital itself is therefore not used again as it is too much a container concept. This analysis needs a more specific approach. Notwithstanding the above-mentioned critique, two models of social capital enlighten certain features of social organization in a way that is particularly relevant in the theoretical approach of – post-conflict – reintegration as a process of re-establishing social relations.

Uphoff (2000) states that social capital is – in line with other forms of capital – an asset that exists in either *structural* or *cognitive* forms. Structural forms are social roles, procedures and networks that establish ongoing patterns of social interaction and facilitate mutually beneficial collective action. Those structural elements are relatively external and objectified and are therefore observable. Cognitive forms encompass norms, values, attitudes and beliefs that predispose people to cooperate and are thus conducive to collective action. Cognitive elements are more internally present and subjective and, although carried out individually, are often shared within the (sub-)culture. Examples of this are norms of reciprocity, attitudes of solidarity and beliefs in fairness that turn collective and social action into expected behaviour (Uphoff 2000: 1876-1877; Coletta & Cullen 2000: 10-11). It is clear that these abstract features, by shaping social relations and interaction in society, come under pressure from protracted civil conflict.

Woolcock's (1998) model offers opportunities to further analyze the structural features of social organization. This model distinguishes between two forms of social organization in terms of who is included in the relationship. Woolcock (1998: 164) initially differentiates between 'embeddedness' and 'autonomy' and between a micro (inter- and extra-community dynamics) and macro (state-community interaction) level at which they are employed. The micro level in particular falls within the scope of this study because of its compatibility with the perspective of the individual-community social and cultural reintegration process. 'Embeddedness' at the micro level refers to the individual's *integration* into social networks and induces *bonding*, inter-community social ties between members. Strong bonding networks are, for example, based on kinship, religion and ethnicity (Colletta & Cullen 2000: 14). 'Autonomy' manifests itself at the micro level in *bridging* extra-community relations between social networks and groups, referred to by Woolcock as *linkage* (1998: 168). For example, within a village community, individuals are integrated in kinship networks (bonding) and families are connected to each other through marriages within the village. Ethnic borders might be crossed through participation in religious institutions (bridging). It

seems that linkage is often the result of the socially beneficial interaction of groups and networks and is mediated by individuals' integration in different networks, groups and categories at the same time.

Woolcock explores the forms in which social organization manifests itself at a certain level of social cohesion. The outcome is the result of co-existing levels of linkage and integration. High levels of integration and linkage offer social opportunity and here we find the mutually collective benefits mentioned related to social capital. But strong bonding organization (integration) together with low linkage levels (bridging relations) means that social cohesion does not reach beyond the social network itself (Ibid.: 171-175). This might cause group members to be indifferent or even openly hostile towards other networks within the community. According to Colletta & Cullen (2000: 15-16), "the absence of horizontal relations – of cross cutting ties between unlike groups [...] – can erupt into hostilities if one group is seen as monopolizing resources and power to the disadvantage of the others." Rebel groups, like the RUF in Sierra Leone often reflect such an excluded position in society and can be seen as reacting to unequal power relations embedded in social organization. In their own way of organizing, they not uncommonly represent strong bonding based on loyalty or force, and reject or jeopardize linking relations or actively demonstrate a destructive or negative attitude to extra-community interaction. With this in mind, a post-conflict demobilization then means breaking down the existing bonding relations that hold together the rebel group. Subsequently, reintegration means the *reintegration* of former rebels or combatants into non-conflict-related *bonding* groups that have the potential to participate in *bridging* relations with other groups in society. Cognitive forms of social relations, as referred to by Uphoff (2000), influence the ability of this process to succeed because they determine whether people and groups are willing to maintain such relations.

## Social identity

Following this focus on features of social organization, this section addresses an understanding of the mutually shaping connection between the individual and forms of social organization. To be part of a group or a member of a collective offers human beings an important foundation for self-definition as well as a definition of other people. People do not only perceive themselves as a total of individual characteristics since part of their identity – the notion of who we are – derives from belonging to a social category (e.g. ethnicity or gender), fulfilment of a relational role (e.g. mother, husband) or membership of a certain organization or institution (e.g. church, political party) (Deaux *et al.* 1995). These are all examples of *social identity* and can be understood as the part of us that exists in relation to our social surroundings. Social identities are often seen as the bridge

between the individual and society, between actor and structure (Jenkins 1996: Hogg *et al.* 1995; Verkuyten 1999).

In the social-science debate, two perspectives on social identity act as a link between the individual and their social context. The first perspective defines social identity as the *social roles* that we fulfil in interaction with others. Who we are is the sum of these roles. Who I am is always defined by my relations with others and is therefore inherently socially constructed. Indeed I cannot be without a social role as, without exception, I relate to others in a social context. The essential meaning of a social role only exists in interaction with the ‘counter role’ (Hogg *et al.* 1995: 257). One can only be a daughter in interaction with parents; a sister in relation to siblings; and it makes a difference whether I am a researcher in relation to other scholars or in interaction with informants. These social roles place the individual in a network made up of personal relations with others.

The second perspective on social identity has its roots in social psychology and attempts to give insight into group processes and relations between groups. It argues that the *social categories* to which we belong define who we are socially. Examples of this are gender, ethnicity and social categories constructed around age. Our social identity is, according to this perspective, the sum of all the characteristics of all the social categories to which we belong. Social identity related to social category can be an ascribed status but can also come from self-identification. The social structure to which the individual is linked in this line of reasoning is composed of all the different social groups and categories in a society (Ibid.: 259-260).

Both perspectives offer an explanation as to who we are socially and, while doing so, social structure is defined at a different level. The first underlines the individual and their social identity based on direct relations with others. The second is more focused on larger networks of which the individual is a part and stresses the social identity related to social categorization and group membership (Hogg *et al.* 1995: 259-260). In this study, both forms of social identity are seen to be relevant in examining reintegration processes. Social identity in the broad sense – the socially constructed self – cannot, in accordance with an individual’s social reality, be reduced to either the sum of role fulfilment or the embodiment of social categories and group membership. In exploring reintegration, the (re-) establishment of social relations is examined at different contextual levels, namely individual, community and society.<sup>1</sup> At these levels, different forms of social identities become more prominent but none of them is fully excluded at each level. Social category identities, like female gender and youth, reflect the dimension of society and general cultural discourse. At the community and

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<sup>1</sup> What exactly is meant by these levels is explained in the last section of this chapter where the analytical model is presented.

individual level these categories become more personalized through the way they shape individuals' social relations and experiences within the community. At the individual level, which encompasses the individual's personal life experiences and personal interaction with others, the actual fulfilment of social role identities becomes more prominent because these are directly linked to relations between persons instead of between groups or categories.

Individuals belong to different categories and have different social roles that lead to multiple social identities. These different social identities can mutually influence each other within and between the two forms of social identity (e.g. gender identity shapes being a parent, religious identity shapes gender identity). Society's social fabric is at least partly embodied by individuals having multiple social identities. Individuals as persons never have only one social identity and, depending on the context, there may be shifts in the dominance and relevance of certain social identities. This provides space for reintegration because it offers individuals room to identify with certain social identities while they may actively dissociate from other identities. It also offers others the opportunity to perceive individuals in different social identities. The intersectional influence between youth and gender is one of the themes in this study.

The specific intrinsic meaning of a social identity within a certain society or cultural context can rarely be automatically or completely deduced from the social position or the property it represents. Social identities have a cultural dimension that reflects the connection with the cultural context. We can clarify this with the example of gender (category-identity) and motherhood (role-identity). Gender refers to the culturally constructed and perceived difference based on the biological property of sex (male-female). Motherhood points to the relationship between a woman and her children. The cultural role-identity of motherhood stretches far beyond the biological or social relations between the mother and her offspring, notwithstanding the fact that the cultural meaning of motherhood is often presented as the obvious and natural way things are supposed to be. The biological and social relations of motherhood are universal, the underlying notions and meanings are culturally specific and thus vary through time, space and context. This changeability offers space for negotiation on the cultural content and meaning of social identities that is either implicitly or explicitly part of the social reintegration processes.

Social identities are often connected to access to resources and assets in the broadest sense (Jenkins 1996: 39). The positions in the social landscape that social identities represent are therefore not neutral. The relationship between these positions is one of power distribution and the cultural content frequently serves to support such power relations. An example is the way access to land in Sierra Leone is arranged through gender-based kinship relations. The genera-

tional conflict regarding the social exclusion of youth in Sierra Leonean society also reflects this dimension of social identities. Hence, the relationship between social identities and access to resources and assets makes the social reintegration process not only a matter of survival but also a political issue.

### Actor orientation and agency

The reader might easily get the impression that this thesis is theoretically founded on structuralism because of the attention paid to elements of social structure (social organization and social identities) in the previous sections. This is not the case and I will attempt to correct such an impression of structuralism by elaborating on the way social structure and individuals as actors relate through agency. This study takes the informants, their individual life experiences and their reintegration strategies as the starting point, not social structure itself.

Saying we *have* a certain social identity is to suggest that we *are* someone or something within a certain social context and relational situation. “To have a social identity” indicates that the identity is the property of the individual. To a certain extent this is indeed the case but it cannot be understood as a property inherently belonging to the individual as a person. A social identity is something we only have within the social relation it derives from. Therefore, as far as social identity is concerned, our socially and culturally constructed self has significance due to the social and cultural context through which it is constructed. This understanding of the character of social identity strongly connotes structuralism that argues that elements have no inherent meaning but receive it from the relation they have with other elements or with the system that they belong to as a whole. Structural analysis in this thesis makes sense for two reasons. The first is our concern with the relationship between individuals and society. Structuralist analysis helps us view society as more than an arbitrary collection of individual people. Through social structure, members of society are connected and, in addition, extract meaning from being socially and culturally positioned. Secondly, in times of violent civil conflict, social networks and structure are radically transformed. A study concerned with social and cultural processes in the aftermath of such a conflict cannot address these processes without paying attention to what is left or what has changed concerning these structures.

However, a one-sided emphasis on structural analysis has a number of pitfalls. It runs the risk of social determinism by giving the impression that human beings and their behaviour are totally determined by the social position they take and the social relations they participate in. It also risks perceiving people as being merely an embodiment of properties belonging to social categories into which they fall (Hogg *et al.* 1995: 261). To avoid giving the impression that such a narrow view is the basis for this study, structural analysis is only applied to



understand *social identity*. Individuals are more than a collection of social identities. Hence, the socially constructed self should be seen as one of multiple dimensions of personhood but in this thesis one that is – in relation to the main theme of this study – of specific interest and placed at the heart of the analysis. Nevertheless, Cohen (1994) criticizes anthropologists for a lack of recognition of their subject's personhood. They tend to present society in ethnographic writings as the determining factor for human behaviour by which they depersonalize their informants and present them as empty vessels filled with culture and directed to act by social structure. Cohen argues that individuals have (self-)consciousness and are able to reflect on themselves and the world around them. If anthropologists ignore this self-consciousness in their informants, they will not be able to truly understand the social world they are exploring (Ibid.: 68-71).

Another weak point of structural analysis is the tendency to present social structure and its elements as disconnected from their history. Social structure and cultural bodies of meaning and knowledge as well as social and cultural identities that come with it are the temporary outcome of ongoing social and cultural processes. They are therefore not static entities but dynamic and changing. With this they carry and represent a history and with that a component of continuity (Jenkins 1996: 62; Verkuyten 1999). Instead of just coming into existence, they evolve through time and space, and shape and content become far from arbitrary. This dynamic potential is related to the way individuals participate in the making of the social and the cultural. People are born into a social structure and cultural context and, although as individuals they had no role in bringing them into existence, they contribute to them by reproducing and transforming the social and the cultural. Individuals shape and give personal meaning to social and cultural identities. People bring along their personal emotions, experiences, history and interpretations while they carry various cultural identities. It is the personal interpretation of what is socially defined that makes the difference (Verkuyten 1999: 39).

To address the pitfalls that structural analysis runs, we need a viewpoint that perceives the relation between the individual and society through social structure and culture not as being static but as one of interaction. This is where an actor-oriented approach is meaningful. Such an approach builds on the observation that “local practices include macro representations and are shaped by distant time-space arenas, but that these macro phenomena are only intelligible in situated contexts. That is, they are grounded in the meanings accorded them through the ongoing life-experiences and dilemmas of men and women” (Long 1992a: 6-7). It acknowledges that individual responses to similar structural circumstances and shared cultural context show differences and it subsequently assumes that the differential patterns are to a certain extent to be contributed to the actors them-

selves (Long 1992b: 21). Long argues that in the heart of the actor-oriented approach we find the concept of *agency* which is defined in the following:

In general terms the notion of agency attributes to the individual actor the capacity to process social experience and to devise ways of coping with life, even under the most extreme forms of coercion.

It is important also to emphasize that ‘agency’ must not simply be equated with decision-making capacities. Agency – which we recognize when particular actions make a difference to pre-existing state of affairs or course of events – is composed of social relations and can only become effective through them. (Ibid.: 22-23)

So with an understanding of agency, people are no longer presented as the depersonalized embodiments of social and cultural identities that structural analysis might suggest but are transformed into social and cultural actors in an interactive relation with their social and cultural environment. Not only does this context infiltrate their daily life experiences but, through agency, individuals reproduce and transform social structure and culture at the same time. It is precisely in this interaction provided by agency that space is created for negotiation of the form and content of social and cultural identities.

The concept of agency has been raised before to explore the participation of children and youth in armed conflict. Honwana (1999, 2000) refers to Certeau<sup>2</sup> when she makes a distinction between strategic and tactic agency. The former is more directed towards long-term developments, the latter aims at short-term effects. Where a strategy is built on preconceived planning, a tactic anticipates the tangible circumstances within which it arises and is carried out. Children and teenagers, she argues, are not yet able to come to strategic agency. Often they cannot see the long-term consequences of their choices or place their actions in a broader context. But they do practice tactical agency to survive in daily life and they actively anticipate the context they find themselves in (Honwana 1999: 8-9). Whether teenagers have the capacity for strategic agency or not is beyond the scope and professional domain of this thesis. The point to make here is that agency not only serves to explore the participation of youth during conflict but is similarly valuable in examining social and cultural reintegration in the aftermath.

Young women and youth should be seen as social and cultural actors before, during and after the ten-year war in Sierra Leone. This study examines the role of social identities in the reintegration of young women into their communities after the war. In this process, the individuals are the actors. Social structure is not perceived as a static determining factor in the process but as the material for reintegration as a relational process, during which it is reproduced, moulded and transformed within certain limits by the individuals who are reintegrating.

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<sup>2</sup> Honwana (2000: 61 footnote 4); M. de Certeau (1980, re-ed. 1990) *L’Invention du quotidien, t.1: Arts de faire*. Paris: Gallimard.

## The play of reintegration

In summary, the specific interest of this study is reintegration as a process of the (re-)establishment of social relations between individuals and groups and between groups within a community and society. These relations consist of a structural and a cognitive dimension. The structural dimension encompasses the actual relations and the elements they are composed of (individuals and groups). Social relations are in their structural dimension *bonding* where they *integrate* individuals into networks and *bridging* where they create *linkage* between groups and networks. The cognitive dimension holds the norms, values, perspectives and attitudes that either predispose (if positive in nature) people and groups to engage with each other or (if negative in nature) make people and groups reluctant to participate in such relations with each other. The structural and cognitive dimensions are as form is to content: the structural dimension (what) refers to the relation and its elements; the cognitive dimension (how) shapes its *character*.

Social identities reflect the embodiment of social structure and cultural context in individual persons. Social identities derive from participation in social networks and by association with social categories. At the same time, access to these social networks and groups is granted to or acquired by people based on these identities. Depending on the scale on which social interaction takes place, these identities influence relations in a very tangible and personalized manner (as role identities are in individual life experiences) or as a more abstract and conceptual (as social categories are within a culture) factor.

What exactly do these notions explain when applied to social processes concerning civil conflict and its aftermath? The situation of a fictive young woman (a ‘bush wife’) as a very rough, generalized and simplified presentation of the actual cases in this study, serves as an example. When she was captured by the rebels during the war and taken into the bush away from her family, the bonding relation with her kin was broken. In the following years, the rebel group became a forced alternative for her, but one with little potential for linkage with other people or groups in society because of the hostilities they carried out. After demobilization, one of the choices for her to make was either to try and find her way back to her family and attempt to re-establish her kinship ties or to stay in the community where she was at the time and try to establish new relations with new bonding groups.

Earlier I argued that individuals do not coincide with a social identity but that they carry multiple identities that become more or less relevant depending on the social and cultural context. The exact meaning of a social identity can vary within certain limits of context and history. One of this woman’s strategies for reintegration into her former kinship network might have been to emphasize and negotiate her position as a daughter. She could also have attempted to communi-

cate the meaning of her time spent with the rebels, which would mean renegotiating her social identity as an ex-combatant's wife. This process of negotiation and transformation of social relations would not only be influenced by her and her family's attitudes and experiences but also, for example, by a cultural discourse on gender and kinship. In general, the ideal objective of reintegration would be that ex-combatants (or every other group or category to which the need for reintegration would apply, e.g. refugees, migrants) shift socially and culturally into other social identities that facilitate their insertion into bonding networks with the potential for linkage, or that the connotation and meaning of being an ex-combatant (or e.g. a refugee or migrant) is positively renegotiated in the community. The former option addresses the structural dimension of social networks and identities, the latter relates to the cognitive dimension containing perspectives and attitudes. It may become clear from this example that the role of the individual is one of an actor, making his or her agency intelligible within this fabric of social relations. Hence, people are not *being reintegrated* but *they reintegrate*.

From this theoretical framework on reintegration, different sets of qualitative variables can be gathered to analyze the empirical data presented in Table 1. The three columns correspond to the spheres of interest for data collection. The approach reflects the concept that reintegration encompasses society as a whole. The first column refers to the individual stories and experiences of informants. The second addresses the relationship between the individual informants with the communities they are now a part of and the dynamics of reintegration that can be observed within the different research fields, Makeni and a village. This is where local (or regional) differences in the course of processes of reintegration are rooted. Elements from the first and second columns are mostly explored in the third part of this thesis (Chapters 6 and 7). The third column contains variables of relevance when the reintegration process is viewed from a national and cultural perspective. Chapter 4 on youth and Chapter 5 on gender correspond to these variables. The top half of the table holds the variables that refer to the structural dimension of reintegration and the bottom half mirrors the cognitive dimension. The six cells in the table are separated by thin lines to symbolize that the disconnection of these spheres is artificial and for analytical purposes only. In practice, a two-way dynamic relation of influence exists both vertically as well as horizontally between the elements that are represented by the variables.

Table 1 Qualitative variables for the analysis of data on reintegration

	<i>Individual Informants</i>	<i>Community Town/Village</i>	<i>Society Country</i>
<i>Relations</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bonding relations between the individual and groups (integration)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bridging relations between groups (linkage)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Social/cultural fabric</li> </ul>
<i>Identities</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Role identities (e.g. sister, daughter)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Personalized category identities (e.g. village youth – village elders)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social institutions and culturally relevant categories (e.g. kinship, ethnicity, marriage)</li> </ul>
<i>Experiences</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Personal experiences and life history (e.g. while being captured)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Local experiences and history (e.g. with fighting factions)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ National discourse and history (e.g. the political background of the conflict)</li> </ul>
<i>Meanings</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Personal meanings, beliefs, perceptions (e.g. towards ‘bush marriage’)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communal perceptions, meanings and attitudes (e.g. towards ex-combatants)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General cultural discourse (e.g. on youth and gender)</li> </ul>

## In Sierra Leone: Method and fieldwork

### Introduction

This chapter provides the methodological framework. It describes the selection of location and cases, the way fieldwork was set up and the method of data collection. In addition, it explores my position as a researcher in the field and I reflect on some ethical questions that became prominent while conducting a study within the context of a humanitarian emergency. Finally, some remarks are made concerning the study's specific focus, limitations and validity.

### Entering the field

On a late Monday afternoon in September 2003 I arrived at the helipad in Freetown. While picking up my luggage, the first thing on my mind was the conscious observation that I had actually survived the helicopter flight that took me across the bay that separates the international airport from the capital. In one of the conversations I had with Paul Richards when preparing my fieldwork in Sierra Leone, he told me – in an attempt to assure me that safety and security would not be a major risk during this study – that this helicopter flight would probably be the scariest thing I would experience while there. “Once you’ve survived that flight, you will survive six months in Sierra,” he said. Before I arrived in the field, I had no idea what to expect. I had travelled through African countries before and the latest security report on Sierra Leone from the International Crisis Group was in my hand luggage. I had even taken it out during the flight. My nerves prevented me from concentrating on the information but at least I had created the illusion for myself that I was on my way to something

important. But still, I did not exactly know what to expect in a country that was trying to recover from a ten-year civil war. In the days immediately following while I was wandering through downtown Freetown, the images I still had in my mind after watching a movie that pictured the centre of town as a battle field<sup>1</sup> faded and were replaced by the sight of daily life in the commercial centre of an African capital, which basically means large numbers of people and a lot of traffic. That was something I was familiar with. At the same time, my curiosity grew. Eagerness to explore the story behind this scene determined my mood. Looking at the ruins of burned-out buildings that had been taken over by either bushes and trees or laundry and people, I realized that in a way I was here to search for the remains of a war, the traces of war in a changed social landscape. What was there to find underneath what was visible on the surface?

The evening I arrived, Paul Richards was at the helipad to let me know that he had arranged for me to join one of the consultants he was working with, Khadija Bah, for a three-day trip to the Northern Region. The team of consultants was conducting a social assessment study of the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Programme (DDR) in Sierra Leone commissioned by the World Bank for the National Commission for Social Action of the Government of Sierra Leone. A small survey needed to be done in Makeni, Bombali District, and in some villages along the road towards Kabala in Koinadugu District to gather data on the way women were left out of the DDR process and how this had affected their current economic and social position (see Richards *et al.* 2003, 2004). During this trip we met Khadija, Aminata and Mary who later would become key participants in my fieldwork. These three young women, who live in Makeni, gave us a brief impression of the problems they, and other women in similar circumstances, had faced since the rebels captured them. Mary, a female ex-combatant, represented a group of Mende speakers who were not willing to go back to the south or east where they originally came from for fear of reprisals. This information was the starting point of fieldwork in Makeni, an urban area in which women, formerly associated with the rebels, both from the north (Temne speakers) and from the south or east (Mende speakers) were trying to rebuild their lives. Another case of interest appeared on my plate when we visited one of the villages along the road to Kabala where a group of women seemed to have resettled more or less successfully with their ex-combatant husbands, some of whom were also Mende speakers. A brief assessment of the interview data suggested that these women had been able to play out their female roles as wives and daughters in favour of their reintegration in the rural community. Taking the two fields together, representing the different groups of women sharing some features but showing variety on others, would offer the opportunity of bringing a

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<sup>1</sup> S. Samura, *Cry Freetown* (2000) and *Return to Freetown* (2002). See also <http://www.cryfreetown.org>

comparative element into my fieldwork. So the decision was taken to follow up on the information we gathered on this short trip and at the end of September I went back to stay in Makeni for the next five months.

## Between and between

Many players move around in the field of post-war transition and humanitarian emergencies but two worlds seem to emerge. One is inhabited by local people, women affected by the war, children, ex-combatants, refugees and returnees, trying from day to day to make the most out of life with very limited options. The other is predominantly expatriates driving around in big white four-wheel drives. The two worlds are linked because they are both engaged in reconstruction, rehabilitation, reintegration and emergency aid, though in very different ways. The group of expatriates also seems to be divided with scholars (and journalists) on one side and aid workers on the other. Scholars are busy trying to grasp a situation and are looking for insight and understanding; while aid workers are keen to do something about it. The aid workers blame scholars for being the back-seat drivers and, in return, scholars accuse aid workers of moving about like bulls in a china shop. The two need each other or can at least benefit from each other's contributions.

I mention the above to locate this study – and myself – in this particular field. I did not 'go native' or disappear for five months in a local community as a more classical anthropological method might have forced me to do. I lived in a house rented by an NGO with their logo on the wall, but never actively engaged in their activities. I spent much of my time at the neighbour's cooking place sharing rice and palm wine but from time to time I did escape to the beach in Freetown where I had dinner at a restaurant whose parking lot provides a complete overview of the international presence in Sierra Leone.

The means of transportation I used in the field shows how I was positioned as a scholar with ties to aid workers. During the day I walked, used my second-hand bicycle or made use of the motorbike taxis. The latter option drew appreciation from local people and worries from my UN friends who found the risks of getting physically hurt too high. Travelling to the villages, I took local taxis or Poda Poda but for trips to Freetown I usually arranged a ride in an NGO or UN car. This travel in the different parts of the field also resulted in the collection of different data. While in a local taxi, I would discuss developments in Sierra Leone with the passengers and driver, while in the UN car I discussed the same issues but from the perspective of international politics. I explored and analyzed my experiences and perspectives with informants as well as with representatives of the world of international aid workers. This made me develop a scholarly anthropological view on the issues in the field, but at the same time I explored



the potential implications of such insights as they might affect, for example, NGO policy.

In my personal opinion, academic studies undertaken in a context of a humanitarian emergency – which Sierra Leone still qualifies for – tend towards arrogance if they do not carry any implications, either implicitly or explicitly, for dealing with these emergencies. This is, after all, the basis of these studies' social and public relevance. Scholars should attempt to reach more than an academic audience only. On the other hand, aid workers should not ignore or dismiss scholarly knowledge as being irrelevant or not fit for implementation. It is their responsibility to do whatever is in their power to achieve a better outcome, and academics can definitely make a contribution in this direction. I deliberately chose to conduct my research independently of any organization working in Sierra Leone because my specific interest was in the people who fell beyond the reach of such aid most of the time. By using sociological theoretical concepts together with an actor-oriented approach, I aim to walk a line between theory, practice and policy. This does not imply that the study wishes to develop and hand over easy-to-adopt policy recommendations. By emphasizing the reproduction and transformation of large-scale phenomena and processes into the individual's daily life, the data and knowledge it provides do not reflect theory opposed to practice but the dynamic between them. I hope my findings and opinions will find their way back to field, whether this is in Sierra Leone or other countries where the context might differ but the issues of importance are the same.

## Data collection

Data was collected through participant observation, formal interviews and numerous informal conversations with people on the streets, in the markets, in taxis and in the town centre while I was chatting to the motorbike taxi drivers and money changers who were waiting for an opportunity to make some money. During the fieldwork period I lived in a small neighbourhood on the outskirts of Makeni. The next-door neighbours turned out to be an ex-combatant couple now busy establishing an agricultural cooperative in a village nearby. Later on, from pictures taken during the war and in the DDR camps, I recognized more of my neighbours wearing combat clothes.

Three key participants – Khadija, Aminata and Mary – introduced me to more young women in similar circumstances who were willing to contribute to my study. I spent time with them on the porch, often watching how food was prepared or joining in by offering comments on the scene in the street. Not only did they make arrangements for me to meet other women and interview them, they were also able to explain or interpret information for me or provide me with

necessary background information. Throughout the whole fieldwork period, I was keen to pick up anything I could hear or read that would be of help in understanding existing notions on youth and gender, on the war and the current social and economic situation and the relation between them. Participant observation in practice meant sometimes picking up a single remark made by a bystander and at other times taking the opportunity to have an animated conversation in the street on political, economic and social issues. The situation in the village was slightly different because I did not live there. Data was collected through interviews during multiple one or two-day visits. The process of data collection was, therefore, far more planned, structured and formal. One of the key sources of information (and a gatekeeper) was a former RUF commander who now had a central role in coordinating reintegration and peace-building activities in the village by an international NGO.

The language barrier – the fact that I could not speak Temne, Mende or even Krio<sup>2</sup> properly and that six months was not long enough for me to become proficient even in the latter – limited my access to certain data. Most of the time, my key suppliers of information doubled as interpreters. Informal conversation, as part of everyday life, was done in English but this forced both the researcher and the informants to switch to a language other than their mother tongue. It also meant that I had no access to information given indirectly in gossip or informal comments and every-day conversations within my hearing. Although I often bothered people around me with my numerous requests to translate jokes or small talk for me, I had to accept that this information was always filtered by the translator's perception of what was and what was not important for me to know; or what it was in my interest to know or, importantly, was not intended for me. It made sources of information and people in the field even more involved and of influence in determining which data were within reach for the scholar. Nevertheless, towards the end of my fieldwork period, my passive knowledge of Krio had improved and I became slightly less dependant on people translating conversations for me. I also became more confident about the data given to me through key sources.

I am aware that by assigning the role of translator and interpreter to my key contacts, I made them an influential partner in the data collection process and in what this study does and does not discuss. The assumption was, though, that the main theme and objectives of the study touched on socially and culturally sensitive information. Bringing in someone from 'outside', someone who did not share the main experience of having spent time in the bush with the fighting

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<sup>2</sup> Krio is a Creole language derived, among other languages, from English. It serves as the *lingua franca* in Sierra Leone. Temne is spoken in the north, Mende in the south and east. There are several other smaller languages spoken by people from different ethnic groups.

forces, could also prevent people from feeling free to speak. I guess I attempted to create to some extent a feeling of being ‘among each other’ for my contacts.

In the process of gathering data through interviews, both the interviewer and the interviewee shape the process and the data collected. The original plan was to focus on the life histories of the interviewees. Life histories are a methodological tool and allow people to reconstruct their experiences in a coherent story in which continuity of person exists, and reflect the way they give meaning to their experiences during the war in the present. As a scholar, I would thus force myself to see my sources not as just people affected by war and in relation to conflict but as persons who grew up while the social and economic context around them changed. In the field however, this concept turned out to be very difficult to retain. Almost all the sources had trouble starting to tell the story of their lives at the day they were born or with a description of their childhood. They usually started telling me about the problems they faced in their present daily lives. It never became clear to me why this was the case. I could speculate (e.g. on psycholinguistic explanations) but I would rather limit myself to observations. I finally chose to let the interviewees decide on chronological order while I made sure that all the issues were addressed.

Interviewees also gave the impression that they were not used to talking about themselves on their own initiative, which meant that the structure and content were also highly influenced by the researcher. While I hoped to conduct interviews only loosely structured by topics, during some of the conversations I got the uncomfortable feeling that I was interrogating these women. We arrived at a situation where I had to probe on every question. This is one of the reasons why I decided to get rid of my tape recorder and started to just take short notes in an attempt to make the interviews less formal. It did not prevent the interviews, at least the formal ones, becoming more structured and it is here that participant observation supported the additional data collection. From the insights I gained by being there, I learned what the right questions to ask were, and every interview I transcribed and analyzed gave hints for the next. In the other direction, information given to me in the interviews or in conversations with one of the key participants could often be used to start informal conversations elsewhere. The same kind of input came from issues that I picked up by reading newspapers or listening to the radio. Participant observation gave me the knowledge to see the relevance of what had not been said, which was then brought up in discussions elsewhere in the field.

The data collected from interviews and field notes and my interpretations were discussed with national NGO and UN staff I met in the field and who were directly or indirectly involved with relevant issues or with the same group of people that my informants represented. In this way, background information and

accounts of historical events given by informants could be checked. Stories that came up during interviews and interpretations given by interviewees were discussed and compared with the stories other professionals had access to. During lively discussions on the topics, I received comments on my opinions and ideas, additional information was given and new ideas generated. These conversations also kept me from floating away from the real life relevance of the study.

## Limitations and focus of the study

I have already explained how certain choices, such as the role assigned to interviewees, shape and influence both the process and the outcome of the study. During the course of my fieldwork and the writing of this thesis, other choices were made regarding method and style that affected the final content. I believe that these choices were to a large extent personal and do not automatically follow on from the central theme and objectives as defined earlier. These choices are discussed here explicitly to put the research into its proper context.

The first choice is the decision to use an actor-oriented approach. Such an approach in this particular study means that the point of reference is the subjective perception of the every-day life experiences of the interviewees related to reintegration processes. I did not, therefore, go on a fact-finding mission of what women experienced historically speaking during the war nor did I intend to develop sociological surveys – not least because this had been done before. The notions, beliefs and opinions related to social identities deriving from social categories and roles became real through individual behaviour and actions but cannot directly be deduced from them. Often these notions are more implicitly than explicitly present in society. It was information on a more abstract level that I was interested in and this could not be captured in surveys or by simply collecting experiences. In addition, I was interested in the way agency worked for these women, which is a concept that has a central place in an actor-oriented study. So instead of writing an ethnography on a community affected by war, I chose to ground my writing in a topic and a process and in doing so I wanted to place the subjects in their social and cultural context.

This thesis focuses on the social position of women *after* the war. I therefore decided to leave their experiences *during* the war aside as far as possible. There were multiple considerations to support this, not least because of ethics. First of all, specific attention for women's experiences during the war, mainly the way they suffered atrocities committed against them, was not needed to answer the central questions posed in this study. Notwithstanding the fact that in certain situations there is a strong relationship between these experiences and the social, cultural and economic position they now find themselves in, I did not feel it was necessary to hear these experiences first hand. It is well known – in Sierra

Leonean society and in the scholarly literature – that gender-based violence was ubiquitous during the war (HRW 2003b; Physicians for Human Rights/UNAMSIL 2002). Many NGOs in the field are concerned with the awful experiences these women went through during the war. This data has been collected and is accessible. To understand what happened to my informants, it was not necessary to ask them and hear it directly from them.

I also took into serious consideration the fact that asking informants explicitly about their experiences during the war could jeopardize the psychosocial balance they might have found since. To stir up memories could cause this to happen. As an independent student who was not affiliated with an NGO offering any kind of psychosocial support, I was not in the position to provide follow-up or counseling if needed. Neither was it within my power to help them gain access to such programmes elsewhere. Ethically, I did not consider it right to go too deeply into possible traumatic experiences and I held back with questions concerning these issues. This does not mean though that I was anxiously avoiding the subject but it did mean that interviewees had a high degree of control over what they did or did not want to talk about. This definitely influenced the result of data collected through interviews but I still feel that the psychosocial well-being of my informants was more important than this study.

When I arrived in Sierra Leone, the war was over. Every-day life had resumed. While writing on violent conflict, we can describe the acts of violence or we can try to grasp the violence beyond the acts. In our attempts to communicate the drama of war, we, the outsiders, often turn to strong images that reflect primarily the former. But while doing so, we risk locking the violence in time, space and the context of the conflict. However, the violence itself stretches beyond that. Referring to this, Nordstrom (1997: 123) observed:

Yet, when I listened to average Mozambican civilians discuss the war, these barbarous accounts, while present, were not the focal point. The destruction of home and humanity, of hope and future, of valued traditions and the integrity of the community resonated throughout these conversations.

In this thesis I chose to stay away from the acts of violence and instead focus on how events and the context of violent conflict shaped the lives of individual young women beyond the exact time and space of the conflict into their present and future in the social cultural domain.

## Validity

This study is a small-scale, qualitative study of meanings and opinions implicitly present in society and viewed in relation to the recent history of violent conflict. It is centred around the individual life stories and daily experiences of various informants. These stories and experiences are highly contextual and subjective

and, because of this, there is only a limited possibility to generalize and draw conclusions concerning the larger population. I believe this is often inherent in actor-oriented studies and although it might result in a loss of wider validity, it also means a gain for qualitative data. The selection of interviewees was based on the snowball method and was to a large extent arbitrary. Populations and focus groups are heterogeneous in terms of relevant variables such as geographical region, age, time spent in the bush, specific experiences in the bush, and type of participation in the conflict. Thus, within the scope and limits of this study, data did not come from a representative cluster of interviewees. I believe that information previously given on choices made sufficiently explains why this particular method was used. Cross-checks on data with the knowledge and experience of others in the field with access to the population address validity to at least a certain extent. The similarities and diversity that derive from the data reflect a link to the social structure and the individual's agency respectively and have been placed at the centre of this thesis.

The cases in the two different geographical fields, Makeni and the village, show a wide variety of ethnicity, experiences, association with factions in the conflict, and social geographical context. There was also a difference in approach and data collection. The two cases should be seen not as a way to cross-check on data but as complementary in finding answers to the questions asked. They are separate cases providing additional material for analysis.

An actor-oriented study – and especially one that uses social identity as an analytical concept – has to pay attention to the researcher's social identity in the field. The relevance of the relationship between informants, field and researcher lies in the fact that in such a study the knowledge being sought emerges in the interaction between all the participants in the field. In such a perspective, context is not only the environment but also includes mutually implicit expectations, assumptions and opinions. As mentioned before, Sierra Leone is currently a host country for many representatives of the international community. And although I did not really fit the profile – riding around town on my bike instead of driving a white car with logo on it – people in the field often assumed I was working for an NGO or the UN and therefore would probably be in the position to offer them a programme or 'assistance', as it was normally phrased. The concept of a scholar travelling all the way to Sierra Leone just to collect data without offering something tangible in return (e.g. money or a project) was sometimes a difficult concept to understand or accept. Especially during the first weeks, people came up to me on their own initiative to be interviewed, even if they had no connection with the specific subject of my fieldwork. Not long after such an offer, the request for financial assistance or help with getting into a skills programme would follow. And I could not blame anyone of them for trying. In contrast to this, I also did

not manage to talk to some women who I wanted to talk to. During the first months, I encountered fear about the Special Court and the Truth and Reconciliation Committee that kept women from identifying themselves as being related to former rebel groups and held them in anonymity. Some women said they were afraid I would broadcast their names and stories on the local radio. I explained what my research was about to the women who participated in the study. On the streets I kept it a little bit vague, not least to protect the interviewees who the community would see in my presence. I usually introduced myself as an anthropology student doing a study on 'war-affected youth' or 'war-affected women', which was a satisfactory answer in 99% of situations.

One of the struggles I constantly fought while working in the field was finding a workable and realistic middle road between naivety and scepticism towards what I was told by participants. Sometimes I doubted whether a story was genuine. At other times, respect and emotional concern for the participants blurred my critical view. This was linked to the implicit negotiation with people in the field about a suitable reciprocity concerning our interaction. Although my name is on the cover, this thesis in its content reflects this relationship.



Commercial activities around the town's car park







Small businesses



*“We are youth”*

## Young men before and after the conflict in Sierra Leone

### Introduction

Although the African population in general is young – in some countries almost half of the inhabitants are under the age of eighteen – attention to youth in Africa is relevant for more than just demographic statistics. Given their participation in armed conflict, the importance of perceiving young people as a social, economic and political force has been stressed repeatedly:

The youth factor has had much less attention in debates about conflict in Africa, yet it may take over from ethnicity as a consideration of more general future importance in a continent with such a high proportion of young people potentially alienated from wider civil society by failures of educational systems and employment opportunities. (Richards 1995: 64)

We need to become more sophisticated in our analysis of children and young people, moving beyond conceptions of them as dependent and consumers, to children as contributors and active citizens. The contributions, responsibilities and agency of youth are still largely confined to liminal [sic] spaces, whereas they increasingly assume central importance in the African social landscape. Their agency should be recognized. (Maxted 2003: 69)

Symbolically, youth often represents contrasting social concepts and their social and cultural identity remains dynamic, hybrid and negotiable. Youth are located between childhood and adulthood, between past and present, between global and local, between the short and long term, between tradition and modernity. Youth represent a community's future and at the same time often oppose and challenge hegemonic relations. Youth in Africa nowadays construct their

expectations for the future through processes of 'glocalizing' but at the same time their lives are unfolding in local communities and on the margins of both national and global economic systems (de Boeck & Honwana 2000). Child soldiers and youth combatants challenge existing notions that perceive young people as innocent victims. It is in this social space that their agency comes into play (Honwana 2000). Youth actively engaged in armed conflict, being morally not yet fully mature but physically capable of participating fully, seek negotiation as to their social identity. With their participation in civil conflict, they challenge existing power relations but at the same time motivate their choices with a call for perspectives on the future.

Social and economic developments throughout Sub-Saharan Africa make youth vulnerable to recruitment in violent conflicts. The African context in which youth grow up is, in brief, characterized by the existence of a small urban elite that is developing strong connections with global networks but at the same time losing touch with the rest of the society from which it originated. In addition to this, there is economic decline leaving many in poverty (Maxted 2003: 52-57). With capital and resources building up with the elite and a lack of public social services, people are being thrown back on social structures that are also under pressure (Zack-Williams 2001: 75-78). In such a context, families at the base of the economic structure tend to develop survival strategies that are of direct influence on the daily lives of children and youth. They are more often mobilized for labour, mostly in the informal economy. Another feature is the lodging of children with often richer families outside their own communities in return for domestic labour. One of the results is that children lose the connection with their own community at a very young age.

On the other hand, the opportunities of gaining economic independence are limited and the social independence that is linked with this therefore becomes more difficult to acquire (Ibid.: 76). The additional destructive and endemic character of HIV/AIDS is further increasing pressure and leading to the breakdown of social structures. In total, the social reality of youth in Africa can be understood as: life in weak states that have lost their monopoly on the use of violence; broken social structures; total deprivation; poverty; limited economic opportunities; and numerous health risks and a lack of health care (Wessels 2002; Zack-Williams 2001; Maxted 2003). While cherishing dreams and expectations coherent with modernity, they find themselves frustrated in vertical social mobility by traditional power systems providing for people based on who you are instead of what your capacities might be (Richards 1998).

While the above gives a brief impression of the social world of youth in Africa and shows that part of the processes that affect youth should be seen as global or regional influences, the following sections in this chapter focus on the

meaning of youth in the Sierra Leonean situation. A line is drawn from the pre-war socio-economic and political context in which the roots of social exclusion of youth are found, through the period of participation in conflict and the demobilization programme to the present period of post-conflict reconstruction and development. The objective is to place the construction of meaning of youth in a wider political and historical context in order to move beyond the perception of youth as an arbitrary age bracket to an understanding of youth as a cultural identity of relevance in Sierra Leone. The negotiation on youth as a social identity in a post-conflict context is illustrated by the example of the Makeni motorbike taxi drivers, on which I have drawn for fieldwork data.

### Political-historical background

When the RUF crossed the border from Liberia into Sierra Leone and started their insurgency on 23 March 1991, they claimed their aim was to liberate the Sierra Leonean people from the suppression of the All People's Party (APC), which had held political power for decades. During the war, a debate started about whether this claim was genuine or not and what the real motives were of youth who decided to join the rebel movement.<sup>1</sup> Participants in this debate seem to be attempting to resolve two central issues. The first question is whether the political and revolutionary expressions of the RUF should be understood as ideology or rhetoric. This thesis does not attempt to elaborate on this. However, the other central issue, the social, economic, cultural and political background of those who joined the movement, is of relevance. Who are these people and what were their motives for joining?

At the moment, there is a more or less general consensus that the RUF attracted those who felt marginalized by APC politics. Two main groups of youth became excluded by their politics. The first was formed by the underclass – those who did not have a regular job; those who depended on the informal economy to earn some money; those who became involved in criminality; those who became caught up in the drug and gambling scene; and those who had no or little attachment to any social structure and were footloose (Abdullah 1997: 51, 73). Some of these youngsters, the urban section, spent time in their own pubs in town where they met, during the 1970s, the second group: students and middle-class youth who had a special position in society, especially concerning political opposition but who had not yet been silenced by the APC. The encounter

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<sup>1</sup> Richards (1996) opposed the by then dominant perception that the violence and atrocities committed by the RUF have roots only in barbarism, chaos, anarchy and personal economic gains. But by offering a different account, he is in return criticized for ascribing too much rationality to the RUF and the way they manifested their war and resistance. He would also have presented the RUF as a well-organized group of excluded intellectuals who were trying to provoke a revolution guided by Ghadaffi's Green Book ideology (Bangura 1997: 119).

between the two groups of youth resulted in a youth subculture that used marijuana as a status symbol and played reggae music as a way of distinguishing and expressing their aversion to 'the system' with plenty of rhetoric (Ibid.: 51-53). Abdullah (1997) argues that the RUF emerged from this particular youth culture but that when it came to using violence, the students and the middle-class youngsters withdrew. The RUF therefore became the product of an excluded underclass, a group of marginalized people, and never developed into a real people's movement due to a lack of grassroots support. This is most likely related to the discrepancy between the expressed aims of the RUF – overthrowing the government and the re-establishment of a multi-party democracy – and the methods they used to reach this aim through atrocities committed against civilians (Bangura 1997: 129-130). This discrepancy was indeed recognized by the youth who were recruited during the conflict and who participated in the violence (Peters & Richards 1998: 200).

The marginalization of youth in Sierra Leone is related to the decline of the state, the deterioration of public services, insufficient economic growth, high unemployment rates and a political system based on patron-client relations (Bangura 1997; Kandeh 1999; Zack-Williams 2001; McIntyre & Thusi 2003; Maxted 2003). The country gained independence in 1961 and started with a multi-party political system. Although parties did not differ much in terms of ideological content, they each reached their own grassroots support. The APC, led by Siaka Stevens, emerged as the opposition during the early years and gained power in 1966. In the first instance, the APC attracted those who had not yet found a home with one of the other parties: northerners, people with a low level of education, wage labourers, and representatives of the lower-middle class. The party had the potential to become a real people's party (Conteh-Morgan & Dixon-Fyle 1999: 69-70).

However, Siaka Stevens perpetuated and secured power by the strategic use of patronage relations, through which he obtained the loyalty of civil society, union leaders, traditional leaders and the intelligentsia but was not as successful with the students. At the same time, he resisted the political opposition and transformed the multi-party system into a one-party political monopoly. Many of the contemporary problems in Africa are, in fact, related to the patronage system whereby politicians commit themselves to only a limited group of supporters. But this is hardly ever the sole cause of problems and other political factors help contribute to making patronage only a part of the problem it is accused of causing (Bangura 1997: 130-135). The above-mentioned transformation to a political monopoly and the banning of political opposition are two aspects of the Sierra Leonean political context that have led to the exclusion of youth. The third factor is the centralization of power in the capital and neglect of the rural areas

and the provinces. Local traditional chiefs, who often came into power along traditional but more or less democratic paths, were set aside by Stevens and replaced by chiefs appointed for their loyalty to the APC (Conteh-Morgan & Dixon-Fyle 1999: 106-107). In the end, violence was also used to eliminate opponents of the party (Ibid.: 135).

In a political patronage system, the political leader acquires grassroots support by redistributing influence, material goods and access to resources to those who remain loyal to the leader. “It involves redistributing national resources as marks of *personal* favour to followers who respond with loyalty to the leader rather than to the institution the leader represents” (Richards 1996: 34). Patrimonial rule does exist in the multi-party system as well, where it is accessible and beneficial for larger groups of people through the strategic use of their votes in these patron-client relations. But by transforming the political playing field into a one-party monopoly, the people have lost this one option of political influence. In patrimonial rule, the leader has the responsibility of securing a perpetual flow of goods and influence. A political loss then also means a loss of access to resources and, with that, the loss of grassroots support.

In the decades before the start of the war in Sierra Leone, the country suffered serious economic decline, with increasing unemployment and poverty as a result. The natural resources meant to provide the national administration and public sector with financial support – of which the diamond mines are the most important – were moved into the informal economy. The political elite used income that was generated in this way to sustain their patron-client relations. Capital was thus removed from the public sector, and health care, education and infrastructure deteriorated. Government institutions did not receive the needed money to remain functional (Bangura 1997: 133; Conteh-Morgan & Dixon-Fyle 1999: 93-95; Kandeh 1999: 351). On the one hand, the government became weaker, while on the other patron-client relations became more important. This caused those without such relations to be excluded and left with no state to offer protection. This hit the youth particularly hard regarding education. Momoh, as president, reflected the attitude of those in power by stating that education was a privilege, not a right. This statement effectively discharged the government of any responsibility for providing education for all. Youth became dependant on patron relations to gain access to education, with the result that education became something within reach of the political elite only (Kandeh 1999: 357; Peters & Richards 1998: 187). With the road to education blocked for the majority, and employment in the public sector at a minimum due to declining state services and government finances, almost the only option for survival for youth was to be found in the informal economy where, again, the same political elite pulled the strings through patrimonial rule. But, as Aning & McIntyre (2005: 69) state: “in

rural areas [...] without sponsorship and protection more and more youths found themselves unable to attend school and without income possibilities”.

The RUF attracted those without strong social ties and therefore those who suffered generational exclusion, while the CDF was composed of youth under the command of local authorities (Peters 2004). However, the unequal power relations between the youth and elders, which turned youth into a majority in the position of a minority, affected all youth regardless of the side they took in the conflict. It was in this social, economic and political situation that the differences between the RUF and CDF faded.

### Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration

While the previous section gave the contextual roots of youth participation in the civil war in Sierra Leone, this paragraph moves on to position youth in the aftermath of conflict. The first step in the transition from a country in civil conflict towards a society involved in post-conflict reconstruction and development – after a peace agreement has come into effect – is the disarmament and demobilization of the different warring factions. The Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programme in Sierra Leone, funded by the World Bank and coordinated by the National Committee for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (NCDDR), has worked with different international NGOs to implement the programme. UNICEF was mandated to take special care of young children, and UNMASIL played a key role in disarmament and demobilization activities. At the start, the DDR programme was designed to oversee the demobilization of an estimated 45,000 combatants, of whom 10% were expected to be children and 12% women. The aim was to reinstall national security in the short-term by disarmament and demobilization and to prepare combatants for long-term economic reintegration (Kai Kai 2000: 113-115; Thusi & Meek 2003: 24-27). The Sierra Leonean DDR was a case of demobilization with cantonment (Knight & Özerdem 2004). After registration, combatants were taken to demobilization camps where they could sign up for skills training and orientation on return and they received financial benefits (Kai Kai 2000: 117-120; Thusi & Meek 2002: 27). Combatants from all parties were demobilized together. This can be seen as the first step in moving away from identification with rebel groups and warring parties. By attending the DDR programme they all became *ex-combatants*. The DDR started back in 1998 but was affected by the country's relapse into conflict. Eventually, between September 1998 and January 2002, a total of 74,490 combatants (24,352 of which were RUF and 37,377 CDF) were disarmed and demobilized, including 6,845 children. The latter figure was higher

than expected but this could be explained by the fact that children did not have to hand over a weapon to register with the DDR.<sup>2</sup>

The Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration programmes have been criticized for setting expectations too high and for a lack of attention to the underlying causes of the conflict (Foray 2000). After disarmament and demobilization, the central theme is return and reintegration. A great deal of focus has been placed on education since youth ex-combatants missed out on education and training while fighting in the conflict. Now, they are often too old to go back to school and catch up but still lack the knowledge and skills required to have a chance of finding employment in the formal sector (Foray 2000: 109; Ginifer 2003: 43). Another problem is the limited capacity of the urban and formal economy to absorb all the ex-combatants. The best option is to stimulate the agricultural and mining sectors (Richards 2002: 275; Ginifer 2003: 44) but in order to find employment in these sectors, ex-combatants need access to land, which they often no longer have. For a long time, the recognition of individuals as civilians has been arranged by local bureaucracies, with chiefs being the main authorities to register citizens and grant access to land, protection and political power. Individuals therefore need connections with a village community to be acknowledged as a citizen. This system of local bureaucracy and citizenship does not, however, seem to be capable of integrating those who were formerly excluded (Fanthorpe 2001: 385).

Other problems also occur concerning social reintegration. Ex-combatants may harbour suspicions as to the community's response to them. On the other hand, there can be fear or feelings of revenge from affected communities towards ex-combatants. By providing attention and assistance for ex-combatants within the scope of the DDR process, civil communities can have the impression that violence and participation in the war is being rewarded. Some ex-combatants can be reluctant to give up the power and status they acquired during the war. And there may also be a discrepancy between former RUF combatants who perceive themselves as revolutionaries and society that sees them as representing the cruel face of the war (Ginifer 2003: 46-48).

DDR programmes often have problems reaching female ex-combatants. In Sierra Leone 4,751 women (6.5% of the total) have been through the DDR. Among the girls in the RUF, only 6% have done the DDR, while for the CDF and the AFRC the figures are even lower (McKay & Mazurana 2004: 100-101). Where the women did join DDR programmes, the programmes were badly designed when it came to addressing women's specific needs related to – among other things – security and health care during the encampment period, and to

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<sup>2</sup> *Source:* NCDDR, August 2002, in Tushi & Meek 2003: 33-34.



social, cultural and psychological issues during reinsertion and reintegration (Shepler 2002; de Watteville 2002; Farr 2002).<sup>3</sup>

In general, the disarmament and demobilization of combatants, many of whom fall into the category of youth, has been seen as successful although this conclusion is premature regarding reintegration. The formal DDR programme ended in December 2003. At a practical level, there were many complaints from ex-combatants that the promised benefits had not been delivered (Richards *et al.* 2003: 27). As mentioned earlier, there were also social problems with reintegration. Most of the youth that became involved in the conflict refer to social exclusion as a reason for joining but it seems reasonable to ask whether this will change after their return to society. Do they now come within reach of government and the community and, if so, is it in a way that sends them back to the margins or are power relations changing?

### The Makeni motorbike drivers

If one wants to get around in one of the provincial towns in Sierra Leone that are too small to make a car taxi profitable and too large to cross on foot, it is common to call for a 'Honda', a motorbike taxi driven by young men, many of whom are known to be former rebels:

In Makeni (a major RUF base until the end of the war) the association [of motorbike riders] is smaller [than in e.g. Kenema, South East of the country] (between 100-200 members) and has a rather unruly, predominantly ex-combatant membership (the executive is struggling with basic issues like trying to get riders to ride less recklessly, to register their machines and to pay for insurance) Some of the bike owners appear to be ex-combatant commanders, who rent the bikes to riders who were formerly under their command. (Richards 2004: 37)

Although I later learned that at least some of them are students trying to make money by sharing bikes depending on the hours they have to attend class, being a former rebel was in fact the way others introduced themselves to me when I approached them for the first time. Urban inhabitants often refer to the way these youths drive their bikes as 'rebel behaviour'. Not uncommonly, their recklessness was explained as coming from a lack of fear due to their experiences in the war as former combatants.

The taxi drivers usually linger around the town's central circle, the car parks and main crossroads while waiting for customers. At many of these places one can also find youth earning a small income exchanging money with international visitors and staff. While this activity used to be carried out quite fairly and openly on the streets, the police and town's representatives forced them, amid much indignation, into the back alleys when a commercial bank opened a branch in town. The youth felt they were trying their best to earn an honest income

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<sup>3</sup> More on women and the DDR programme can be found in the next chapter.

having found a niche in the market but were now being treated as illegal traders who should not carry out their activities in public. It is the same feeling of outrage caused a few months before after the town's administration called for 'Operation Free Flow'. During this operation, the town's streets were cleared overnight of all the street vendors and other commercial activities that usually took place on the sidewalks. The main complaint from those who felt swept away from their business spots, however, was that the authorities did not bother to assign an appropriate place for them where they could continue to trade and, because of that, they felt that their serious and genuine attempts to make a living were being frustrated merely because the authorities wanted to show their power.

Tension between the motorbike drivers and the police as representatives of law and order was tangible. From the police side, this was directly linked to the violence they had suffered at the hands of the rebels. It appeared that their attitude towards the motorbike drivers, who they strongly associated with former rebel combatants, was based on a combination of grudges and fear. This feeling was not only directed towards male youth but also towards the women who were associated with the rebels. In an informal conversation with a police officer about whether he would consider remarrying a woman who had spent time with the rebels during the war, he said:

"It would not be possible for me to marry a woman originally from the south or east [Mende] because I would not want to go there and ask their parents for me to marry her. This people killed too many of my colleagues. I don't believe these people went with them by force. Maybe the girls who were taken from the villages. But those who came from the towns, they went with them to gain, to loot. For me as a police officer it is not possible to marry one of them. It is against our code of conduct. It is because I live between the civilians, you know. It is different for the soldiers; they live in their own barracks outside town. But for us from the police, we live here between the civilians and what would happen if she behaved like she did in the bush and other people would come to me...."<sup>4</sup>

The motorbike drivers in their turn were suspicious of the police's real motives in their actions, saying that they were always ready to fine the bike riders for minor (traffic) offences as a revenge for acts of war. Mistrust came to a climax and nearly led to a violent eruption when a motorbike taxi driver was killed in a car accident and fellow drivers did not trust the police to handle the body respectfully on the way to the surgical ward of the hospital in the next town.

This incident led to an intervention by UNAMSIL CivPol in an attempt to bring together police and bike riders to cooperate in a common cause. With the help of the Makeni Motorbike Riders Association, a small survey was carried out to find out who was and who was not registered for insurance and had a driver's

<sup>4</sup> The English used in the interview fragments has not been edited. Any irregularities in the use of grammar derive from my attempt to translate and transcribe close to the Krio that was used by the interviewees and the interpreters.

licence. Strikingly, the drivers who participated in the survey were honest about the fact that almost none of them were actually registered, which meant they were open about the informal character of their activities. Those who took part in the survey and subsequent registration were offered an opportunity to acquire a formal driver's licence free of charge (to be paid for by DFID) after they had attended a short training course, given by local police officers, in proper traffic behaviour including traffic regulations. An interesting detail was that one of these officers was a woman who herself used to ride a motorbike and because of her experience, she apparently gained some extra respect with the bike riders. In the end, over a hundred drivers were registered as official drivers and their licences were presented to them at a final ceremony at which community stakeholders were also present. During the ceremony, which included the distribution of specially made t-shirts for the participants, speeches by the stakeholders and soft drinks and food afterwards, the new responsibilities of these drivers were announced, and hopefully consolidated. The drivers were explicitly presented as having been transformed from youth engaged in informal, uncontrollable, semi-criminal activities into service providers who could now be held accountable and be expected to demonstrate specific responsibilities, obligations and behaviour.

In a metaphorical sense, what happened was the transformation of the bike riders as a group representing alleged rebels, proven ex-combatants and symbolically rebellious youth into their own group linked with the community through commercial service. It was also an attempt to neutralize the tension between representatives of authority and a group associated with ex-combatants based on recent history and memories. Through the ceremony, the drivers who participated gained acknowledgement of their activities and moved from exclusion in the informal sector to inclusion (through formal registration) in the community as professionals. However, all this did not fully clear the air of the tensions between motorbike drivers and police officers. By creating a formalized group, those who did not become part of it became more illegal and more informal than before when there were no formalized drivers at all. Some of the drivers who did not get onto the training course (for reasons that remained unclear to me) expected to be hassled by the police even more. Unfortunately my fieldwork period was not long enough to conduct any follow-up on this issue.

## Meaning of youth in contemporary Sierra Leone

Once the Sierra Leonean war had started, youth found themselves in an environment of general economic decline and with little or no access to education or employment opportunities due to political and economic exclusion and social and cultural marginalization. This made them prone to recruitment. Ten years of war did not increase the availability of education and employment, and it is still very

difficult even today for youth to make a living in contemporary Sierra Leone, which is even more ravished than ten years ago. “We are strained” is what many of them said every-day. What has changed, however, is the national discussion of youth as a category of relevance, which has drawn attention to their social and cultural position. The National Youth Policy (GoSL 2003) subtly defines youth along the lines of social and economic needs instead of as a bare age bracket:

The policy [national youth policy] defines youth as all Sierra Leonean female and male between the ages of 15 and 35. This bracket is exposed to multiple influences and requires a variety of social, economic and practical support to realize their full potentials. [...] This does not exclude any young Sierra Leonean liable to youth related needs, concerns and influences. (GoSL 2003: 2, 6)

In Sierra Leone, the social and cultural understanding of adulthood is to a large extent linked to economic independence. To make the full transformation from child via youth to adulthood requires them to be able to support a family (wife and children) of their own. “The transition from youth to adult depends on the success achieved by the individual” (WCRWC 2002: 11). Sometimes it is argued that in communities in Sierra Leone one only finds women, children, youth and elders, with the dichotomy between youth and elders reflecting mainly a difference in power and status. The political history of Sierra Leone shows how far the difference between elders (or ‘big men’) and youth can go in consequences. In addition to that, the understanding of youth is also gender-biased, meaning that it refers to boys and young men. “This is in large part because girls are considered children until they are married, when they become women” (Ibid.). It is not difficult to understand that in the problematic contemporary social, political and economic situation in which Sierra Leone finds itself, the age bracket of youth is stretched to a maximum. Not uncommonly one can hear adult men (meaning physically adult and according to international age standards) say: “We are youth, what is there for us to do?” Within this comment, frustration is stated about unfulfilled potential. They do not refer to a phase in personal development but to a position in society in which the economic, social and cultural have become entangled. Hence, the society’s break line runs along generations, with the majority being youth and in the position of a minority.

Through participation in the war, youth have become highly associated with violence. This is reflected in the National Youth Policy in one of its explicitly mentioned objectives: “to mobilize youth of all ages to replace the culture of violence with a culture of peace, dialogue and responsible citizenry” (GoSL 2003: 4). However, to focus on youth as a group in itself with the potential to agitate, forces attention away from the problematic relationship of youth with society. The problem of youth in Sierra Leone does not lie with the group itself but in the place they are given in the social and cultural landscape. The violence they participated in was not their violence as part of their youth culture but youth

became prone to being pulled into violence stirred up by others as a result of general cultural understanding and the practice of generational relations. Knowing now that they are associated with the ability to rebel, they can manipulate fear in society against them. They are conscious of the recognition they might receive for being marginalized in the past and they now choose to participate no matter what. On the one hand, youth are exploiting the fear in society and their own eagerness to participate in illegal activities and using it to legitimize these activities by suggesting that society is not giving them the opportunity to do otherwise. On the other hand, they are constructively negotiating their position in the community and using their empowerment to appeal to elders to transform power relations.

The National Youth Policy addresses the responsibilities of youth to actively refrain from violence against the national community, as well as the responsibilities of adults (read: elders) to provide space for youth to develop and prosper in different domains of every-day life (see Box 1). How this will work out in practice within communities depends on local history, socio-geographical

*Box 1* Responsibilities as formulated by the Sierra Leonean government

*Responsibilities of youths (GoSL 2003: 8)*

- Youths should strive to meaningfully contribute to the social, cultural, economic and political development of this nation.
- Youths must respect and maintain the laws of Sierra Leone.
- Youths must refrain from all forms of violence, substance drugs, and practice safe sex habits.
- Youths must strive to promote the policy of national reconciliation.
- To promote peace, security and development.
- To respect and protect public property.
- To promote gender equality and respect for the rights and dignity of girls and women.
- To discourage acts of violence, crime, exploitation and oppression of vulnerable groups.
- To actively participate in the fight against STDs (STIs) and the spread of HIV/AIDS.
- To honour and respect Sierra Leone's national symbols.
- To promote and defend democracy through active participation in the democratic process at all levels.

*Responsibilities of parents/guardians/relevant authorities (GoSL 2003: 9)*

- To ensure protection, affection and stability for youths within the age bracket 15-18.
- To enhance physical, psychological, sociological and economic developments of youths.
- To ensure protection without overpowering them.
- To recognize the potentials of young people and guide them to develop their abilities and talents.

features and the attitudes of community members, both elders and youth. A constructive acknowledgement of the position of youth in the community would focus on inclusion and approach, promoting links between representatives of different generations. Such a relationship between community and individual social life would carry the recognition of youth participation in conflict being a matter for the community. A negative relationship between youth and others in the community or family, based on fear and mistrust or disempowerment and exclusion, perpetuates the root causes of the massive youth participation in Sierra Leone's civil war. After being disarmed and demobilized, many of the former combatants shifted in social identity from being a rebel or combatant to being considered youth. The logical next step is to assign them an appropriate place in communities and in society as a whole to prevent them from turning against these same communities again, which actually means they are given opportunities to reintegrate. The example of the Makeni motorbike drivers illustrated how such a change in relations might come about.

During my fieldwork, the general discourse on ways to relate to the recent experience of war was expressed by the Krio phrase 'the war *don don*'. People were eager to forgive and forget in order to finally leave the war behind and move on and they appeared to be very conscious of the fact that this would only happen if revenge and mistrust were kept out of the public domain, notwithstanding personal feelings and attitudes.<sup>5</sup> Shaw (2005) explores the rationale behind this attitude, which in western perception appears to be too noble to be true. While contesting the use of truth telling (through Truth and Reconciliation Committees) in the process of social reconstruction in Sierra Leone, she convincingly argues that Sierra Leone's deeper historical legacy of violence constituted a grassroots practice of social recovery based on 'social forgetting':

Social forgetting is a different process from individual forgetting, in that people still have personal memories of the violence. But speaking of the violence – especially in public – was (and is) viewed as encouraging its return, calling it forth when it is still very close and might at any moment erupt again. [...] Social forgetting is a refusal to reproduce the violence by talking about it publicly. (Shaw 2005: 9)

The social identity of combatants is linked to violence. Social forgetting helps to 'unmake' past violence and 'remake' ex-combatants as new social persons (Ibid.). Although youth themselves walk a fine line when they refer to the use of violence to back up their negotiations with the community about their position, in the process of the reconstruction of Sierra Leonean society there seems to be space to renegotiate the social and cultural positioning of *youth*.

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<sup>5</sup> See also Chapter 7 where I elaborate further on the notion of 'the war *don don*'.



Sieving flour



Harvesting cassava leaves

*“Taken into the bush”*  
Young women involved in  
the conflict in Sierra Leone

### Introduction

This chapter focuses on the core of this thesis, which is the case of young women who became affiliated with fighting factions during the war, specifically through non-combatant roles. The objective is to clarify these women’s experiences and roles during the war in relation to the larger framework of gender relations. The following section elaborates on the meaning of a female gender identity and women’s social and cultural positions in Sierra Leonean society in general. In doing so, it is hard not to mention initiation into *Bondo* society because it plays a key role in the construction of a gender identity for girls turning into adult women. In the next section, the context of conflict comes to the fore when exploring the meaning of gender-based violence used during the war against women. Following this, I elaborate on women’s positions in conflict. I will try to break down the false victim-perpetrator dichotomy that still often features in presentations of women in conflict. Next, an analysis is offered of the possible meaning of the forced marriage arrangements in which these women were involved after being captured by rebels during the war. It is based on the hypothesis that these marriages carried elements of victimization and survival at the same time. The final section shows how the gender blindness of the demobilization policy excluded many women from the programmes and benefits offered to ex-combatants in the transition phase from war to peace.



## The construction of gender identity

While I am working on my field notes at the back of the house on the outskirts of Makeni, a loud noise disturbs my concentration. Its rhythm reminds me of drumming and it seems to be coming closer. When I go onto the front porch to see what is happening, a large group of girls – probably between ten and twenty years old – is passing along the street in a typical half-dancing half-running fashion, while singing and clapping their hands. They are all carrying big bundles of wood on their heads. Dust from the street swirls up from under their feet. People around stop their activities for a while and some of the women in the neighbourhood join in with the singing and clapping. My next-door neighbour, Fatmata, jumps up and down on the veranda shouting: “This is Sierra Leone culture!” A few minutes later, after the girls have disappeared out of sight, she and I are sitting at the kitchen table on the veranda of her house where she explains to me that these girls from a nearby community are on their way to be initiated into *Bondo* society. In a very revealing way, she tells me how genital mutilation is part of the initiation. At the end of her ‘lecture’ Fatmata emphasizes again that this – ‘the secret society’ – is a part of Sierra Leone culture which she is proud of. She makes a promise to arrange for me to be present a few weeks later for, what is called ‘the pulling out’ of the girls, which for them will mark the end of the initiation period. Then, they will be presented to the community as marriageable women.

*Bondo* society, in English also referred to as the ‘secret society’, is to be found throughout Sierra Leone, with the Krio being an exception, and is organized along gender lines (WCRWC 2002: 32). The male equivalent is known as *Poro*.<sup>1</sup> One might say that next to kinship and marriage, it is the most important social institution in Sierra Leone. In the context of this thesis it is of interest because it is such a clear example of an institutionalized form in the way collective cultural perceptions and values are impressed upon individuals, thus mediating the construction of social identities. The secret society creates strong ties between members and specifically among age groups who are initiated at the same time (Richards 2004: 15). The female society is strongly associated with its controversial practice of female genital mutilation (in Sierra Leone also referred to as female circumcision). Although there are NGOs, both national and international, that are trying to discuss the practice in public, it is still very much a taboo subject (WCRWC 2002: 32-33).

Jane, a nurse who I asked about *Bondo*, did not open up until I assured her that my interest was not so much in the practice of female circumcision itself as

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<sup>1</sup> In Mende the secret society for girls is called *Sande*.

in the secret society as a form of cultural education on gender issues.<sup>2</sup> After that, this is what she told me about what is taught to the girls during initiation about becoming a woman:

“Well, they teach you how to show respect to an elder. How you show that you know that the one you greet is an elder, you don’t just stand up straight, but you kneel like this [she shows me how]. They used to take you into the bush for a long time, weeks or months, sometimes up to six months. And when you then came out, you would be all changed. You put on very nice clothes and these beads around your waist and then you would be the finest woman in the community. In former days they also used to take you into society just before you got married, when you were big, like me [she is in her early twenties].

So then they would teach you about man and woman and about your body. If you would not go into the society you would be afraid of men. You would be scared if a man touches your breast. But in the society they teach you about these things. And they tell you how to run the house and to obey your husband and to be humble. If they then take you into the society by the age that you can get married you will be prepared.

And if they initiate you, they can see if you are still a virgin. If you are not a virgin anymore they tell your parents and they will tell the man who marries you. If he loves you it is not too big a problem. Today it is not a big problem except in the rural areas.

But nowadays, they take little girls from five years into the society. And by the time they will get married they have forgotten about what they have been taught in the bush.<sup>3</sup> They don’t stay in the bush for weeks anymore. Just two or three weeks. They also tell you stories and history. About the people in the community, about what happened to who and the history of the community. They tell you all that when you are in the bush.

The society is everywhere the same and you can hear from the songs. They teach songs. There is sort of a national song that is about the same for the whole society and then they teach you more personal ones. If you can hear them sing you can go in and then they will take you into society. You will hear the drums and the songs soon. They do it with the harvest because then there is plenty of food and it is cheaper. Now, because of the schools they do it for Christmas holidays.

Going into the society will make you change, you change, when you come out, people are nice to you, they prepare food for you, you dress nice, and you will be different. If you don’t go through the society you don’t belong. If you want to go to community meetings you have nothing to say, or they chase you away. They say that you are not one of them. They will laugh. You are different if you did not go through society, we are all women but still you are different. Like there is a door and you cannot go through.

Today we are more educated; there are girls who refuse to go into the bush. When you are a teenager they cannot force you that is why they now take them at such a young age because they cannot say anything. The society really changes you but now it is not as nice anymore. Now it is just a waste of food.”

Jane’s first reluctance to share with me what *Bondo* is about is related to the fact that it is indeed a ‘secret’ society. Almost all the participants in the fieldwork

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<sup>2</sup> Although I do have my own concerns about the practice of female genital mutilation, I also believe that a debate on the issue should not isolate it from its cultural, political and economic context. This particular thesis is not the time or place for an in-depth discussion on the issue.

<sup>3</sup> When I checked the information on the average age for initiation with Ms Kh. Bah she stated that it was always the practice to initiate girls at a very young age starting as young as six years old. It has also been the practice to initiate before the age of 20. The average age then will be in a wide range between nine and sixteen years old (personal communication).

had been initiated but apart from mentioning that they had been ‘to the bush’, which is the way they refer to the initiation, they did not want to reveal any more:

“You know, those things, we are not supposed to talk about it. It is just forbidden to talk about it. So I cannot tell you why we do it and what happens in the bush.”  
Baindu (Mende-speaking, initiated)

People from outside, meaning those who had not been initiated and also some international NGO workers would question this secrecy:

“I don’t know why they don’t want to talk about it, it is not that secret anymore. People know about it. They write books about it, they discuss it on television, in the newspaper. Even around here, they don’t even try to keep it a secret. You hear them and you see them on the streets. And then they can even do it in the next room. They will only make a lot of noise so you don’t hear the screaming.”  
Mary (Mende-speaking, uninitiated in *Bondo* society)

This however, I would argue, shows a misunderstanding of the meaning of the secrecy in *Bondo*. The existence of secret knowledge that is kept and transferred only within the society creates a distinction between those who belong and those who do not (yet) belong. In addition, the precept of secrecy serves to instil social discipline (Richards 2004: 13-15). It is, therefore, not the existence of the society itself that is subject to secrecy, but certain knowledge that is passed on within the society is withheld from those who have not been initiated.

The *Bondo* society mediates culturally valued and shared knowledge concerning the approved attitude towards elders with respect to age and authority and gender notions.<sup>4</sup> As became clear from Jane’s account, the initiates are taught to show respect and obedience towards their elders. Subsequently they are taught what is expected of them in the role of wives and mothers. While they stay for a period of weeks or even months in a closed compound ‘in the bush’, they learn whatever they are supposed to know about maintaining a household, their position in the marriage, sexuality and childcare. What is most important though is that this is all not just acquired through cognitive learning (indeed the information itself is usually already known by the initiates) because rituals form the key to learning. Thus, the real knowledge is located in the experience that the initiates undergo while in the bush. The essential meaning of the initiation period is to transform girls into adult women, ready for marriage. It is not solely about ‘getting the message’ across on what is culturally expected from women but it aims to generate a change in social personhood, which can only be reached through participation and experience (Bah 2000: 10-43).

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<sup>4</sup> At this point it might be clear why in-depth data and analysis on *Bondo* is scarce and difficult to obtain. Therefore I am very grateful that Ms Kh.A. Bah granted me permission to use her MPhil thesis on the subject (Kh.A. Bah (2000) *Making persons: Female initiation rituals and formal education in Africa as structures/practices of transformation*) as an additional source. Born and raised in Sierra Leone herself, her account of the meaning of *Bondo* in her thesis is based on personal knowledge and information derived additionally from discussions with initiated family members and relatives.

As mentioned earlier, the ‘secret society’ is organized along gender lines. Children who are initiated are not transformed into adults as such but acquire a gendered social personhood. Bah (2000: 39) argues that the initiation’s outcome is different for boys and girls:

The gendering of boys into males results in their attainment of manhood, which then results into their participation in public life, which is largely the domain of men. For women, it fits them for reproduction. Hence while male initiation makes men, female initiation makes wives and mothers.

The cultural notions on gender and generational differences, positions and relations that are mediated by the *Bondo* and *Poro* as social institutions, trickle down through society and into daily life in a wide variety of manifestations. Although the meaning and form of the initiations into *Bondo* and *Poro* are liable to change (e.g. due to the long period of war and processes of urbanization), the underlying notions concerning gendered personhood are, as far as I have witnessed and heard, still widely supported in contemporary Sierra Leone. In the light of the multifaceted relations between gender and violence, which is our primary concern in this chapter, I want to draw on Bourdieu’s notion of *symbolic violence*, to point towards a form of structural gender-based violence present in society, that is related to the inequality of power embedded in gender relations (or in other social relations, which are shaped by domination, e.g. between generations, religion or ethnicity). The key to understanding this symbolic and deeply structural violence is found in his argument about the domination of men over women:

Symbolic violence is instituted through the adherence that the dominated cannot fail to grant to the dominant (and therefore to the domination) when, to shape her thought of him, and herself, or, rather, her thought of her relation with him, she has only cognitive instruments that she shares with him and which, being no more than the embodied form of the relation of domination, cause that relation appear as natural [...] the schemes she applies in order to perceive and appreciate herself, or to perceive and appreciate the dominant [...] are the product of the embodiment of the – thereby naturalized – classifications of which her social being is the product. (Bourdieu 2004: 339)

According to Bourdieu, the violence is found in processes of upbringing and education through which notions of domination that shape the social relation between the groups concerned (e.g. between men and women, between elders and youth) are internalized by individuals and subsequently applied in their perception of the other, in self-perception and in the perception of the relationship between the two. Hence the domination is reproduced and perpetuated by both the dominated and the dominant.<sup>5</sup> Initiation into the secret society could be

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<sup>5</sup> While discussing this section with my supervisor, we came to talk about the problem with Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic violence and how it blurs the distinction between structures that predispose violence to happen and violence itself. The conceptual question is whether we should define power inequalities (e.g. gender inequalities) that provide space for violence as violence in itself. Though I

seen as an institutionalized form of this process. Attitudes of obedience and humbleness, as Janet mentioned, are taught as characteristic of ‘good women’ in Sierra Leone and reflect the subordination of women in relation to men in general and the subordination of the wife to her husband in particular as the natural order of things. Furthermore, obedience and humbleness are not just taught as proper behaviour for women but express a form of subordination that is, through initiation, supposed to be internalized into a female personhood. Although Bourdieu refers to symbolic violence as distinct from physical violence, but does not exclude either one of them, the two do meet in situations where physical violence is employed and “structured to harness cultural notions of femininity, masculinity, procreation and nurturance [...]” (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004: 22) The ritual of female genital mutilation can be placed in this light, in that it is a form of physical violence used as part of a process in which femininity is internalized into a gender-specific personhood.

For individual persons, self-perception and perception of social relations does not often result in a straightforward, one-dimensional idea on gender relations but rather in paradoxical and ambivalent notions. A survey among refugee and internally displaced women on the prevalence of war-related sexual violence in Sierra Leone showed that concerning attitudes toward women’s rights and roles in society in general,

more than 90% of the women agreed that women and girls should have the same access to education as men and boys. More than 80% of women agreed that women should be able to express themselves freely, that there should be legal protection for the rights of women, and that women and girls need more education about their reproductive health. However, more than 80% of women also indicated that a good wife obeys her husband even if she disagrees. [...] More than 60% of women expressed the view that a man has the right to beat his wife if she disobeys, and that it is a wife’s duty/obligation to have sex with her husband even if she does not want to. [However] The same proportion of women indicated women and girls need more education about their right to refuse sex.  
(PHR 2002: 55)

We cannot understand the impact of gender-based violence in relation to violent conflict in its full dimension if we do not trace the roots of gender-based violence all the way back to the society in general. Conflict does not take place in a cultural vacuum nor can the impact and meaning of this violence be solely defined within the time-span and context of the conflict.

If we criticize policy and perspectives on the subjects of our attention as male-biased, we should not do so by adopting a female-biased perspective in return. Gender as a cultural and analytical concept is not about ‘women’s issues’

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acknowledge the problematic implications of Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic violence, I have still found it useful in this case to link gender-based violence committed within the context of civil violent conflict with a larger framework of gender relations that exists parallel to the context of civil conflict.

but about the cultural construction of both womanhood and manhood. Hence in the case of Sierra Leone, these particular gender notions also imply that, for young men, their potential for becoming a proper adult (or ultimately an elder) within the community lies in their social-cultural, political and economic achievements. As we saw in the previous chapter, their inability to do so, due to social and political exclusion together with lack of development, creates a large group of youth with problematic access to education and a minimum of economic opportunities. In addition to this, it could be argued that the crisis of youth for young men also represents a crisis in cultural and social fulfilment of personhood. In this line of reasoning, being considered youth then means sitting in the waiting room for manhood.

For women, the status of social and cultural adulthood, or more specifically womanhood, is linked to marriage and motherhood. This does not mean that women are not present in the public domain in Sierra Leone society. They certainly are, at work on the land, as traders at the market or as teachers or nurses in the formal sector. A gendered personhood is not as much about what you *do* in society as it is about who you *are* in the community, although in practice the two are linked. Nevertheless, a woman's social and cultural status is much less related to her individual achievements in the public domain but predominantly depends on her role as a wife and mother. Fulfilment of these particular – reproductive – roles lies primarily in women's socio-biological capacities which are less dependent on the socio-economic context. Hence the relationship between individual feminine roles and public position is directed in the opposite direction. As Janet uses the metaphor of a door in her story, women cannot acquire access to certain domains of public and social community life if they have not yet acquired the full status of womanhood, whereas for young men the key to the door to adulthood is found in public achievements. For women, to become a wife and mother also opens doors to other positions within the community. Sometimes these domains are symbolic in the sense of being consulted for decisions, while at other times they are tangible in the sense of women actually being allowed to be present at community meetings where decisions are made by community stakeholders.

Although young women are affected in daily life by the same problems as young men – such as poverty and unemployment – the social identity of youth in terms of political, economic and cultural exclusion from a gendered adulthood in effect refers mainly to young men. Young women are regarded as adults once they are either married or have gone through pregnancy. I would argue that this particular difference offers an explanation as to why male youth tend to focus on negotiating their position in the public domain, while young women, as we will see in the following chapters, focus on marriage as a strategy for social reinte-

gration. While young men and women follow different roads, they are all hoping to find a respectable place and position within society from which to participate as adult men and women. Hence, the individual and the social-cultural self are entangled at the point where reintegration is found in restoration of gendered personhood.

## Gender-based violence in the context of conflict

The relationship between gender and violence is made up of two directions. All forms of violence, whether political, economic or social, affect women and men differently due to gender stratifications that are inherent to all cultures and societies (Moser & Clark 2001: 34-39; Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004: 22). Any analysis of such violence should ideally be informed by these gendered differences. Some forms of violence though, whether they are carried out within a context of violent civil conflict or not, do indeed qualify as being specifically gender-based, by which I underline the fact that this range of violence is grounded in existing gender notions and related disparities that are acted out by means of violence.

In this section I elaborate on the meaning of gender-based violence committed in the context of violent civil conflict but before doing so I want to clarify what I mean by the term gender-based violence. When discussed in relation to violent conflict, the terms ‘sexual violence’ and ‘gender-based violence’ are often used interchangeable. However, I prefer to differentiate between the two. In their report on the use of sexual violence in the conflict in Sierra Leone, Human Right Watch defines sexual violence as

an overarching term used to describe “[a]ny violence, physical or psychological, carried out through sexual means or by targeting sexuality.”<sup>6</sup> Sexual violence includes rape and attempted rape, and such acts as forcing a person to strip naked in public, forcing two victims to perform sexual acts on one another or harm one another in a sexual manner, mutilating a person’s genitals or a woman’s breasts, and sexual slavery. (HRW 2003b: 2)

*Gender-based violence*, however, should, in my opinion be perceived as violence which is not only carried out by means of unequal gender relations but which can or should be understood as a direct or indirect aggressive and harmful manifestation of social-cultural gender constructions. Furthermore, it encompasses all violence that physically, psychologically and/or socially affects someone’s gender identity. Gender-based violence can thus either serve to confirm a gender-specific identity (genital mutilation) or harm an individual’s gender-specific personhood. Sexuality and gender are inextricably linked and gender-

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<sup>6</sup> United Nations, *Contemporary forms of slavery: Systematic rape, sexual slavery and slavery-like practices during armed conflict*, Final Report submitted by Ms Gay J. McDougall, Special Rapporteur (New York: United Nations, 1998), E/CN.4/Sub. 2/1998/13, pp. 7-8.

based violence is essentially about power. Sexual violence is the most obvious but not the sole form of gender-based violence. Although the forced marriage arrangements that women in this study experienced during the war are often referred to as sexual slavery – and thus a form of sexual violence – I prefer to understand them as a prolonged form of gender-based violence in which repetitive sexual violence was embedded.

Whereas outside the context of widespread civil conflict, gender-based violence is often perceived as interpersonal and impacting on the individual woman's psychological and social wellbeing, the politics of the conflict shape the meaning of the gender-based violence used. The occurrence of gender-based violence during some contemporary African civil wars brings its social-cultural, economic and political dimension to the fore. This is not least because of the massive scale on which it is employed and the fact that it has usually been carried out in the open in full view of the community. Gender-based violence does not only violate someone's bodily and personal integrity. Through the way it affects the victim's gender identity it also violates social and cultural personhood (with stigmatization as a result), which has consequences for the economic, political and social relations that are connected with it. Furthermore, everything a woman's bodily and social person stands for in a community is victimized by gender-based violence. Sideris (2001: 148) argues that the ways in which women are raped, for example, pervert social norms and thus are an attack not only on the woman herself but also on the social and cultural integrity of the community she is part of. Widespread gender-based violence strategically used in civil conflict aims at social and cultural destruction. To acknowledge the social dimension of rape does not degrade the impact of the attack on the individual, nor does it ignore the individual's personal experience. I agree with Sideris (Ibid.) when she states – while explaining that the trauma of rape is multi-dimensional – that “this interdependence of the individual and social dimensions of the trauma of rape in war provides victims with an opportunity to avoid privatization of the damage and to recognize the socio-political intent of the attacks”. Subsequently she argues that although women who are raped during a war are not at all confused about who is to blame for what they had to suffer, this does not always free them from feelings of shame (Ibid.: 149-150). After all, guilt and shame are two different things.

Turshen (2001) links rape as an example of gender-based violence directly to the political-economic domain by posing the thesis that large-scale wartime rape and abduction of women rests on the recognition of, first, women as property and, second, women's links with property. She argues that women's assets reside in their productive and reproductive labour and in their access to assets like land and livestock. Women are often captured as war booty. Being used as cooks,



prostitutes, porters or wives means that their productive labour is transferred to their captors. The acquisition of their reproductive labour becomes even more cruelly evident in ethnic wars when women are either strategically made pregnant in order to give birth to the enemies' offspring or they are violated in such a way that they become unable to give birth at all. To target women's ability to bear children also means depriving a community of its future. Women's links with property are found in the notion that I mentioned in Chapter Three, that social and cultural identities are very often linked to access to resources. Through social relations around marriage and kinship, women's access to these properties is often arranged. The harm done to women that break this link with property lasts well into the aftermath of the war:

The economic consequences of the loss of current assets and of the ability to generate future assets resonate for a lifetime. The political consequences of loss of status or standing in one's community, which is the first instance of women's citizenship, are not well studied or understood. For African women whose economic self-sufficiency is tied to their community standing, the political and economic consequences of rape [or forced marriage arrangements] are inextricably intertwined. (Turshen 2001: 67)

In the following chapters on women's daily situations and life experiences regarding their reintegration, it will become clearer how the social, cultural and economic effects are related and are of great influence in their day-to-day livelihoods. The stories the women tell show how they are trying to re-establish social relations to regain access to existing networks and resources or to create new networks and find new resources. As stated in the previous section, we cannot begin to understand what it means for a young girl or woman to be captured by a rebel and taken as his wife and through the course of events to give birth to his children, if we do not first understand what it means to be a wife or mother in a given cultural context. Pre-conflict gender notions might be subject to change due to the often massive scale on which gender-based violence is carried out in times of violent conflict but that transformation of meaning is not something that goes without saying. From what I have seen in the field, I believe that many of the problems that the women who participated in this study had to face in their reintegration show that society's systems of meaning have not changed in a way that constructively addresses the outcome of recent history. While, for example, the group of single mothers probably increased in number throughout the war, the community's perceptions of single mothers may not yet have changed accordingly. This can explain why women opt to stay in their wartime marriage arrangements and, for the sake of survival in the aftermath, do not escape the violence that affected them during the war. Women can only partially escape from the gender-based violence that they experienced during the war, such as being captured as a 'wife'. The structural gender framework that links the social position of adult women to the status of marriage is still in place

and if it does change at all, its pace does not seem to keep up with the women's reintegration.

## Women's positioning and roles in conflict

In various presentations on women's positions and roles in conflict I have found that the victim-perpetrator dichotomy often features, with women being presented as mere passive victims as opposed to the male perpetrators. Though its empirical validity has been repeatedly contested by academic work on the subject of gender and conflict, this dichotomy still appears to be difficult to eliminate. I argue that it should be understood as predominantly reflecting a spectator's view that arises from conceptual simplifications of the complex social reality of violent conflict which serves as an analytical tool for our outsiders' understanding of this reality. A problem arises when we subsequently use and perceive the same concepts as being descriptive of social reality.

Let us first explore the issue of women being perceived as passive subjects of the acts of violence they faced. While working on this thesis I have been confronted many times with images of women living in conflict-prone areas and presented by the media as the mere victim of cruel acts of sexual atrocities. I have attempted in the thesis to draw attention to and create an understanding of the situation in which these young women find themselves. Attention is easily drawn by focusing on violent acts. When we 'see' an act of violence we often perceive the situation as interaction between a (passive) victim and a(n) (active) perpetrator. The most predictable emotional response then is outrage towards the perpetrator and pity for the victim. The risk of locking the participants in these single-dimensional roles lies right around the corner. Outrage and pity which the violence calls for reflect to a large extent our emotional and moral reactions to what we witness and do not automatically imply an understanding of the impact (short- or long-term) of the violence for those who are affected by it. The essential point I want to make here is that especially when conducting qualitative research on emotionally filled topics like (gender-based) violence, the researcher (or the spectator for that matter) is at risk of addressing his/her own feelings of outrage towards this violence and pity for the victims by seeing those involved only as clear perpetrators and victims.

I believe that in this case, apart from high levels of researcher reflexivity, it helps to focus on participants' strategies rather than on the violent events they were drawn into, which then provides space to emphasize the participants' agency in coping with such situations. It does not deny that women have been victimized by the violence they have faced but it moves beyond the actual situation to see how their positions and roles change in time and in the situations that follow. I want to emphasize that in doing so the account and analysis offers

an additional narrative in relation to existing ones on the acts of violence, not an alternative one.

Most of the women who participated in the fieldwork clearly stated that they had been captured, by which they meant that they had been drawn into the conflict by force.<sup>7</sup> With this remark they dissociate themselves from the real or feared accusation of voluntary participation in the conflict. During the time I was in Sierra Leone, I got the impression that for the communities I lived in, the dichotomy between victim and non-victim was not so much a distinction between victim and perpetrator as it was the difference between voluntary and forced participation in the conflict. With this, the social reality of violent conflict in which the distinction between victim and perpetrator becomes blurred and inconsistent is partly acknowledged. However, perceptions of either forced or voluntarily participation are also inconsistent throughout the course of the conflict, something which is not always equally acknowledged. McKay & Mazurana (2004: 34-39) state that the time that girls spend in the bush is often linked by the community with voluntarism. This means that the community might feel that the longer a girl stayed in the bush the more likely it is she stayed there voluntarily. In addition, in the eyes of the community, the longer she stayed in the bush, the more likely it is she participated in all kind of atrocities and became an associate of the rebels instead of a captive. And Shepler (2002: 56) found in her study, which was conducted at the end of the war, examples that showed that within the communities they wanted to reintegrate into, boys and young men were much more likely to be accepted on the assumption that their participation in the conflict had been on a forced basis while young women who had suffered gender-based violence were more or less blamed for the situations they had found themselves in during the war. In my own interaction with participants, I chose not to question how they had been captured, and took their account of their participation being on a forced basis as an uncontested 'fact'. By so doing, apart from reasons of ethics, I hoped to create space in which the participants did not feel the need to stay fixed in their role of victim in order to convince me of their participation being involuntarily. Furthermore, by not contesting the status of their participation, I sought to pay attention not just to what they had been victimized by but to what they themselves had done to survive this. I thus moved my focus beyond the period of the violent conflict itself and to their current situation and problems.

Another implication of the – as I would thus argue false – victim-perpetrator dichotomy is the myth regarding women not fitting the combatant's role and

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<sup>7</sup> The only exception to this was some of the young women and girls in the village who stated that some of the combatants who occupied their village said that they wanted them 'for marriage'. They were, therefore, not actually captured and *taken away* by the combatants as the village itself was taken over by the rebels. See also Chapter Seven.

position. I believe that the central misassumption that keeps this myth alive is the confusion of conflict in general with *militarized* conflict and a subsequent focus on women's minor participation in armed conflict as combatants. Nevertheless, the position of women being both passive victims and non-combatants have been challenged and deconstructed by several case studies that focus on women's agency and their diverse roles in conflict (see e.g. Turshen & Twagizamariya 1998; Moser & Clark 2001; Meintjes *et al.* 2001). Notwithstanding the observation that female fighters do exist, only a few of the women in this study did, according to their own accounts, actually pick up a gun. My focus was not specifically or exclusively on female fighters but predominantly on those young women who had been captured and were taken along with combatants as the 'civil group' or the civil attachment, which was how some of them referred to their status. These groups were comprised of women, young men and children who supported the combatants mainly in non-combatant tasks and roles. However in the eyes of the affected communities, one does not have to handle a gun and become an armed combatant to be a perpetrator or active participant. Some women described how they were forced to participate in so-called 'food-finding missions':

"We moved from another village to another village. There were more women with us that were also captured. I did the housework. We also went into the villages for food finding. When they entered a village with fire the civilians would run away. And they would leave the food. The goats, sheep, chickens, rice everything; we would take it and carry it to our base. This was the way that we lived. We women also had to go on these food findings. If you were from the south, you come here to the north and they would harass people, take their food from them. They sometimes would kill you for your food. And they took everything away."

Women in conflict to a large extent take on traditional gender roles as they are taken into the bush with their captors. Although women may not have been prominent as combatants (which is still very much a masculine domain), the fulfilment of these roles and tasks did not prevent them from being perceived as an accessory in the crimes committed, whether forced or not. Thus, if we want to oppose the perception of women involved in conflict as passive non-combatant victims, we should not only point to those who become combatants and have taken on roles that are normally perceived as masculine but we should also see how women become participants through non-combatant roles and note that they are sometimes perceived as perpetrators because of the feminine roles they reproduce in the course of the conflict.

### Forced marriage arrangements

Many women were directly affected by the war when they were captured during raids on their villages or schools and subsequently held in forced marriage

arrangements with their captors in conflict zones. Women generally refer to this as ‘being taken to the bush’. It is interesting to note here that the same description is used for initiation rituals. Not only did these activities literally take place in the bush (in contrast to the locations of settlement, e.g. town or village) but ‘the bush’ is a strong metaphor in Sierra Leone with multiple meanings depending on the context in which it is used. It is beyond the reach of this thesis to elaborate on all these meanings. However the phrases ‘bush marriage’, ‘bush children’ and ‘bush behaviour’ are used in reference to the war and at the time of the study had a negative connotation. Notwithstanding the aggressive nature and cruelty of this captivity, after being captured, taken into the rebel movement and away from home, the construction of relations with people within the group in parallel with friendship and marriage served as a way of surviving for some women.

“I was not feeling happy, but when they captured me, because of my life, protecting my life I decided to live with them, feeling lively, for me not to be killed. I made friends in the group, for me not to sit lonely, because if I would sit like that they would kill me. So that’s why I decided to make friends.”

Marriage in this context refers to a relationship between a (rebel) man and (civilian) woman that is extended in time and behavioural patterns beyond the actual moment of capture or act of sexual violence, like rape. Women were taken from their homes and in many cases were forced to live with the man who had captured them. Sometimes they were given to other men in the group as wives. In cases where the captured girls were considered too young to be placed in a marriage-arrangement they would be given to a couple within the group to help with housework such as fetching water.

“The man that captured me took me to his wife. And the wife was taking care of me. I was their until I was matured and then one man told me to get this sort of marriage. Not legal but we should be together. This man was also with the rebels. The people accepted and I accepted also, so I went to live with this man and I gave birth to a baby boy. This boy is with my mother now. At this moment my man is in prison. He was arrested in Makeni, six months ago now.”

“I was 22 years by then. When I was captured I was taken to the base. We as women would take care of preparing food at the base. The boy that captured me gave me to his commander as a wife. I did this because of my life, I was not happy with it, but it was the only thing I could do to save myself. He had three wives. During that marriage I gave birth to two children, boys. They are with my mother now in Kenema and they are going to school.”

Many of the women who were captured spent months or even years in the rebel group until finally peace came. Some of them are still living with their ‘rebel husbands’. The use of the word ‘marriage’ seems misplaced when defining such a relationship. In the interviews, women also appeared to struggle to find the right word to refer to the ways they were or had been attached to rebel men

during and after the war, using phrases like “I was with this man”, but nevertheless the outcome was often the word ‘marriage’ although many of them stated that it was at the same time not ‘a real marriage’. Indeed, romantic notions of love as a basis for marriage and voluntarily preparedness to share a long life together were not the basis of most of these relations. However, seen from a perspective of social organization, the implications the forced arrangements carried for attitudes, responsibilities and behaviour between captured women and rebel men do reflect, in some ways, the cultural notions of gender relations and marriage arrangements existing in Sierra Leonean society irrespective of the context of conflict.

“The man that captured me, I am still with him now and we have three children now together. If I would have been asked I would not have chosen him as a husband, but it was because of the gun. I was captured and forced to be with him. During the whole time I was with this one husband. Some of the other men in the unit had more women; some have three, just like in normal life. [Giggling] Some women got three men during the war.”

As mentioned earlier, being attached to one man in particular within the rebel group and having a husband offered a way of survival. Where the wife is responsible for housework, cooking and cleaning, for providing sex and taking care of the children, the husband’s responsibility would have been to offer physical protection against additional acts of violence and the provision of an income either in money or goods.

“The one that captured me took me to be his wife. I have one child with the man. The man was killed during the war. My child is four years old now. I stayed with this man five years. It was not a real marriage. It was because it saved my life. If I would refuse, they would kill me. If he [the RUF husband] was around town I was fine, but if he was not around then another RUF man came to harass me. This is the way they do. Because it was their own time, you know, there was no government, it was the RUF time.”

Women were cut off from civilian life outside the world of the bush camps, disconnected from supportive networks such as family and community, with options for escape being at best limited and at worst impossible. Opportunities for finding refuge were uncertain because of the way former rebels or participants were viewed by the surrounding, victimized communities. Women were therefore conscious that they had to find strategies for survival within the rebel groups. The marriage arrangements, being a bonding relationship within the group, offered access and entitlements within the enclave of the rebel movement. Once in the group, friendship and ‘marriages’ opened up networks of reciprocity and the result was a certain degree of personal security within the larger context of chaos, violence and uncertainty.

In addition to the physical dimension of survival, the reproduction of forms of social organization could be interpreted as survival in what I would call the relational sphere of day-to-day life. This was then reached through the recon-

struction of the social world at a more symbolic and conceptual level. To understand this completely, we should again grasp how and where violent conflict in certain civil wars has affected the social world. Nordstrom (1997: 169) argues that:

What a civil war like the one in Mozambique does is remove the battlefield and the place of torture to the civil area; both the public and the private got pulled into a war zone. [...] The torture is haled into the centre of home and community. The social universe itself becomes the victim.

The interconnection between civil life and the context of violent conflict evolved in Sierra Leone in two directions. Some towns and villages were taken over by the rebels and daily life in the affected areas became saturated with war-related activities. The war entered the women's social world and when women were captured they were literally pulled away from civilian life into conflict zones. In both situations, part of life in the affected communities and within the bush camps still evolved around mundane day-to-day activities. Children had to be taken care of, food had to be prepared. The division of labour and relations between persons were to a large extent shaped in line with the codes of conduct in Sierra Leone prior to the war.

Taking this into account, I would argue that part of the agency of people being dragged into violent conflict that enters their social worlds and confronts them with unfamiliar situations lies in their ability to reproduce and transform, where necessary, elements of social and cultural structure in order to be able to relate to changed circumstances. Survival in this interpretation becomes a matter of upholding the normal as far as possible within a context in which normality is placed under constant threat. To take part in the construction of the social world along familiar paths and patterns, women move from being passive victims of rebel cruelty to survivors whose agency is found not as much in the deconstruction of the world around the bush camp through participation in violence as in reconstructing a social world to survive under given circumstances. Through marriage arrangements, women either consciously or intuitively addressed the non-rebel social roles of their male counterparts. In relational terms, one could say that interaction between male rebels and captured wives was not only shaped through perpetrator-victim roles but also through husband-wife positioning. Stories told by the women suggest that there were differences between the rebel groups regarding the treatment of women. Some women stated that in the group that captured them, the commander had some sort of control over the other combatants concerning their behaviour towards women.

The husband-wife relationship, however, also implies space for good and bad husbands. Some women stated that their husband-captors treated them well, meaning that there was no further violence within the relationship, while other

women were not as lucky and suffered additional domestic violence. This can also be understood as the reproduction of non-conflict-related behavioural patterns within a context of conflict. But the context of conflict does make the women in such situations even more vulnerable and their options to control, influence or escape the situation are limited. At the same time, the context of violence can enforce the occurrence of domestic violence with the rebel-husband being in a more powerful position (with the woman perceived as war booty that can be treated as one pleases) and all of them being surrounded by violence in all its dimensions. Notwithstanding differences between husbands' attitudes, it could be said that while women were victimized by being captured, war violence and the rebel-captive relationship, survival was partly found in the construction of husband-wife positioning. This placed women in the ambivalent and paradoxical position that arises from becoming an agent in their own victimizing situation.

### Gender-based exclusion from disarmament and demobilization

For many who were involved in the conflict through participation in one of the fighting forces, registration in the main disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programme (DDR) marked the transition phase from war to peace. Several authors have pointed to the practical reality of how these programmes have often turned out to be badly designed when targeting women associated with the fighting forces and serving their specific needs during and after encampment (e.g. Farr 2002, 2003; de Watteville 2002). Heyzer (2003), for example, distinguishes three trends regarding gender in DDR processes. She argues that these programmes tend to target mainly male combatants. Secondly she states that in these programmes the so-called civil groups (e.g. women who were abducted and served as 'wives') are not recognized and, thirdly, that the special needs of (female) dependants of (male) combatants are often not included in the different phases of these programmes (Ibid.: 9). Stories I heard from ex-combatants and women who have been associated with the fighting factions in Sierra Leone suggest that problems for these groups began right from the start with the way selection and registration for the DDR programme in Sierra Leone was arranged. Disarmament and demobilization are, as the words connote, essentially highly militarized events. The main objective is to get arms and guns out of society and to break up the organized fighting groups. The benefits that often accompany such a programme – like skills training, a toolkit and 'start off' money – are not only meant to smooth reinsertion and reintegration but are also needed as trading material for guns and warfare (though this is not expressed openly).

Initially, registration for the DDR programme in Sierra Leone was done using a one-man-one-gun criterion. This meant that anyone who wanted to qualify for



DDR registration, with the exception of children up to the age of fifteen, had to hand over a gun. Since women were less likely to carry a gun or arms, this policy made it difficult for them to register. Later, when it became clear that this policy of registration was not bringing in enough combatants for disarmament, group registration became possible. If handing over a certain number of arms, guns and munitions, a larger group of combatants would be registered at once. At first glance one could say that this strategy improved access to the DDR programme for women in so far as it offered an opportunity for women who had not explicitly been combatants themselves to register. However in practice, for a group of combatants to be registered it was up to the commander to identify those under his responsibility. Since the captured women were linked to a group of combatants through their captors, they still had to depend on male combatants to be registered. In exchange for access to the DDR and its alleged benefits, forced marriage arrangements for some women were extended into the transition phase. Another effect of this policy may have been an ethnically based practice of swapping women just prior to registration. Some participants have suggested that captured Temne women and girls were left behind as single women and mothers, while other Mende women were identified as wives by their Mende commanders. Policy blindness for the specific female roles and positions in conflict also led to exclusion in some situations from the DDR of those women who tried to register for the programme independently, as Khadija mentions in her account:

“During the war we stayed here in Makeni, the house is still there. We were with more than twenty. We were left behind with only the girls and we went together to the UNAMSIL. When the peace came they said let us go to the Town Hall, for us to go and register. They want to come and disarm. But we went there and they said let us wait. So the place where we wait, the UNAMSIL met us there and they told us that they can only talk to those who have guns. For we, we don have guns so they don consider us. Only those who had guns they disarm, they pay them, they give them some instrument. If you say you want to do tailoring, after the course they would give you the machine and other things. If you say you want to do gara tie-dyeing, any job you want to do, after you’re finishing they have things to give you. But some of us we don have arms, we don disarm and we don have benefit from them. None of us got into DDR, only those whose husband left them with guns.”

Other women told me that they had also been sent away by UNAMSIL with the comment that they were now free. Though this might reflect the perspective of the military involved and the fact that they had actually freed the women from their male captors and this was a positive thing, it did not indicate an insight into the complexities of the positions and roles these women found themselves in throughout the war.

Not only do data suggest that the DDR programme was difficult to enrol in for single (captured) women without a gun and thus to gain access to help and benefits, it has also been suggested that women were less likely to opt for

entering formal DDR programmes. I would argue that to some extent this has to do with the militarized and masculine discourse used in DDR programmes. Women who were captured and tried to stay away from the actual fighting while in the bush were less likely to identify themselves as being combatants who qualified for disarmament and demobilization. Nor did they politicize their position in the conflict as much as male combatants would and thus feel that joining the DDR was something they were entitled to do in exchange for keeping the peace. Shepler (2002: 56) found that women were more likely to be subjected to stigmatization in the aftermath of war than male combatants and therefore were more likely to choose strategies that would not reveal their status as former combatants or 'bush wives'. Hence, they were less likely to participate in DDR programmes because this might emphasize their connection with fighting factions during the war.

Problems with designing DDR programmes to ensure they achieve their aims as well as fitting the needs of those who are supposed to be reached arise from the difficulties of making policies in such a way that they fit the complex social reality of violent conflict and its aftermath. Categorization is used to assign help and access to programmes for specific groups of people. However in reality this provides access to one group but inherently excludes others, which easily provokes those excluded, especially in a context where expectations of outside help are very high. Some of the women's bitterness in Sierra Leone was reflected in their statement that if the country were to relapse into violence they had learned that they would need to make sure they got hold of a gun, if only to be able to get benefits afterwards.

Women who missed out on participating in the DDR programme missed out on the chance of getting additional skills training and starting capital. Consequently, they had to start afresh and had nothing to rely on. Nevertheless, even those who did follow such training have had to face severe problems in daily life in post-conflict Sierra Leone, living in a country in ruins and suffering from severe poverty. While the focus in the following chapters is on their reintegration under difficult circumstances, we should realize that in the end the success of the reintegration of these women and the country's recovery as a whole will be defined not only through dealing with the heritage of the conflict itself but also with Sierra Leone's general development in all its dimensions.



Neighbourhood children



## Finding new ways: Individual integration strategies

### Introduction

“I was born in 1978 in a village in Bo district. I was the eldest of six. One boy, five girls. My father’s sister also lived with us with her daughter. My father was a driver for a Lebanese, my mother used to sell some small vegetables. I went to school up to form five [secondary school]. I stopped school because the war came to us. I was captured in 1995 when they attacked our village. All the people got scattered and many of us were captured and taken to the base into the bush.

I got a husband there. That was the way you were protected. I did not get any children with him. He did not treat me bad. It was bad time because of the war, but the man himself was nice to me. He did not make me work hard labour. I just had to fetch food. Before the end of the war we separated because of another woman. Then I went to live with my friend and her husband who were also in the bush.

I was disarmed in Makeni. The friend that I was with by that time gave me some arms to get registered. I was registered at first but when these people came back from Freetown my name was not on the list anymore and therefore I did not get into reintegration. When I was in Makeni I met a man who liked me and he took care of me. He rented a room for me and we lived like boyfriend and girlfriend. I did not have to do anything in return, except for the love that was between us. But now he went to Freetown to stay there.

I don’t have any work to make a living. I live with a friend who is with a husband and he has a job, so he brings in money and she gives me some small money and food. There are about five of us at the house that depend on her. Here in Makeni I have my Mende friends and we take care of each other. We all ended up here because of the war.

Sometimes I would wish to go home to my village. My parents got separated during the war, but my mother lives in my village and my father lives in a village that is very close. I am a stranger in Makeni and that means that I have no right to land here. Home is home. In the village my family has land so if I could go back I would always have something there. My parents would accept me but the other people in the community would say: your

daughter has been in the bush for a long time and now see what she came back with, nothing at all.”

Baindu, taken by RUF, 25 years old

This chapter presents and analyses fieldwork material on reintegration processes with the focus on the establishment of highly personalized social relations which harbour basic human security at the level of the individual and community life. It places the women’s personal accounts, which were gathered in Makeni,—like the one above—at the centre of the discussion. The group of women I was interested in were those who had spent time during the war in the bush with one of the fighting forces – the majority of whom had been with the RUF – and were very diverse. Some of them went to school for a few years, some had never done so; some of them grew up with their parents, others were raised by members of their extended families. Some of them had spent years in the bush; others were captured and held by the rebel movement for a period of months only. Some of them originated from the southern province and were Mende; for others the northern part of the country was their homeland. However, similarities such as their position as ‘bush wives’ and the reintegration strategies they developed derive from the events they describe. Their stories could also therefore be read as representing a much larger group that remains largely invisible in the literature on reintegration as well as in the country’s reintegration policy. In my opinion, the similarities can be interpreted as the outcome of a shared social and cultural context in which the individual lives of the women and their reintegration come about.

The chapter shows that the process of reintegration is highly influenced by the options women chose to shape their lives on a day-to-day basis in the aftermath of the war. Though most of the women had already (temporarily) settled in Makeni during the war together with the RUF, after the final peace they had to relocate in the social fabric of this urban community. The following section explores Makeni town as the context for this process and as a place that had to be shared by former combatants and civilians. It gives examples of how the ex-combatants’ presence in town has been negotiated. For the women in forced marriage arrangements, the transformation from war to peace meant the moment to reconsider this situation. In the next section I discuss how women relate to their ‘bush marriages’ and what the meaning of marriage is in relation to reintegration. Given the fact that kinship networks are one of the most essential social networks in Sierra Leone, I elaborate in the following section on the options for women to go back to former communities to re-establish kinship relations. I argue that their reluctance to do so is rooted in the fear of reprisals as well as in cultural notions on their position as daughters and adult women. In the following section the link between day-to-day survival and social relations is made and I

explain how social relations have an important influence on access to the assets and capabilities needed to develop livelihood strategies. If these livelihood strategies remain insufficient, reciprocity can make a difference in survival. In the last section, I explore examples of the social relations that women are maintaining in which reciprocity plays an important role. It shows how the exchange of commodities based on personalized relations turns these very relations into assets.

### Makeni: A place to be shared

Surrounded by green hills and bare rock formations, Makeni town is a two- to three-hour drive from Freetown depending on the road, one's car and weather conditions. It serves as the capital of Sierra Leone's Northern Province.<sup>1</sup> Although people in Freetown, Sierra Leoneans as well as members of the international community, consider Makeni to be a post 'in the provinces' or 'up-country' – by which they basically mean 'in the middle of nowhere' – the town has the atmosphere of an urban centre in a rural area. Three main, surfaced roads connect Makeni with the other corners of the country, making Makeni the administrative and commercial heart of a rural area. Economic activities are concentrated around the town's centre, Independence Square, and the car parks where the shared taxis and *poda podas*<sup>2</sup> depart from.

Ethnically the population of Makeni (and the north in general) is predominantly Temne. Most of the Northerners are Muslims but Christian churches are also to be found and at the time the fieldwork was conducted I did not pick up on any obvious signs of religious division that bore the potential for violent conflict. Both Christian and Muslim prayers precede every group or community meeting. One of the interviewees phrased her attitude towards religious differences as a matter of sharing the same concepts using different modes of expression: "Everyone calls on God, but we have different names for God, which is the dialect to do so." At least on the surface, the people of Sierra Leone seem to have mastered peaceful coexistence when it comes to religious diversity.

Before the war, just over 100,000 people lived in Makeni but during the war the population decreased to half of that number.<sup>3</sup> By 2004 Makeni was growing

<sup>1</sup> Sierra Leone is divided into three provinces and one area: the Southern, Eastern and Northern Provinces and the Western Area which covers the Freetown Peninsula (see Map on p. x). The Northern Province includes five of the twelve districts: Tonkolili, Koinadugu, Kambia, Port Loko and Bombali district. Makeni is located in Bombali District.

<sup>2</sup> *Poda poda* means literally 'back and forth' or 'up and down' and is the Krio name for the mini-buses used for public transport.

<sup>3</sup> It turned out to be extremely difficult to find reliable data on the current population, which is understandable as a country recently emerged from ten years of civil war. NGO workers, government statistics and all kinds of websites give figures that range from 50,000 to 100,000. Often it is not clear whether satellite villages are included in the count or not. The main point I want to make here is that

again, although not all the facilities it once had were back in place. The running water system has not been restored and although the pylons are still standing, there is no electricity unless you can afford to pay for petrol to run a generator. In a country devastated like Sierra Leone, it is not surprising that only a few find themselves in such a fortunate position. During the dry season Makeni is known to be the hottest place of the country and the water wells tend to dry up for a couple of weeks each year. People (mainly women and children) then have to walk to places outside town or into the swamps to fill their buckets with water.

As in any West African town, the streets are full of women and children carrying plates on their heads and selling small foodstuffs like fruit, groundnuts or cakes. Carpenters use the sidewalks as a shop-window and the tailors do the same with their porches. There are a few nightclubs, a government hospital, a teachers' training college and a stadium.<sup>4</sup> Celtel recently connected Makeni to the country's mobile phone network, roads are being fixed and at the beginning of 2004 a branch of the Sierra Leonean Commercial Bank opened in the town. In the future, these improvements may encourage the return of former inhabitants which could again make Makeni the bustling town it once was before the war. A handful of NGOs, bilateral donor organizations and UN organizations that developed and implemented programmes for the North have set up their regional offices in town. On the outskirts of town are the UNAMSIL offices where, until mid-September 2003, peacekeeping forces were based. With the planned pull-out of UNAMSIL, these military forces were transferred to Liberia. A small team of Milobs, CivPol and Civil Affairs officers have remained and were still there during the period when this fieldwork was conducted.<sup>5</sup>

The town was not directly affected by the war until late 1997 when the RUF lost power in the south and east and moved north. By that time, inhabitants who had an opportunity to find refuge elsewhere had left the area and Makeni became a ghost town. The RUF took over the town and turned it into their headquarters and stronghold. It is said that the population in the north was less politically opposed to the RUF than in the south and east. Several people in the study also

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the population of Makeni experienced huge changes throughout the war and it is still changing in the course of reconstruction and rehabilitation.

<sup>4</sup> I was told that the stadium was one of the first community buildings rehabilitated with help of UNAMSIL peacekeepers. The logic behind this is that it serves as a gesture to the local people, to boost sports activities (which are often seen as bringing together inhabitants in an atmosphere of friendly competition and community) and it is a good place from which an evacuation can be organized in the case of security problems. (A stadium surrounded by walls can be secured and the football field makes a perfect helipad.)

<sup>5</sup> Milobs are a multinational team of military observers whose main task is to stay up to date on security issues in the region. CivPol stands for Civil Police, a multinational team of police officers that supports the local police force. Civilian Affairs is helping to support and re-establish the town's administration.

stated that the RUF used less violence against civilians in this area than elsewhere in the country. Resistance from civilians might have been less marked because stories of atrocities committed against civilians in other areas could have made Makeni's residents more reluctant to openly oppose the rebels. Examples were also given of the RUF sharing food and materials with the civilians. This all probably contributed to the decision of many former RUF combatants to stay here after the final peace was announced and the DDR had finished.

“Even in our own country, they [RUF] did some terrible things. They did so many wrong things there that no one could stop them. If they wanted somebody's place, or if they wanted to take rice, they used to kill our brothers. I witnessed it. I saw them doing that. But in Makeni they would say “you leave your habit across the river”. Here it was a different thing, you can see Makeni, you can see that houses have not been so destroyed here but these people who came from here, they destroyed our country. But when we reached up to here [Makeni], he who was in power by then [in the RUF] he stopped everything. That is why some of us, we don't like the behaviour of these people [those who committed the atrocities against civilians], they are very tribalistic [sic].”

Mary, in the RUF since 1991

At the time when the final peace accord was about to be signed and implemented, Makeni not only accommodated those combatants who had already arrived during the war but, with the town being a stronghold, it also attracted combatants from the surrounding areas:

“When the ceasefire came we were still in Tongo and we travelled to Makeni, where the defence headquarters was. So everyone tried to come here for security reasons, so we were here when the final peace came.”

In addition to this, it served as a place of refuge for those who were excluded or explicitly sent away from surrounding villages due to their activities during the war.

For many, the decision to settle in an urban area was fuelled by very pragmatic but not always realistic expectations concerning jobs, training and trading opportunities. Disarmament and demobilization also meant that former rebels and combatants came out of the bush back into public and civilian life. An urban community offered a place where they could participate in the civilian domain while still under the protection of anonymity. They could go public while still being hidden. As far as Makeni was concerned, it is likely that feelings of being free from reprisal were related to the local history of the town being an RUF stronghold, which also offered protection to numerous ex-combatants.

Nevertheless, the transition from war to peace meant a change in status for the former combatants present in town. While they had been the occupying force that secured power through arms and a constant threat of violence, they now had to negotiate for space with civilians. Encounters between civilian homeowners (some of whom had recently returned to town) and ex-combatants who had made



it their place of residence during the war involved micro-negotiations on the place in the community (house, compound or neighbourhood)<sup>6</sup> assigned to former rebels.

“Some of them [RUF ex-combatants] were driven away out of the houses after the disarmament. The house owners came back and asked them to leave the houses. Otherwise they would go to the police and then the police would ask you nicely, but if they did not go, they would throw away your things. This chase happened in the first months.”

“During the time that I came to Makeni there was nobody around. I was not feeling fine to stay because all these people have run away for the looting. Makeni was by then taken over by the RUF. All civilians were gone. There were only RUF. The houses were empty so I just entered one and lived there. That’s how the house became my own. [...]. I am still staying in the same house. When the people came back to this house and saw that I kept the house clean and tidy they decided not to drive me away but they decided to let me start and pay. So now I pay rent for the room. This happened a lot. After the war we wanted everything to finish and if they would start to drive us away the war would not finish. [...] The first time I entered Makeni, the civilians that were there provoked me because of I was living with the RUF. It stopped when they made announcements to stop the provoking. Because if you continue the provoking the war would not really end.”

Pragmatic motives of commercial practice, the urge to execute some sort of people’s justice or actions driven by revenge, and individual experiences during the conflict and the meanings attached to them, all resulted in a perception of these residents by the homeowners as either unacceptable occupants based on their activities in the recent past or as proper and useful tenants. The same is relevant for interactions between neighbourhood inhabitants and the women associated with the RUF.

“In the first time I experienced that people blamed me, that they accused me, that they told me to leave because it is not my home town that I just came to sit down here. But now after it is reported to the police, the police came and stopped those people. That we are all Sierra Leonean and that they had to stop fighting.”

“The paramount chief, thanks to him. He sometimes speaks on behalf of the ex-combatants. Because some of them feel, if they go to the chief and say this ex-combatant has done this or that, they make an allegation and they want the chief to take action and to lock the man up. But this chief is somehow different. Otherwise we would be facing a serious problem here. They really intended to fight us. After the war they said they would do some society ceremonies to take us away. They will fight the Mendes to leave this town. Some of us Mende, the war brought us here, but most of us still voted for the RUF, [by which the interviewee attempts to make a difference between forced recruitment and voluntary conscription] so lets get them out of Makeni [the people will say]. That fighting, except for the chief it was stopped. So that is why we are strangers here, but we are not dead, we are alive.”

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<sup>6</sup> The wide-open streets of Makeni are lined with big houses that have a veranda in front where people meet, sit and talk. These houses are mostly rented out per room to families and therefore usually crammed with people. A few houses often share a back compound where a cooking place can be found. For the individual, the people living in the same house or compound form their closest community unit.

“At first when we came some people used to look at the houses for long and say these ones burned our houses. And they were looking at us in a different way in the society. They used to call me bush girl, rebel and they said we had sicknesses from the bush.”

These remarks underscore the fact that, especially in the first months, the outcome of any negotiations was frequently negative for the ex-combatants. After a few months, once the moment of transition from war to peace had passed and campaigns for reconciliation had started, open stigmatization and the rejection of former combatants seems to have faded from the public domain. None of the interviewees mentioned any incidents like these having occurred recently. Nevertheless, social relations between former combatants and the town’s civilians were still a subject for negotiation in a more indirect manner, as is described in the following paragraphs.

### Reconsidering ‘bush’ marriage arrangements

In the previous chapter the meaning of forced marriage arrangements during the war was explored. By the time the war was about to end and when the DDR was going to start, women found themselves in a situation in which they could reconsider these relations. Some decided to stay with their captor-husband, even though their decision often rested on ambivalent emotions and perceptions of this relationship.

“I don’t really like that type of marriage; the war forced me into this. We have been together until he has been arrested. I am having some sort of sympathy for him. I cannot leave him now he is in prison. I am feeling bad for the child, because it came not out of a proper marriage and now the child is under my control and not the father’s. It is like the child has no father. If you are legally married the father has control over the child.”<sup>7</sup>

“But for now things are better. I am still with the same man, but he is not doing that to me any longer because he knows that the war is finished and he has no longer that power to do that to me. I want to stay with my husband for the time that I am here in Makeni, I would not want him to go to look for another wife, but when I get the chance to go home, then the thing between him and me would be finished.”

From these extracts we can see that women have feelings of responsibilities towards the men who captured them, towards their children from these relationships and also towards themselves as wives. As I argued before, for women in Sierra Leone to be married by a certain age plays a key role in acquiring a respectable social status. To become a ‘proper’ woman means becoming someone’s wife. It also means they are taken care of. And in Sierra Leonean society people implicitly expect that behind every woman there is a man to take care of her, either her father, her brothers and from a marriageable age a husband. This helps to explain why the woman in the second fragment wants to be related to her

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<sup>7</sup> According to kinship traditions, it is common in Sierra Leone that the children born into a marriage are linked to the father’s family.

husband at least as long as there is no other alternative. She seems to weigh the means against the end. Although her personal feelings towards the man and the relationship forced on her might reflect the opposite, the marriage does at least secure, to a certain extent, her social and cultural identity as a wife and a woman. It also provides security for her children with a connection to their father, and therefore their position in the community or kinship network.

Some of the women were determined to leave their rebel husbands. Among other influencing factors, this appeared to be associated with the low level of self-identification these women had with the rebel group and the extent to which their relationships were perceived as contextual and situational:

“When I came to town I decided to fall apart with my man because what we had was just a war issue. That is why my husband did not disarm me. I chose to leave the marriage because it was a forced one. I stayed in Makeni from that time. I did take my children with me.”

Subsequently these women focused on getting into a new marriage to re-establish an accepted social position but at the same time they are worried about their chances with men. Considering their position in the community, they defined their status as unmarried women or single mothers as the key problem. It is this that differentiates them from their peer group and makes them a potential laughing stock.

“They only laugh at us because we are not yet married. And at this age I am supposed to be married. I want to be married now but there is no husband. The difficulty is that most of them they know that we have been captured by the rebels and they are afraid of us. The fact that we were with the rebels makes them afraid of us. Local men prefer women that were not captured. At this moment I make a living to keep boyfriend. He gives me money and buys clothes and food. My mother does not have money to do that for me because there is no business. So my boyfriend now gives me money to buy clothes and food for my son and me. So that’s the way that I live for now. I found him in Freetown. He met me to the house and he asked me if I had husband. I said no but I have a son. So he said he wants me to be his wife, but I don’t know whether it is going to be true or not. Since I left here I did not see him, I did not receive any letter or money. I do think that the community looks different at me than at the ones that were not captured. For example those that have not been captured they have now been married. But we that have been captured we have no husbands, so you see the difference. The difference between them and we is that they are now married and we are not married. Only God knows if we need to get married to get respect, but for me I don’t feel good about it. I want to get married.”

That they were captured at a marriageable age and have now moved a couple of years beyond that, that they have been with another man and that they might have children to take care of does not help them as candidates for marriage. This is especially true considering the fact that their potential husbands are young men who find themselves socially and economically in a difficult position. Currently in Sierra Leone (and in other African societies) male youth tend to marry at an older age because it is more difficult for them to become economically indepen-

dent enough to take care of a family of their own. This makes them even more reluctant to marry a woman who has children from a previous relationship.

“It is difficult to find an actual husband that I can like to marry. The men are telling lies around here because of the war. Some of them if they want to know you as a woman, if they want to use you, they would just come and lie and say that they want you for marry. So you will have hope and trust them, you just live with them because of this man promised me a marriage. They know that she has no money, so I can stay with her and tell her to marry. You stay with him for a long time but if he has to start giving money he will just leave you for another woman. This is the way the men get rid of women now. Even if they tell you they want you for love, they have awareness that we women don’t want anybody for love now. It is time for us now, time for love has passed. They know that we need marriage for now and that is what they promise us now and when it comes to that they leave us.”

In a society where the social, cultural and economic position of women is inextricably linked to their reproductive roles, women become dependant on men for survival. This makes them vulnerable in their relations with these men. This resulted during the war in bush marriages being to a certain extent a survival strategy while, in the aftermath, marriage has become a tool for social reintegration. Women tactically reproduced existing social patterns in a context of war, violence, chaos and destruction. In the end it has helped them to survive. In a changing situation from violent conflict to peace, they have had to re-evaluate their situation. Although the decisions made among the participants in this study differed, they are all to be understood within the larger cultural framework that defines gender relations and assigns a key role to the social institution of marriage. Although women are vulnerable in such a framework, they are also actors who reproduce it based on a hegemonic understanding of the relations. For many of these women, marriage appears to be a tool for reintegration and at the same time marriage becomes an important indicator of successful reintegration.

### Coming home, going home?

Women currently living in Makeni who were taken into the bush with the RUF during the war had different reasons for coming to Makeni in the first place. For some it was their hometown when the war affected them. For them to return to town after the war meant coming home to a familiar place and often coming back to relatives. In this situation, women’s reintegration was indeed a *re-establishment* of social relations within a community that was once familiar. An example is the story of Khadija, who grew up in Makeni where her mother supported the family by selling pans, plates and buckets. Even during the war she returned to town with the RUF, with whom she had spent time in the bush. After the final peace agreement she managed to re-establish relations with her family and now lives with her mother and grandmother in the same house in which she was captured. She is responsible for two of her four siblings:

“When the war came they captured me. That was in 1998. I lived with them and I became pregnant. When they captured me they took me to Magburaka, to the base there and we stayed there for one year. We went back to Makeni with the whole group. [...] After the peace came I came back to this compound. Before coming to the house I met some of my friends and I asked them to go to the house and talk to my parents to tell them that I was not willing to live with those peoples [the RUF]. But because of my life and they said they would give me I decided to live with them, so please let them [her family] forgive me. They came and talked to them to accept me back, to come to the house. Some of the other people are not willing to accept us, some of the community they laugh at us. They say they captured us and in the end we have no benefit. I was not feeling good about that. Now they have stopped laughing at us.”

A slightly different situation is found in the stories of other young women who are Temne speakers from the north and who were taken away from their villages by the RUF. They either ended up in Makeni with the rebel movement during the war or they came to town to settle after the DDR started. Aminata’s story represents the young women who decided that resettling in the village where they were captured would not offer sufficient economic or social opportunities. Apart from survival opportunities, these women sought anonymity in the urban region and the fear of reprisal and stigmatization appears to keep them from going home.<sup>8</sup> At the time of this study Aminata was 28 years old and the mother of two children born before the war. She is now also responsible for taking care of her mother and little sister. When the small town she lived in before the war was attacked by the RUF, her husband was killed and she had the choice of either joining the RUF or being killed. She then became separated from her children and the war ended when she was in Lungi but she did not qualify for DDR. She found one of her sons, who by then was a former child combatant. Because of this she did benefit from any financial support for transportation back north. Later she found her other son in Port Loko. She decided to go to her mother’s village, being afraid and ashamed to return to the place she had lived before with her husband. Her mother was happy to see her back alive and Aminata was able to explain herself (as she phrased it) and received understanding for the fact she was forced to join the RUF. To her mother (and also to me during interviews) she repeatedly stressed that she hated the atrocities the RUF had committed and that she had never participated in them. Together with her mother she then decided to settle in Makeni. They feel their options for the future are better there because everyone in the village knows she spent time with the RUF. In Makeni they found anonymity and only a small network of people now know about her past. She believes that in general, former RUF combatants are accepted in Makeni but nevertheless having been previously associated with

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<sup>8</sup> The director of one of the NGOs in Makeni that provided training, counseling and assistance for ex-combatants, child soldiers and former rebel wives confirmed that after a reunification process with the family and community some women eventually decided to leave to return to town in the hope of finding better opportunities (personal communication, November 2003).

the rebels, they have to be careful not to make a mistake. From time to time her mother travels back to the village where they still have access to land.

Most of the women represented in this study, however, are Mende speakers who came originally from the south and spent a long time with the RUF. Baindu, whose personal account opened this chapter, is one of them. After the war had officially come to an end, like the other women, they also faced the choice between going back home or staying in Makeni. Although the Mende women often expressed their wish to return home during the conversations I had with them, they also gave the impression of being reluctant to act. The initial answer given when asked what held them back was a complaint of having a lack of money for transport. This however proved to conceal more complex reasons and ambivalent emotions.

As the war started in the southeast and these young women were captured in the early years of the war, they had spent a long time with the RUF and had often moved around from place to place with them before they finally arrived in Makeni:

“When the war ended I was in Makeni. We travelled around in the country, we used to walk on foot, from Kailahun to Kono, from Kono to Makeni. If they want to move, we all moved together. The group was very big. There were too much of women and children. The men would be in front with arms, we the women, and other people who are having a problem, who are sick or have anything that is heavy to carry would follow and armed men would also be behind us to guide us. I arrived in Makeni in 1999.”

The rebel group became their point of reference for a long period of time in demanding and insecure circumstances of violent conflict. While the social world around them was characterized by chaos, violence and threat, these women tried to carry on as much as possible with daily life as they knew it with the group of rebels who had captured them. Disconnected from their family and home community, they spent their mid-teens with the RUF, matured over the years, acquired husbands, became mothers and in the end they survived. Most of them stated that although the situation was not what they would have wished for, they also had to cope with it once they found themselves in that situation as the alternatives were limited.

From the moment when the final peace agreement was signed, the future was about to change but was still very uncertain. Within the rebel group, relationships had been constructed that served as reciprocity networks. Most of the women knew friends in the RUF who they could turn to for help because they could not be sure of how civilians would respond to them:

“When I needed food or money I went to the RUF. They assisted me small small. I would prepare food for them also and eat with them. But sometimes there was no food and then I would just drink water with my baby and sleep. I decided to stay with the RUF because I knew them, I was used to their habits and I had stayed with them for five years. I was afraid to stay with the civilians because of the civilians they would have a problem. If you had

been with the RUF they might treat you in a way that you don't want. So I decided to just follow the RUF. When I think of the family I lost and remember my mother, father and sister I cry and feel like a stranger in Makeni. There is nothing to go back to for me in Kailahun. The house is burnt, the family is killed. So I stay in Makeni. I am not afraid, but there is nothing there for me and I make a living now in Makeni."

As is also mentioned in this interview fragment, for some of the women there simply was nothing left to go home to. Family members had been murdered or separated from each other or had gone missing in the war. But often it was fear of the way people back home might respond that made them reluctant to return after all these years of war. Many women stated that they expected family to be positive about them having survived the war, but that the community would respond negatively since they had spent years with the rebels:

"There are other reasons why I still cannot return home. Apart from the issue of money I have some hesitation about my reception home because in the Tongo area there are so many Kamajo<sup>9</sup> who are against the RUF very much. I'm afraid that if I go as soon as possible they will ill-treat me or see me very different. Except if I happen to get some sort of good encouraging information from the place, from a family member then I would go. But up till now I did not have any contact with someone there. In Makeni I still feel like a stranger. I don't feel fine about my life here. We have tried to get into some programmes, but no way, so maybe that is because people still see us as rebels. It is not easy for us to make a living here. Maybe it is better at home, but I'm still afraid to go."

"My family would be happy to receive me because they know that I was captured. I have a baby over there now that I am supposed to take care for. It's the baby that was born in the bush. I sent him there two years ago. I could not afford to travel myself. And the boy with me meant a lot of problems so I decided to send him to my mother. My brother took him. I was afraid to go there myself because the Kamajo was still fighting there and I was with the RUF. These Kamajo people are very bad. They even fight their own people. If you go to the village they would harass you and harass your family. They would even come and give some of us to marry to the elderly."

Sometimes interviewees expressed fear of unexpected reprisals that might not happen in the open. At times I encountered situations where people were on their guard against being poisoned. For example, I was warned many times not to finish a soft drink that had been left out of sight for a while in case someone had put something in it that would make me sick.<sup>10</sup> A friend who organized a huge party for his daughter's name-giving ceremony in the south where he originated from afterwards expressed his relief that everything had gone fine and no one got hurt. When I asked why anyone would get hurt at such a party, the answer was

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<sup>9</sup> *Kamajo* refers to the traditional hunter groups that played a leading role in civil defence groups fighting the RUF. Although CDF combatants were included in the DDR programmes, the *Kamajo* itself cannot be demobilized for it is in essence a culturally embedded organization.

<sup>10</sup> I have observed the fear of feuds being dealt with by poisoning the enemy's food or drink on previous visits to West African countries. Apart from the vicious intent behind poisoning, taking care of food and drink is of course wise in an environment where disease is often spread by poor hygiene and is a serious threat to one's everyday health.

that there were so many ex-combatants there that someone might have taken the opportunity to get even over past experiences. Someone else stated that:

“They might say that everything is normal now with the ex-combatants but they take revenge in secret. They could poison you, invite you for a drink and say to you that they are now friends again and then put something in your drink that makes you sick. Or you might be taken into the bush for the society and then something might happen there so you don’t come out of the bush again.”

Although none of the women actually knew of any specific incidents, the fear of reprisal was definitely present. This particular fear seems to also capture the more generally present fear about the way things might evolve in the near future, related to uncertainty over what their position might be within the community.

In addition to these emotions, another complex cultural mechanism appears to be at work that prevents these young women from going back to their families. They all said that they felt they could not go home *empty-handed*:

“My uncle took my children there. [Back to where she came from.] He came to look for the children when the peace came. When he came and found me I decided to give my children to go with him. I could not go with him because I had nothing by that time. And I am the eldest. I did not want to go and just sit with these people doing nothing for them. I have children and the burden then again would be with the people I stay with. So I told my uncle to go with my children. If God will provide for me I can find a job and earn some money and then go and join them. [...] Because by that time [before the war] I was considered not to be able to do anything for myself and my parents would assist me. But now I am at this age it is not to easy for them to do anything for me now. [...] Makeni is not my home, but in Kenema people knew me very well and they know that somehow I have been captured. If I would go there now in this condition people would provoke my mother. They would say to her, your child was in the bush and after the war she came with nothing. She is just from the bush. So I don’t want that kind of statement to be made about me. For my children it is different, because my mother gave birth to me and I am the first. If it is my own children than my mother makes no difference, she takes care of them. Because it is what she got from the higher. The other people are not that concerned about the children so they don’t treat them different. Them coming from the bush is not that big a problem for children.”

As I mentioned earlier, most of these young women were in their mid-teens when they were taken by the RUF. Not yet fully mature (physically and, more importantly, culturally), they grew up away from home. Through the relationship they had with men, the ‘bush marriages’ and by becoming a mother while in the bush they became adult women according to existing cultural perceptions and meanings. This implies that they are now supposed to be taken care of by their husbands and have lost their rights to rely on their parents or older members of the extended family. They are in fact expected to make their own contribution to this family network so that younger members are supported. This probably explains why the children born in the bush, mentioned in the interview fragment above, are integrated in the family network and taken care of, while their mother decides she cannot return to her own parents because she would become a burden on the family.



In the normal (non-conflict) context, temporarily moving away from home for job opportunities or travelling around in the country for trading is generally accepted in Sierra Leone. Although a long period of migration away from home could result in a loss of entitlements within the community, I got the impression from interviewees that a period of absence is acceptable as long as one returns with a substantial contribution to make to the extended family and community. However, coming back *empty-handed* would be interpreted as having failed and would not justify one's absence. And if one returns as an adult woman with no contribution to make to the family network, that would mean having failed in one's role as a daughter and as a woman.

Women like Baindu did not leave home for trading purposes or jobs elsewhere in the country. They left because they were captured by a rebel movement at a time of violent conflict. If they did not return home empty-handed but with some gains or profits, they would risk being accused of having profited from the war. The home community would doubt their reason for leaving and whether it was indeed a case of enforced participation. They would be vulnerable to allegations of having tagged along with the rebels on a voluntary basis and therefore the community would perceive them as perpetrators instead of victims, guilty instead of innocent.

This reveals a complicated dilemma for these young women. By going home empty-handed they expose themselves as well as their families to the negative moral judgment of the community. They would be seen as a cultural failure as daughters and women and that would have a negative influence on their own and their family's position within the community. They would become the laughing stock of the community. However, if they had been able to somehow profit from their absence and brought this profit back with them to the community, they would risk being accused of having gained from the conflict. This would also place them in an unwanted position in the community. However, most of the women I spoke to did not appear to have gained from the war and they were particularly concerned about avoiding a situation in which they became a burden on the family. Some of them who have given birth to children while in the bush have sent their children to be taken care of by their own families. With the decision not to go back home, they not only prevent themselves from being in an uncomfortable position within the community but also fulfil a daughter's responsibility for maintaining the social position of their family. Through their absence, they protect their family from community provocation and disdain due to having a daughter who came home either as unsuccessful or as a perpetrator.

## Surviving day by day: Assets, capabilities and entitlements

Countless times during afternoons on the veranda waiting for rice to cook or evening to fall, I heard the women lament “we are strained”: they were strained in day-to-day survival and livelihood. Even before the war, Sierra Leone was suffering large-scale economic decline and by the time it had ended it had become a war-ravaged country where opportunities were very limited. The majority of the population now lives in extreme poverty. In this section I focus on the ways women are trying to design livelihood strategies in a country where the possibilities to do so are restricted. Central to this is the link between these strategies and social relations and identities.

At the heart of any livelihood strategy lies the use of assets, capabilities and entitlements. Assets (possessions like land or capital and resources one has control over) and capabilities (a person’s skills and competences) can both be employed in income-generating activities. Entitlements are rights or claims that groups or individuals can appeal to and derive from social and cultural structures and political organization. They are essential for the opportunity to acquire assets and capabilities. The right of access to community or family land and access to education are examples of entitlements relevant to livelihood strategies. Assets and capabilities are linked to social relations and identities through entitlements. Who you are socially, culturally and/or politically in a society influences what you are entitled to, subsequently influencing what you can acquire in terms of assets and capabilities. One of the things the women in this study share is their lack of assets and capabilities to generate sufficient income. This is due to a loss or a lack of entitlements related to a combination of gender notions (structural causes) and a wartime legacy.

First, an illustration of what the role of assets can be in ways of making a living. The use of land – either to grow food for personal consumption (during the war the agricultural sector almost completely reverted to subsistence farming) or to produce a surplus crop that can be sold or exchanged for other commodities – is a common way in which entitlements and assets provide people with a tangible livelihood option. Although the privatization of land by buying and selling is taking place in some limited areas (e.g. around Freetown), *access* to land is still predominantly through kinship and community ties. Many women who were captured by the rebels feel that their way back to their home community and family is blocked and they have, consequently, lost their entitlement to access to land and with it an important opportunity for making a living. This loss of a very basic asset is a long-term consequence of the position they were put in during the war.<sup>11</sup> If they want to make a living by growing crops, they now have

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<sup>11</sup> Three systems of law co-exist in Sierra Leone: General Law that contains statutory law and common law, Customary Law that is based on local tradition and customs, and Islamic Law that is only

to rely on negotiating access to land with those with whom they do not have a strong relationship. This may turn out to be less reliable because it is not as strongly based on a shared perception of rights, duties and regulations among each other as it would be among members of the same community. One participant told me that she had made a deal with a neighbour in town to grow cassava on his piece of land squeezed between the houses, for which he would later receive part of the profit. At the end of the day, he claimed the total harvest. The woman herself was reluctant to claim the part of the crop she was entitled to because she did not come from the town and had previously been associated with the rebel movement.<sup>12</sup>

In an attempt to cope with their loss of access to land, many women expressed the wish to start a small business. This is probably related to the fact that they lived in a more commercially oriented urban area. On the streets, in the markets and around the car parks of Makeni, petty trading is a very common commercial activity. To begin trading though, one needs either capital or products. Married women are commonly given an amount of money by their husbands to start a small business. Women who went through the DDR have sometimes decided to use their benefits to start a small business, for example by travelling to nearby villages to buy agricultural products like cassava leaves and selling them for a small profit in the town's market. However, the market economy in post-conflict Sierra Leone does not yet appear capable of absorbing all these trading initiatives or of providing everyone in the market with a substantial daily income. I have often asked myself while looking at all the people: who were selling, who is buying? Petty trading seems to be a strategy for women and young children to acquire additional family income but is not sufficient to provide the lion's share of it.

Apart from these, what I would call asset-oriented, livelihood opportunities, one can improve one's position on the labour market. Education in its broadest sense as a means of acquiring skills and competences is the most obvious way of doing so. Access to formal schooling is another example of how the available opportunities to increase capabilities are related to entitlements and social identities. Though the practical possibilities for attending school decreased in the course of the war, access to formal education had long since more to do with structural matters. In the chapter on youth in Sierra Leone, I explained that one of

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applicable in marriage, divorce and inheritance for Muslims. Customary Law and Islamic Law are predominantly employed in the provinces. By law, women cannot inherit property and many of the women who lost their husbands in the war experience problems gaining access to land because they are no longer entitled to the land they owned when married (HRW 2003b: 15-19).

<sup>12</sup> It is important to note here that the general law system is not easy to access for women (without money) nor does customary law appear to have the answers yet to address these problems.

the pre-war complaints of youth was that access to the formal education system had become available only for the lucky few who maintained productive client-patron relations. This was expressed in the phrase “education is not a right but a privilege”. In the context of this paragraph, I argue that a right is an entitlement that can be *demand*ed by someone whereas a privilege is an entitlement that is *granted* to someone. Youth did not have the ability to empower themselves by using their rights to acquire assets and capabilities. They had to depend on others to open up opportunities to do so. The socio-cultural and political exclusion of youth meant a lack of entitlements which has prevented them from gaining control over resources and assets and from developing capabilities which are necessary for them to make a decent living and to become respectable adults.

For girls and young women in Sierra Leone, being able to attend, let alone complete, their schooling is even less likely. If we take into account that education is very costly and families often have to make sacrifices to send their children to school, then we can also understand that parents find themselves in the situation where they have to choose to allow only *some* of their children to go all the way through school. General gender notions instead of individual features (like the individual ability to learn) appear to result in girls being taken out of school at a younger age. Sometimes they leave school right after they have been initiated and when they are expected to get married. People in and around Makeni also used to say that girls are taken out of school once they have learned to count well enough to start working in the market.<sup>13</sup>

To compensate for their lack of capabilities due to limited education, many of the participants are trying to get into a programme that enables them to acquire new skills:

“[...] you know we have almost lost our first change. So we just try again and again, we have children coming up. So if we have the opportunity, if we have the money, we can continue schooling, but I think skill training is better ... with that you can make some money, Le 5,000 or Le 10,000, but I make it by myself. This is self-help. Lot of these girls cannot pay for official schooling, but rather than sitting down and do nothing it is better to try and make some money.”

Many of the national and international NGOs active in post-war Sierra Leone offer such training as part of their intervention and aid packages. The skills that women can learn in these programmes typically include Gara tie-dying, soap making, dressmaking and hairdressing. Some NGOs also provide literacy train-

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<sup>13</sup> Some statistics to illustrate gender inequality concerning education: Adult Literacy Rate, female (% ages 15 and above), 2003: 20.5; Adult Literacy Rate, male (% ages 15 and above), 2003: 39.8; Youth Literacy Rate (female rate % age 15-24), 2003: 29.9; Youth Literacy Rate (female rate as % of male rate), 2003: 64. Figures were retrieved from <http://hdr.undp.org/statistics/data> and reflect data included in the Human Development Report 2005. Sierra Leone ranks 176 out of 177 on the Human Development Index. On the gender-related development index, which is adjusted to account for gender inequalities, the country is ranked number 139.

ing and health education during skills programmes. National and local NGOs are often religiously based and, consistent with the NGOs' main policy and goals, their programmes are designed to target specific groups. While many of the organizations work within a larger framework and discourse that addresses post-war processes of reintegration and reconstruction, one can easily find programmes for ex-combatants, women and children affected by the war and for internally displaced people. I noticed different attitudes to these kinds of training programmes. Women did not always choose to register for the DDR programme and they are at times reluctant to participate in programmes offered by an NGO that is openly meant to help groups that carry a strong connotation with the recent history of war. Some women had social and psychological objections to identifying themselves with the registration categories for certain training and aid.

However for others, the offer of free education and training is more attractive and identification with certain categories is something that one can be very pragmatic about. While I have been in touch with both givers and receivers of help and aid programmes and development projects, including skills training, I have sensed a subtle difference in the perspective of these projects and aid provided between the NGOs (particularly the international ones) and the people (women) who are supposed to receive this help. NGOs ground their work predominantly in an ideology of 'doing good', as they strive to help people. Their primary goal is not to make money but to spend it on help and support based on a discourse of relief and development. Inherently this creates a situation in which the NGO perceives itself and the 'other' as participants in a relationship between a giver and a receiver. The result is that NGOs have a preference for receivers who are vulnerable or in need, which inevitably results in an unequal relationship. Skills training programmes designed for war-affected women are supposed to help *victims* of war not *survivors* of war. To justify helping, the other is perceived as being in need of help, and therefore helpless or needy. Furthermore I would argue that, whether it is explicitly communicated or not, the receiver is someone who will be uplifted by the help they are given, in the perception of many of the NGOs.

From the perspective of the receivers (such as women joining a skills training programme), however, NGOs are merely filling the gap left by the government, civil servants and other institutions during the years of social and economic decline and ten years of war. NGOs are institutions that provide medical and psychosocial care, education and training, agricultural support and banking facilities (micro-credit programmes) and are at the same time an important source of employment opportunities. Women in this study were well aware which NGOs offered what kinds of programmes or aid and what terms were assigned to individuals. They were very pragmatic and down-to-earth about the way they

presented themselves according to the criteria set for accessing a programme. I have noticed this way of anticipating an NGO's presence, specifically among women who were bitter about being excluded from the DDR programmes. Also, women who previously did not want to participate in a DDR programme because they did not see themselves as ex-combatants attempted to make up for having missed out on the benefits by trying to get into another programme in a later stage of the post-war period. In their eyes, the NGOs were not as much helpers for the needy but alternative players in the socio-economic field. I argue that, just as they are not reintegrated but reintegrate, women were not waiting to be helped by a willing NGO worker but try to benefit as much as possible from the opportunities that have come with the international community and aid industry's arrival in their communities.

### Reciprocity and the necessity of new networks

If circumstances do not generate sufficient daily income, reciprocity can make the difference. Reciprocity refers to the exchange of goods, food and money among social equals. Not only does it reside in *personalized* social relations but at the same time affirms the same relations. Reciprocity moves back and forth on a double-defined continuum made up of a level of unselfishness and of closeness (Kottak 2000: 325-327). This implies that reciprocity does not always need to be altruistic. If one can get as much as possible out of the relation while giving as little as possible (a low level of unselfishness), it is still reciprocity-based. If the exchange is between two individuals who do not have any relationship apart from that moment of exchange itself, reciprocity slips into forms of trade. Because reciprocity and social relations are tightly connected, one might get an indication of the extent to which individuals are reintegrated in social networks by looking at the direction and form of reciprocity to which they have access:

“But home is still home, there you have ways to keep your money. For example, if you have this pen and I come and ask you this pen, and you don't want me to have that pen, you say that you don't have a pen but that you know someone who has a pen and so and so is the price. And then you tell me to give you that money so you can go and buy me that pen. Then you just go and run to get your own pen and give it to me for that money. But you really don't want to help me. That is what we are experiencing here.”

Women who came from Makeni have now re-established relations with family and former friends. Some of these relations may have changed due to recent experiences but they all share a common history, of which the war is a significant part. But, as mentioned earlier, a town like Makeni hosts many who are not on familiar ground and live far from the community they originate from: they are relative strangers in town. They have not returned to networks in which reciprocity might renew and reconfirm social relations. They either establish new relations forming new networks or transform the character of recently built

networks which have remained from the war. I will now elaborate briefly on three types of relationships women have established and in which reciprocity plays an important part. First are relationships among those who were in the bush together; second is participation in a church community; and third are different types of individual male-female relationships.

Mende women feel like strangers in town. Many of them complained of being the subject of gossip in the neighbourhood or at the market. They felt discriminated against, for example when trying to get into a training programme offered by local NGOs. Apart from not being able to speak the local language, which differentiates them immediately from other inhabitants, they are experiencing being perceived as the embodiment of recent history:

“Well, it is like so, also because, if you are a Mende and you can speak Temne, if they know you can speak Temne they will know what to talk even if you are present. For as long as they know you cannot speak the dialect you are in trouble. You dress good, but they will talk about you. If you approach them they will start talking about you. Yes, that is the way most people do here. They were saying ... even for us, the war came from somewhere to the Mende land and then they capture us. The war was brought here by a Temne man but because we came together with them here, they used to say we Mende brought the war. But the Temnes were in the war, the Mendes were there, the Konos were there, the Limbas were there, all of us were there. All the tribes in Sierra Leone. But because the war passed through the Mende land to here, they say the Mendes brought the war. They blame us for what happened here. They say it even if you are not responsible. Sometimes if you have problems, they say these are the people that spoiled our places.”

Whether it is rooted in tangible situations of discrimination and the apparently hostile attitude of civilians or it is based on subjective experiences and perceptions, the common result is that some Mende women showed a tendency to rely on mainly each other's company. Although previously captured women nowadays dissociate themselves explicitly from the rebel movement as a political entity, in practice they maintain relations with those who they knew from this time in the bush. In some cases, when local women are part of the rebel group that captured, the opportunity to get acquainted with local people does occur. In all situations it can be said that violence and force no longer uphold relations and reciprocity, in many cases found between people who were in bush together, has become the affirmative element.

“When I need money now I go to different people in Makeni, I go to sisters when I know that they have food. Friends sometimes give me Le 1,000 or 2,000 and that is how I manage. I knew these friends in the bush. We were all together. Some of them came from here or are now married to a man and therefore they have some assistance. I don't associate with the RUF anymore. These friends are just helping me, doing good.”

“It is difficult for us, because even if there is someone willing to talk for you they will be afraid that people see that as a connection with the movement. I am getting by now because there are some friends of my man around and they assist me sometimes. But I don't have nothing at all to do. The people that assist me some of them are from the RUF, some of

them are not, but all of them I know them from former times and the war also brought them to Makeni.”

Membership of a church community offers access to a social network and this has often been mentioned by participants. It distinguishes itself from former relations in that it is not rooted in the idea of shared experiences of the war. Religious values such as forgiveness and charity not only provide a basis for the relationship of church members but also offer a framework in which women can find truth and meaning that helps them to relate to their own war experiences. Many times I have heard women call on God to explain what has happened to them. The church and the religious values it supports have the potential to construct bridging relationships among former combatants, captured women and civilians.

“I gave my testimony in church about my past, that they killed my husband, that they took me with them for two years, that I went to Lungi for disarmament, but I did not have a gun. So I explained myself in the fourth month after I came back to Makeni. I went to church and said I am a stranger from Freetown, but I am a Christian, so I come to join this church, I have no husband, I am suffering from the rebel war, I did not have any benefit. There is one thing; if you come alone without a husband they have this look upon you. They just think that you are passing by, meeting with anybody you feel like. So to let them not look at me with that local eyes I explained myself. That the rebels killed my husband so they sympathized with me, they made friends with me, they come and greet me, I go to meetings for the church, they know me more. Some of the ex-combatants gave testimony, some of them did not. Sometimes you will not know what to do. You don’t have way to get money, early in the morning you have to eat, you have to pay rent, and you have to do something about the financial problems. So if you don’t explain yourself, even though you explain yourself you cannot always find a person to assist you, but if you explain yourself people will know more about your problems. Like for myself, one of my church members found this place for me. When I came I said I wanted a place for rent, so he made the change for me.”

“Well, the church that I go to, the pastor is a Mende but that is not why I go there. I know him through the institution [where she received her DDR training] He used to go to the institution to talk to us, to preach to people, especially the ex-combatants, on how to become a good citizen. He invited us to go to the church. But we meet with people in the church and those who we met there, if we meet them now in the streets we call ourselves sisters in the church. We know them, they ask you what is your name, where do you live, sometimes in the evening they will take the bible and visit you to talk about God. Sometimes there is friendliness. That helps to feel little less like a stranger.”

Previously I argued that male-female relations are important in the process of socio-cultural reintegration. Women focus on getting married or choose to stay in a former forced marriage arrangement expecting to either acquire or maintain the status of being a married woman. But there is more to a marriage than social respect. Within a marriage the relationship is usually affirmed on a regular basis by reciprocal exchange. The gifts that are given and received are, depending on the level of wealth, sometimes the bare necessities as a bag of rice or something more luxurious such as a bar of soap or maybe even – and only useful in the



urban areas – a top-up card for a cell phone. These gifts communicate the connection, commitment and mutual responsibility between two people. In these situations the intention of establishing a relationship or the already existent relationship is underscored by reciprocity. However, the connection between the social relationship and the practice of exchange might also be switched from time to time. Sometimes women get into a relationship in order to gain access to reciprocal exchange. During my fieldwork period I had noticed that one of the young women who participated in the study became acquainted with a young local man who she said worked for an international NGO. I spotted them frequently sharing drinks on one of the street corners. One afternoon while she plaited my hair, I asked her what the deal was with this man. Did she like him? She started giggling and explained that she did like him a lot and that he was good to her. But on my question as to whether she liked him enough for marriage she answered firmly: “No! He is only for caretaking!” If we stretch this scale of relational reciprocal exchange to its end, we can also see that at the end of the scale the male/female interaction itself becomes the subject of exchange, when the relationship is good for trading, which is prostitution (in Sierra Leone predominantly referred to as commercial sex work). For some women, selling their own bodies in short-term encounters with men is their last option for survival. In terms of reciprocity, the level of unselfishness is then at its highest and the level of closeness at its lowest.

In circumstances where physical survival is a day-to-day challenge I have seen that social relations may be affirmed, defined and preoccupied by the exchange of goods necessary for a livelihood and living. Through the concept of reciprocity, social relations become additional assets in themselves where broken social structures and changed socio-cultural relations result in a loss of assets and entitlements. Socio-cultural reintegration is not only a matter of repositioning oneself in a society and community but becomes a matter of survival.

## Following existing paths: Reintegrating in the community

### Introduction

Today I am again on my way to pay a visit to a village north of Makeni to gather additional data on reintegration in a rural setting. On previous visits to the village, I successfully arranged a ride with a UN or NGO car, but this time I decided to go by local transport. Not out of any practical motivation, nor supported by a noble ‘going native’ anthropological impetus drive but because in a sentimental way I missed the ‘travelling in Africa’ feeling. As I had to spend a couple of hours at the car park, I used my time to chat with motorbike drivers, to buy kola nuts for the village chief and to find cassette tapes with popular music for some of the participants, while I waited until the driver had gathered at least seven passengers, myself included, to make it profitable to get on the road. I turned out to be privileged to share the front seat with one of the other passengers. In the car, despite the natural air-conditioning, it is hot and the smell of human sweat and *pojo*<sup>1</sup> mixed together tickles my nose.

We make so many stops that the long-distance taxi drive resembles a slow train. At almost every village or settlement passengers board and alight. After some time we pick up someone who will be the ninth person in the car! I wonder exactly how he will be squeezed in. With astonishment and a touch of indignation, I observe how this person is directed to the driver’s seat. The driver pushes him as if he is a package to be stowed so far towards the middle of the car

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<sup>1</sup> Palm wine.

that the man has to lift his right leg over the gear stick. Luckily the car is an automatic so we will not be needing it that much during the ride! Then the driver himself gets into the car. Before he closes the door he lifts his body up a bit, then slams the door and then he lowers himself, with a little help from gravity, between the door and the eighth passenger. I am happy to see that at least he holds the steering wheel with both hands – although for that he has to push the passenger sitting next to him in the chest and all the way into the back of the seat with his elbow. As a final step, the driver slings his right leg over his passenger's left leg to be able to press the accelerator. We are on our way again!

“Are you crazy?!” I ask the driver with an evident lack of empathy for African circumstances. “No”, he replies, “crazy, but without other options.” And then he shows himself as an eager teacher to explain to me how he struggles to make enough money to make an actual profit out of these trips. His expenditure for car maintenance, petrol and informal pay-offs (for example at the police roadblock just outside town) is high. The small amounts of money that short-distance passengers pay him make a difference to his profit. Then one of the passengers in the back asks me who I think is really crazy, the driver for taking so many – too many – people in his car or the passengers who choose to travel this way? He clearly agrees with the driver: “we do things this way because there just is no other way available to do it”.

The reason why I have included this passage here is that, though it is an anecdote without any direct relation to the conflict, for me it nevertheless strikingly reflects the fundamental attitude of many people in Sierra Leone regarding the task of living together after ten years of brutal war cracked society's social fabric and unity. It also confronted me with my tendency to approach this issue with the wrong question in mind. I have often caught myself wondering how people in Sierra Leone *can* move on together, while the question should have been how people *do* so. ‘Can’ suggests that there is an option not to move on together, whereas in the social reality of Sierra Leone this option is limited or absent. There is hardly an opportunity not to live together because the war in Sierra Leone was not fought against ‘the other’ (defined along ethnic or religious lines, for example) but among ‘ourselves’. What remains are only various options on how to live together. This difference in perception which sets a clear division between the outsider as an analytical researcher and the participants as the ones who live this social reality every day became particularly clear to me during my visits to this village. Reintegration there was not so much a matter of individual trajectories of ex-combatants and/or their wives but appeared to be far more of a process that concerned the village community as a whole. In this village reintegration seemed to be not just the (re-)establishment of social relations between individuals and the community but derived *from* these relations.

As mentioned earlier, during the first week of my fieldwork in Sierra Leone I was given the opportunity to join Khadija Bah, a consultant working for the World Bank, on her trip to some northern villages to gather data on female participation in the DDR. After this survey was done and I had settled in Makeni, I decided to pay some additional one and two-day visits to the village as part of my study. These visits became more than just an enjoyable side trip out of town into the country's more remote rural areas. My initial interest was the impression made in these brief interviews that at least some women in this village had been able to successfully renegotiate their position as daughters and wives after they had been forcefully involved with rebel activities. While the focus for my work was on the social and cultural reintegration process for women in an urban area, these additional visits to this village provided me with an extra perspective on my own data. Firstly, it painted a picture of the rural community context from which many of the women in town originated. Secondly, the stories from this village suggested that notwithstanding the occurrence of large-scale stigmatization of formerly captured women in Sierra Leone, other trajectories and outcomes of and approaches to the post-conflict processes also appeared to be possible.

Although the data from these visits are not as comprehensive as those gathered in Makeni, I have found it useful to see them in light of this study's entirety. The difference in this data's validity is mainly rooted in differences in the method used for data collection. Instead of living in the village continuously I went back and forth for a number of visits. The interviews were always more formal and were also with persons from the community in the presence of one of the former combatants. This particular chapter is mainly a sketch of a village getting wrapped up in war and coming out of it again. Nevertheless, it does show that in such a rural context ex-combatants and their wives reintegrate with their families and the village community in a more integrated way than the social integration strategies that women in Makeni have individually developed. This insight adds to our comprehension of the complexity of reintegration as a socio-cultural process with regard to the context it takes place in. It is for this reason that I did not want to omit the data from this thesis, even though the information is in a more descriptive than analytical form.

### A community drawn into and coming out of war

It is midday when we finally arrive at my destination. The tar road runs right through the village. On my left-hand side I see the remains of the former chief's house. He was burnt alive while locked up in his house by the rebels as revenge for an old feud. On the other side is a small shop where they sell soft drinks. They come out of a fridge but are always lukewarm; the generator is broken. The sun is at its highest point in the sky. It makes the air shimmer above the road and

at the same time it sucks out all the depth of the scenery. People and buildings have lost their shadows. The light is sharp, the air is thick with dust. Women sit on the porches of houses which are partly or almost completely ruined as a result of the war and poverty – nobody really knows which. A few girls carry plates with peeled oranges to sell to the people in the cars, *poda podas* and trucks that pass by on a regular but not very frequent basis. There was a time when this village close to the district border was a bustling trading centre between Makeni and the towns further north. Today there is some activity at the carpenter's workplace. The heat captured under the low roof of the building together with the wood shavings lying on the ground make it a damp and sultry place. Here I meet James again, a former combatant who will help me with my interviews.

Like Makeni and northern areas in general, this particular village did not get drawn directly into the civil war until the late 1990s when it was first taken over by the AFRC.<sup>2</sup> This faction was responsible for burning down the chief's residence with the chief still in it. (Notwithstanding the horrific intent of this action, the story goes that the chief had in fact been warned before the place was set on fire but instead of packing his bags and leaving, he had fallen into a deep sleep on his bed due to alcohol. Civilians who thought he had fled the place later found his remains.) The AFRC was known to use atrocities and widespread terror to keep civilians in check. They set up a roadblock near the village to control all the main traffic between the two northern districts of Bombali and Koinadugu. The paramount chief currently in power stated that this roadblock used to be marked with the dead bodies of the victims killed on the spot. Later on, the village was taken over by Nigerian soldiers with the ECOMOG troops. When the Nigerians withdrew from the village (I did not clearly understand from the conversations in the village why this happened), the RUF, by this time separated from the AFRC, re-entered the village and remained in control until the final peace agreement and demobilization came into effect.<sup>3</sup>

The way all three of these fighting factions and parties went about the village made it very hard, if not impossible, for civilians not to become involved in one way or another. According to the Chief's speaker, who was the main authority in

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<sup>2</sup> The Armed Forces Revolutionary Council was a Junta regime that seized power in May 1997 following a military coup led by Johnny Paul Koroma. The AFRC became allies with the RUF. ECOMOG (ECOWAS Monitoring Group which is the military force sent in by the Economic Community of West African States) removed the AFRC from Freetown after which President Kabbah could return in March 1998. However, the AFRC did not leave the stage of war completely. In 1999 the joint RUF/AFRC split up again into two separate factions. (Ducasse-Rogier 2004: 22-32) Three alleged members of the AFRC have been indicted and are due to face trial at the Special Court for Sierra Leone (<http://www.sc-sl.org>).

<sup>3</sup> ECOMOG withdrew from the country gradually while UNAMSIL took over the peace-enforcement and peacekeeping activities. ECOMOG's withdrawal from Sierra Leone was completed in 2000 (Ducasse-Rogier 2004: 27).

the village during the war, the AFRC's hostile takeover of the village chased civilians out of the main settlements to live on their small bush farms.<sup>4</sup> The speaker himself was forced at gunpoint to take the rebels to his cattle which were grazing on pasture further out of town. According to civilians, the AFRC were responsible for most of the burnings and the massive looting that took place. Women and girls were raped, and young men were mutilated and killed.

ECOMOG, which attempted to clear the country of rebel activities after they had ousted the AFRC from power in Freetown, recruited local youth to fight on their behalf against the rebel factions, who then considered themselves CDF. The ECOMOG soldiers, however, also employed an 'if you are not for us you are against us' attitude. Every unknown young man was considered a potential rebel and treated as such. The ECOMOG soldiers thus also placed the village community in a situation in which they had no choice other than to comply with those who had taken over the village and to let their youth actively participate in the fighting. When the RUF came back after ECOMOG left, they are said to have encouraged communication with the civilians and invited them to work out some sort of understanding:

"But the rebels who occupied the place sent for us to come to town. They said that they were not here to harass us. Now they split power with the AFRC Junta, they were not longer at peace. We accepted and we left the bush to come to town. When we came here we sat down with their big man. We had to provide feeding for the rebels. We were charged to pay per months. Five hundred cups of rice, five gallon of palm oil and 5,000 Leones [sic] every month. This is what they wanted to receive from the paramount chief. He had seven sections under authority. I had to call for all the seven section to pay. This happened for some time. Then the road from Freetown to Kabala was reopened and they could supply the people by the road. We had to get some peace. When the RUF were here they invited us to leave the bush to come back to the town and said that they could then provide us with assistance in town. We lived in harmony with the rebels until the peace came with the Lomé Peace Accord. We had an agreement with the rebels, you take the town, and we live in the bush and provide you with food and that created some sort of peace. This was different from the time with the Junta; they would harass us in town as well as in the bush."

Chief's Speaker

James, who was my key contact person in the village, played an interesting role amidst all this. He is a Mende and originates from the Eastern Region of Sierra Leone. When the war started, he was working as a plumber for a European development agency. His then first wife came from the north and when the war came too close to their home in Bo they travelled to the Northern Region to stay ahead of the trouble. In the late 1990s, he arrived in the area around the village just when fighting was starting between the AFRC and ECOMOG. Though he

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<sup>4</sup> Often cultivated fields are located outside the main villages and settlements. A small hut, no more than a thatched roof supported by a few poles, serves as a shelter where the family can stay from dusk till dawn while they work the land. During my fieldwork, many families were still living on their bush farms waiting for the restoration of their houses in the main village.

was not very explicit about it in his story, he suggested that this time was particularly difficult for him as a Mende because they were then seen as the opposition and a threat by the AFRC, ECOMOG and the local militias that had recently organized (CDF). By that time, his first wife had fled into Guinea but he did not dare to go because he did not expect to be allowed across the border as he would be seen as a rebel and potential troublemaker. He chose to stay in the village where he hoped people could vouch for him not being an enemy. When the RUF arrived in the village and started to negotiate their position in town with the civilians, James was asked to take on the role of interpreter and mediator between the civilians and the RUF:

“So the RUF guys came but most of them are Mende. And they can’t speak to the civilians. So as soon as they overrun the town, they came and asked about the chiefdom speaker and said, look guys we have not come to harass anybody. The only thing is that we have information about these guys [AFRC] violating human rights, about raping, innocent killing, too much harassment.<sup>5</sup> And the whole town gathered and the food that they took from the guys they gave it back to the people. So I was directly appointed, they told me, between them and the civilians. If they need anything they don’t have to meet the chiefdom speaker but I would pass the message. I was already in the community here and the speaker recommended me to do that because some of these guys if I am with them they would not be able to do any other thing, because I must apologize to them if they do the wrong thing, I would say no that is not a good thing to do. They told me to tell the people let nobody to have fear to do business. So we were living together, if they need anything they tell me to come to the chiefs. Most of the chiefs were on their various farms and the agreement was that they [RUF] have no right to go there. If they need anything they come to me and I would go to the chief. Any civilian who wants to travel to another point from this end, for him not to be harassed he would come to me and I would give him paper and if my signature is on that then they would know this man came from RUF controlled area, so let him go with no harassment.”

Apparently this role of coordinator and mediator fitted James very well. After the final peace when the DDR was implemented, he was again asked to act as the main coordinator and to mediate between the ex-combatants in the village and the DDR administration. And with his role as gatekeeper and interpreter between me and the village community, his contribution to this study was once more one of continuing this position as the man at the centre and as point of access at the same time.

The image that arises from all of this is of a village community that was becoming entangled in a situation where clear distinctions between formal and informal, legal and illegal, war and peace were fading and where, in order to survive, one had often no option other than to engage either actively or passively

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<sup>5</sup> From this it appears that, at least in this village, the RUF attempted to win the civilians’ trust and support by openly turning against the AFRC, accusing them of large-scale atrocities against the general population. The RUF seems to differ from their former allies in their behaviour towards civilians and by openly rejecting harassment. One former commander told me that sexual violence (meaning rape) used against the villagers would be punished by execution on the spot.

in the war. The forms are diverse: discretely complying with the occupying power; becoming a more active participant; or by just trying to develop and make use of livelihood opportunities that were still open and which were somehow connected with those who had turned the civilian domain into a war zone.<sup>6</sup> Ahmed, a Sierra Leonean national who works for an American NGO in the village, phrased it with a mixture of sorrow and anger:

“Somehow we all played our part in the war. If you were lucky it was on the side of the government. But we were all in war. People around here had to suffer from all of them, the AFRC, ECOMOG and the CDF and the RUF. And at the end of the day, everyone was in there. I do not blame anyone around here for what happened, they were forced. People here know out of experience that everyone carrying a gun is a potential bastard, no matter what side they were on.”

Things changed in the village when the last peace agreement was about to establish a real and lasting peace. Most of the combatants, RUF and CDF, joined the DDR programme, after which it was up to them to decide where to go. According to some of the ex-combatants I spoke to, there had been some sort of ‘day of reckoning’. Those who were identified by the villagers as being responsible for or an accomplice in the worst atrocities committed against civilians were ‘asked to leave’ the community. This also applied to those who did not abide by the new rules of behaviour and who did not put into practice the lessons on conflict resolution learned from the DDR:

“Just after the war some of the former rebels left because they were afraid for reprisal coming from the community. Others were asked to leave by the community. Those were the ones that committed the worst atrocities and the civilians identified them. The ones that live here now are accepted.”

“Some people went who went through DDR and took the classes in like ‘homecoming’ came back but did not behave. They were fighting each other. And those were the ones asked by the community to leave.”

Other ex-combatants were not actually driven out of the village by the community but chose to leave, looking for economic opportunities elsewhere because in the village it was “only farming and cattle”, as one of the former combatants phrased it. The general assumption is that quite a few left for the diamond mines to start digging for their fortunes in exchange for two cups of rice a day. The local women who were married to these ex-combatants left with them.

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<sup>6</sup> See also Nordstrom (2004) and Vlassenroot & Raeymaekers (2004) who show that, in countries involved in protracted civil conflict, the social worlds of war and peace no longer occupy separate domains. Nordstrom argues that within the social reality of war, peace is found in different shapes and manifestations and that it occurs over a varied time-span. It comes and goes as a tidal wave. At the same time within a domain of peace conflicts do still exist. She also claims that war-peace zones are not clear-cut but diffuse or flow into each other. Vlassenroot & Raeymaekers (2004: 13) show, using an explicit livelihood approach, that protracted conflicts tend to create a situation in which “the ‘rational’ pursuit of individual livelihood ends up reproducing the collectively ‘irrational’ phenomenon of war”.



After this phase, the community turned its face to the future. First of all, this meant that activities were focused on the reconstruction of the village, which in practice meant the revival of material infrastructure and economic activities. Many of the villagers were still living on their bush farms because their houses had not yet been repaired. The American NGO in the village made it their priority to combine reconstruction, long-term development and reintegration in the way they organized their activities. For the construction of a health centre, a new secondary school and a dam to provide the village with running water, they got all the youth and ex-combatants to work together for the benefit of the village community. Community labour is a long-standing practice in Sierra Leone and, although it can also be used negatively by elders to exploit and suppress young men, it is a way of encouraging collective action to affirm community ties.<sup>7</sup>

Following this community labour, the NGO wanted to offer a skills training programme to all the young people in the village. Unfortunately this was affected by DDR policy that dictated that the money given for this training should be first used to train ex-combatants. The NGO is trying to provide others in the village with the same opportunities by using other funding. Women are hoping to receive micro-credit to start a small business in addition to their work on the family land. By rebuilding the secondary school, the village hopes that people will return from their wartime places of refuge. Those who could afford it went to the urban areas, like Freetown, where facilities are much better. The village is still suffering from the consequences of the large-scale neglect of rural Sierra Leone, which has been identified as one of the original root causes of the war.

At the socio-cultural level of the village community, the focus on the future is defined by the frequent mantra of 'the war *don don*', which has been uttered all over Sierra Leone in the last few years. Though it remains a difficult concept to grasp for an outsider, I believe it can be captured in understanding that 'the war *don don*' is not as much a denial of what happened but a determination to move forward; it is not as much a statement of 'forgive and forget' as the communication of a sense of the fundamental impossibility of escape from what

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<sup>7</sup> Compulsory community labour in rural Sierra Leone is related to the history of domestic slavery. It is however permitted by the Forced Labour Ordinance of 1932 for a chief to mobilize village youth to build and maintain his own residence and basic collective infrastructure, like roads and water supplies. Nowadays this cultural practice seems to also fit the idea of community development programmes carried out by INGOs (Richards *et al.* 2004: 18-20). Given the limited time I have spent in the village, I want to be cautious in assessing whether in this case community labour should be seen as a constructive collective contribution to the community's reconstruction, as a way for ex-combatants to compensate for the harm done to the community or as *de facto* servitude that might again reflect the problematic relations between youth and elders belonging to the village elite. Either way it can be seen as an indicator of the integration of former combatants in existing social and cultural structures and practices.

has happened; it recognizes that those who were part of the war are also part of the community or society at peace: they cannot be ‘cut out’ of it:

“When they say ‘the war *don don*’, what they mean is that all the bad things that has happened, and those who you think did bad during the war we should encourage them. we have to encourage those who were our enemies and we have to all live together, not take advantage of anybody, don’t abuse anybody, don’t do bad to anyone, we all live together as one people. They say “there is no bush where you can throw bad pikin” which means there is no bush where you can throw away bad people. Even when we now see them sitting together or sitting lonesome thinking about something we take them with us to the farm or to go dancing. All these social things. We are all living together.”

Paramount Chief

“We have to do this together, it is the only option. The war is over. If we don’t move on the war will not be over. The war is over; we have to rebuild this country. We suffered enough. So we live together but we don’t trust them. But we take them into our community. What choice do we have?”

Ahmed, working for an INGO

So those who have actively participated in the war are included, not so much because of moral imperatives, but because people have learned that those who become excluded, isolated and alienated from society can easily turn against the community. While some of the ex-combatants were asked to leave the village, those who remained are integrated in the community, if only to make it more likely that they will not again turn against it. Peace becomes a collective responsibility through social relations at all levels of society, not just an agreement leading to ex-combatants restraining from picking up their guns again. Establishing a lasting peace and community reintegration go together.

## Ex-combatants wives

“Before the war we did farming; I did not go to school. I got married in 1997. Just during the war. I was living with my first husband. When we met, life was still normal in this area. The war had not yet affected this part of the country. We were living together but my husband and me were not working on the same farm.

When I was working on this farm, these guys, the AFRC came and took me. They did not actually harass me but we were moving to different places and they took me along. I was in there with one man. I was not with them as to service them like others who were there. If they wanted to cook, to assist their wives, something like child slavery. I was not one of them; I was married directly to the man. I was taken by this man and lived like in a marriage with him. As they took me, that was the marriage. I was just like that; it is not that you had a choice to disagree. Whatever they say, you have to agree.

So I was with them from one place to another until after pregnancy, the man disappeared finally. By that time I was staying in Kono. This man left us to go to town [Freetown]. After some time I was struggling because I was not getting any assistance from the others again. The only assistance was getting some food to eat. So I tried very hard to find my way back to this village. I managed to find a car to take me there. I could leave the place because I told them that I was going to my family to give birth to my child. By that time there was nobody to take care of me. They will never refuse that.

When I came back to the village, the RUF was still here. I was living with my grandmother. Together with my other sisters. I stayed with her until I gave birth. They did not really harass me. When I came some of the people of the community the people in the town started to identify me as being one lady that was with the AFRC. So they thought I was on an undercover mission. So they interrogated me for some time, the RUF men. They got information from others in town. But I managed to explain myself and the elders explained that I was a citizen of this town. So after some time that stopped and I could stay in the community without any problems. I gave birth to this baby, she is a big girl now, and she was born in the year 2000.

By that time there was food to eat from the farm. But money was not in circulation and there was no market. So all the other things you need in life, like clothes, were hard to get. Some time after I gave birth, my first husband has been observing me and saw that this man that took me away was not coming back. So that is when he decided to take me back again. He went to the family and things were arranged between us. I did not ask him, it came from him. He came to my family and said, let's forget about what happened and let me take her back. So he is taking care of the baby. In the beginning people were talking about me having a junta baby. But my husband was overlooking that system. My neighbours were saying that. But that went away, it died down. After the peace there was a lot of sensitizing of the people so that helped and it stopped. But at the beginning when the memory was still fresh people were saying these things. But in the time after disarmament, people were told to stop pointing fingers at others, so it died down. It bothered me sometimes and people recognized it so that is why it stopped.

Before that [the war] I was doing business, I had my table. But at times, when my memory recalls these times I feel sad. That is why I put everything at the back, to forget everything. My father was with the SL police and he was killed by the AFRC. After that our house was burned. And they took out everything. Later my mother died because she was not able to cope with the restraints of that time. Then this guy took me and there was no willingness from my side to get into this marriage. And then after that he disappeared from me, so all these things bother me a lot when I recall all these things happening.

My marriage is important in my life now. My husband is giving me assistance, food, clothing. People in the community respect me more now I am in a marriage again, instead of living as a single woman with my child. A good woman is a woman who is under control of her husband. She has respect for her husband and obeys her husband. She does not roam around from one place to another and she gets respect from the people in society and she has to do something like learn a job or doing a small business. So being in this marriage helps me to gain respect in the community.

I was unfortunate; I did not get the chance to get through DDR. Now I work on the farm. At this moment we are harvesting the rice and after that we start planting the vegetables, like hot pepper, the garden eggs ...”

Sally, 22 years old, taken by the AFRC

On my arrival in the village, the objective was to hear how female ex-combatants and ex-combatants' wives were doing in this community with regard to reintegration. Sally was one of the women who participated in this initial survey. In the first instance, because the interviews were done to evaluate the official DDR programme, interest was directed towards those stories that supported the suggestion that women who had become forcibly associated with the combatants had been excluded from the official DDR programme. On later visits I added to this the idea that I was interested in the reception back home of girls and young women who had been taken away. While I used the category 'ex-

combatants' and 'ex-combatants' wives' without any further specification, it turned out, during a review of my data, that I had gathered very diverse stories of women who were indeed married to ex-combatants.<sup>8</sup> Some, like Sally, had been captured by the AFRC and returned later to the village; some had married young local men who had then joined the CDF on behalf of ECOMOG; and others had been placed in a marriage arrangement with RUF soldiers when they occupied the village. The diversity, therefore, in the ways the village community was drawn into the war by different factions is also found in the way local women became involved through forced wartime marriage arrangements with men belonging to these groups.

If we look at the meaning of these marriage arrangements in times of war, we could say that the marriage between local CDF combatants and local girls could be considered as 'normal' marriages between young members of the village community that are not particularly defined by the context and dynamics of the war. The process of establishing new relations between village members through marriage remained to a certain extent unaltered during the war. The male part – and at times also the female part – of the marriage more or less happened to become involved in the war due to circumstances, just as the village as a whole became involved.

The experiences of young women, who had been taken away from the village with the AFRC combatants and were forced to live with them elsewhere, are similar to the experiences of the young women who ended up in Makeni, though they usually did not spend as many years away from home as the Mende women from the south. Some of the women from the village were captured with their (potential) husbands (remember that women tend to marry at a young age, especially in the rural areas) who were thus conscripted at the same time. In the aftermath, the difference that matters is that the women I spoke to in the village managed to return to their homes where they could rejoin their former husbands:

“I was born in this village. Before the war came here I was married and worked the farm with my husband. We were at the farm when the rebels attacked. I was pregnant. I was abducted together with my husband. They took my husband with them. I was beaten and left behind. Civilians took me to a nearby village where I was treated with native herbs. There I heard that ECOMOG captured the village. So I went back and ECOMOG treated my wounds. Later my husband escaped from the rebels and came back also. He was conscripted with ECOMOG volunteer youth. By a rebel attack later he was again captured. He was taken away while I was still here. He did not come back until after the peace. He was disarmed in Kabala and trained in carpentry. It had no influence on our relationship. I know my husband was forced. He did not do anything against the people living here.”  
Fofanah, 20 years old

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<sup>8</sup> This can be explained by the fact that the combatants have gone through DDR encampment together, irrespective of the faction to which they belonged. According to the ex-combatants themselves, the term 'ex-combatant' does not differentiate between these factions but predominantly refers to those who have been through official disarmament and demobilization.

Not all the wartime marriage arrangements that affected young women from the village were the consequence of being captured and abducted. During the time the RUF occupied the village, their combatants became involved with local women, as is the case with Fanta and Jacob:

“Before the war I was doing petty trading, selling different market items. I lived with my family. When the war came, we ran into the bush and we did not come out before it calmed down a little bit. But then during another attack I was taken away by the rebels with my family. They took us to Magburaka where we stayed with the rebels for nine months. I had to do housework for the man who took me. When UNAMSIL came to Makeni I was released and went to Kabala. The area around here was still held by the rebels. Nearby there was a road cut. The rebels made a huge pit in the ground and the cars driving between Makeni and Kabala could not cross there anymore. It was there where I met my husband. He was with the rebels that held that roadblock. There was no woman there to cook for them so they hold me there to do the work for them. I stayed there for seven months. Then my husband went to disarm in Kabala. I did not disarm because I had no gun to hand over. My parents came to take me to Makeni where they live and they asked me if this man has been taken good care of me. I told them that he has never beaten me or harassed me. So they said that if he wants me as his wife he should come to Makeni for the wedding. This is what he did after the DDR process. Leaving my husband was never an option for me. I never experienced any problems with the community when we came to live here because some of my other relatives live in this village.”

Fanta, aged 21

“Before the war I was a student living in Kono. I was born in Binkolo [a village near Makeni] When the rebels attacked Kono in 1991 everyone scattered and I managed to flee to Binkolo. By the time the government troops regained control over Kono I went back. During the second attack on Kono the rebels took me together with my sisters. I was forced to fight with the rebels. They beat us and I was forced to go into training. Participation meant survival. With the rebels we went to Makeni. The rebels had different groups. The fighting forces, the civil group and the groups of small children. I was in the civil group. We were not actual fighters but some of us would carry guns to protect the group. From Makeni I again managed to escape to Binkolo but was captured again when they attacked Binkolo. From then I was kept under strict supervision. They sent me to the roadblock nearby this village. I stayed there until I went to disarm in 2001 in Kabala. I took training in building and construction. I met my wife during the war. I saw her in the village and I liked her for my wife. I asked Mr R. who was my commander to assist me with this. So he said to my wife to go to the roadblock where I was, to greet me. That’s how we met and she stayed there with us until disarmament. I did not allow my wife to disarm because she was a woman. When disarmament came we were still afraid that the government would persecute us as we were identified as ex-combatants. I did not want that for my wife, so she went to her family until I came back from the disarmament.”

Jacob, aged 28, married to Fanta

The fact that these young women did not leave the village or the immediate area might have worked to their advantage regarding their acceptance following peace. The women who were interviewed did not report having been rejected by the community. If there were any problems for those considered ‘Junta wives’, they seem to have faded with time. But it is important to note here that the information coming from these interviews is by definition biased in favour of

reintegration. This is simply because the people I interviewed (both former combatants and their wives) in the village were those who had stayed there or who did not choose to go back to where they originated from; nor were they those who the community had rejected.

Though the chief's speaker, for example, stated in his account that no one who had been captured from the community by the rebels went missing or had not yet returned, based on the interviews I did in Makeni I have reason to believe that some of the young women did not opt to return to the village and now live in places such as Makeni. At least one woman told me that she had been married to a man from this particular village and that she had lived there on his family farm until she was captured. Her husband was killed during the raid and after the war she chose not to go back to this village because she did not want to be a burden on her family-in-law. She would then probably be at risk of being remarried to her late husband's brother. But at the same time, during the transition phase from war to peace, some women had found their way back to the village alone and were accepted by their relatives:

"I was captured in the first attack on the village. Before that I was doing farm work with my parents. When they took me they did not marry me. I was there to cook, to do the laundry. I was taking care of them. Sometimes they would go for food finding, they used to take us to give us the load to carry that to the base. They took me to Kono. That is where I stayed until the peace came. I was not given to nobody for marriage because I was too small a girl. After the ceasefire we travelled from Kono to Makeni. I told the captain that I wanted to travel to my parents and my family. He let me go then. He did not give me a paper to travel because he did not really agree for me to go to see my parents before disarmament. But I did not want to wait, so I went. I travelled by motorcar. I did not pay. I went to the car park and the captain asked for a lift for me, to take me for free. They could do that because by that time all the cars belonged to them.

My family was happy to see me, the whole family assembled and they said they would never allow me to move away again. I came back before the disarmament. All the other people in the community were happy to see me again. They never called me names like junta woman or something like that. At this moment I am married but my husband has not yet come to collect me. That will take some time. After I came back this man saw me and he went to my parents with kola and asked my parents to give me for marriage. He still has to bring the kola, the *lappa*, the *pojo*. We are now looking for the second stage. I am happy to be married now. I would want to learn a job, to learn skills, like tailoring."

As mentioned earlier, some former combatants were asked to leave the village and their wives, who they had met and married during the war, left with them. The fact that the combatants and their wives were in this particular village during the war also implies that for the family and village community there was no discussion about whether they actively participated in the war or not. Everyone witnessed what happened and who was responsible. (Compare this with the situation of the Mende women in Makeni, who had been away from their home community for years during the war and, as a result, the home community was ignorant about what they had experienced or how they might have participated

during that time.) Judgements were made in the village and it appears that these women preferred to leave with their combatant husbands than stay in the village without their ex-combatant husband and risk social exclusion (or risk being married off by their relatives to an elder as his third or fourth wife).

The women who were married to the combatants who were allowed to stay have become the wives of strangers but they are nevertheless still embedded in their home community and social relations were maintained. Many of these marriages have been formalized<sup>9</sup> afterwards and women said that their responsible relatives (parents, uncles) were more bothered by the question of whether the ex-combatant husband had treated the woman correctly as a proper husband should. Whether he was an ex-combatant or not seemed to be less relevant. In addition to this, it can be said that these women's kinship relations also worked to the benefit of the male combatants they were married to. One of the RUF commanders, Mr R who had arranged for Jacob and Fanta to get together, formalized his wartime marriage to one of the local women after he had returned from DDR encampment. And James even mentioned his marriage as a benchmark for his own reintegration in the village community:

“My current wife is from this village and we met after the war. She was like a gift from the community. The elders told me I should not leave and I would get a wife here before going. And they did it.”

What it all seems to boil down to is that during the years this village was directly affected by the war, clear distinctions between war and peace faded, whether between perpetrators and victims, or between rebels and civilians. Nevertheless, during the transition phase from war to peace, selections appear to have been made, either by individuals themselves or by the community, as to who would be given a chance to settle in the village. Economic as well as socio-cultural motives appear to have been at play but for those who were allowed to stay, a place has been created in the community through basic pre-war social and cultural structures. Reintegration in this village seems to come down to trying to smoothly assimilate strangers into familiar social structures and to getting ex-combatants and their wives back onto the familiar social path. The former combatants who have been allowed to stay are now mobilized for community labour and their wartime relations with local women are formalized as marriages. For the young women I interviewed, it has meant that those who were able to stay did not report any additional problems. They appear to have picked up their life story as it was meant to evolve without a major break. The war did cause suffering and as individuals they have had to find a way to cope with the memory

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<sup>9</sup> With formalized I refer to the cultural practice that the husband-to-be asks permission from the girl's parents to marry her. Part of the procedure is the extensive exchange of gifts over a long period of time. In normal circumstances, there is a period of time between the start of the marriage process and the actual moment when the husband comes to 'collect' his wife.

of the violence they faced. But as far as their social and cultural position is concerned, they are now at a point that is not too different from where they probably would have been irrespective of the war: married and working the family land. At least for some of the young women from this village, key social relations have either been maintained or re-established and so they have been able to reintegrate into the village community. Their social personhood has thus been restored.



## Coming back from the bush: Final analysis

### Introduction

The primary objective of this study was to gain insight into processes of post-conflict reintegration from an anthropological point of view. It has been approached from an individual's perspective but with the emphasis on his/her relationship with the social and cultural context. By deliberately choosing not to conduct this research from within an NGO working in the field of reintegration, I explicitly distanced myself from adopting a policy-oriented discourse on the issue of reintegration. The focus instead was on understanding the strategies employed by individuals who reintegrate into a community, with or without making use of an NGO or other policy interventions on offer. This study also rejected a single-dimensional focus on the violence used in times of war and the interest was instead on reintegration as a social process, which can be understood as an attempt to restore or cope with the long-term socio-cultural harm caused by wartime acts of violence.

Central to this study were the young women who had forcibly become affiliated with one of the fighting factions during the ten years of civil war in Sierra Leone. These women had not specifically taken on the role of female fighters during the war but had – at a young age, mainly as teenagers – been captured by combatants and subsequently forced to live as their wives. Qualitative data on their reintegration were collected during six months of fieldwork in 2003-2004, mainly in the provincial town of Makeni in Northern Sierra Leone which used as an RUF stronghold in the final years of the war and still harbours many former

combatants. In addition, but to a lesser extent, data were collected in a village along a main road to the north that was occupied during the war by the AFRC/RUF, ECOMOG and again the RUF respectively.

This study defines reintegration as a dynamic process that revolves around the (re-)establishment of relations between the individual and social networks, which contains – implicitly or explicitly – a negotiation of social and cultural identities. Two questions were central in the collection of data. First, I sought to understand how young women and girls who were formerly associated with the fighting forces could (re-)establish relations with the communities they now live in. The second was to analyze how the social identities of youth and female gender have affected the course of this reintegration, as seen from individual life experiences at a community level.

To analyze the empirical data, this study draws on theory regarding social organization, social identity and agency. The theoretical framework is based on qualitative variables relations, identities, experiences and meanings, which are additionally manifested at three levels: individual life experience; the community; and society as a whole (see Chapter Two). In this framework, reintegration comes about through the (re-)establishment of social relations that can be bonding and create the integration of individuals in groups, or bridging by creating linkages between groups and networks. In addition, I have argued that, for anthropological studies, recognition of someone's agency is the acknowledgment of one's individuality in relation to their cultural context. This approach rejects cultural and social determinism whereas it underscores the point that individuals cannot be reduced to being merely embodiments of social structures and cultural meaning. Interaction exists between the cultural context and individuals who internalize this context. Through agency, cultural context is continuously recreated by people who reproduce and transform social structures and cultural meanings in their relations with this particular context.

To recapitulate the two main research questions, I will begin by elaborating the influence of gender and youth as social identities on reintegration. This influence comes from the cultural discourse on these identities and the way they have or have not been linked with violent conflict and how they are or are not made the subject of negotiation in the aftermath. The next section reflects on reintegration as a social process as it emerged from the empirical data. The final section of this chapter and thesis poses some remaining questions and could be a starting point for further study. I also attempt to formulate possible implications for policy on social reintegration that emerge from this study.

## Youth, gender and the difference it makes.

It is generally acknowledged that large-scale youth participation in Sierra Leone's civil war is related to the social, political and economic exclusion of youth in the decades preceding the conflict. This notion is reflected in the post-conflict changes in the general discourse on youth in Sierra Leone. Demographic trends in combination with economic decline, the deterioration of civil services, together with a political one-party monopoly and the practice of patrimonial rule have created a 'majority in the position of a minority'. I have shown that 'youth' in Sierra Leone society does not as much refer to an absolute age group as it does to a social economic category. This category is one of primarily young men who are frustrated in their vertical mobility and are therefore not able to acquire the position within the community of an adult or elder with its corresponding assets and entitlements. The social identity of youth is, I argue, in fact gender-specific and male-biased. *Youth* are young *men* in a waiting room for adult social personhood who are unable to find opportunities to move on and up.

Many of the combatants were considered to be youth who, through their participation in violent conflict, have proven themselves able to agitate and rebel against society. Whether that is out of ideologically motivated choice, revenge or as the result of force makes no difference. Either way, their position has become politicized. In Sierra Leone, the exclusion of youth has been a potentially destructive process. Having been disarmed and demobilized, many of the former combatants shifted in social identity from being a rebel or combatant to being considered youth again but carrying the identity of an ex-combatant. I have argued that, with recent history in mind and the connection having been created between youth and ex-combatants, youth can exploit the fear in society and their own eagerness to participate in illegal activities to legitimize these activities by claiming that society does not give them any other opportunity. They can also constructively negotiate their position in the community and use the empowerment found in assertiveness regarding their problematic position in the community to appeal to elders to transform power relations. The example given of the Makeni motorbike drivers, many of whom are former combatants, shows that there is a thin line between the two options. While relations between youth and society (the elders) are still problematic and constrained by slow economic and social development in the post-conflict phase, they are under negotiation.

The mantra of 'the war *don don*', which encourages the people of Sierra Leone to refrain from recalling the war by publicly emphasizing the violence committed, in a way supports the reconsideration of the position of youth in the community. It is an appeal not to reject those who participated in the violence of the war. To a large extent the civil war in Sierra Leone became a conflict between generations. With youth embodying the continuation of community and

society, the future of Sierra Leone as a collective cannot be recaptured from the heritage and public memory of war without reaching out to build bridges with those youth who have been excluded, and encouraging them to reconsider their position in society and community. It is fundamentally impossible to escape from what has happened and to avoid those who were involved in the war because they are so much an integral part of society and the community. Both the notion of 'the war *don don*' and the negotiation of youth's position in society seem to point towards a collective responsibility to address one of the root causes of the violent conflict and to transform social and cultural structures accordingly.

To see (young) women's involvement in violent conflict as the result of women merely being passive victims of violence employed by men would be to undervalue them. Women *do* pick up guns. But having acknowledged this, we should also realize that in the war in Sierra Leone, though they were present, female fighters were in the minority. So the case for the women's position in violent conflict cannot solely be made by paying attention to those who explicitly challenge the idea of women being passive victims by having taken on the more masculine and militarized roles in war. In this thesis I have tried to come to a more sophisticated understanding of women's positions and roles in violent conflict that would cover the chasm between the perception of women as active fighters and that of women as passive victims. The situation of young women who got involved with fighting factions through forced marriage arrangements proved to be an illuminating case study. It showed that women were clearly and brutally victimized by these marriage arrangements as a protracted form of conflict-related gender-based violence with repeated sexual violence as an integral part of it. It also showed, however, that once caught up in these circumstances, women were able to find survival strategies in these same arrangements.

Through husband-wife positioning, women addressed certain responsibilities with their captors that entitled them to a limited degree of protection against additional violence and offered them access to the necessities for survival. This reciprocity was also at play in the social relations that women established among themselves while in the bush. Thus the paradox of women becoming agents in their own victimization was created. Secondly, the stories of these women have shown that women do not need to take on masculine roles to become a perpetrator in the eyes of the community. The female tasks and roles they carried out during the conflict (with the example of 'food-finding missions') can be perceived by those affected by them as active participation in or compliance with the violence. The differences in the way women were received in their home communities in the aftermath of the war are linked to these perceptions of their positions, which are not unambiguously defined but provide space for personal and local diversity.

To fully understand the women's challenges, opportunities and limitations regarding their reintegration after the war, we need to take into account the larger gender framework that constructs female social personhood. I have argued that womanhood in Sierra Leone is predominantly defined through their reproductive roles as wives and mothers. The forced marriages that characterize their position in the conflict are a form of gender-based violence not only because it was rooted in the unequal power relations between male combatants and female victims but also because it was directed to these very reproductive roles and therefore has affected women's social personhood. Many young women were taken into the bush when they were still in their (early) teens. Normally, being taken into the bush refers to the initiation of girls into the secret society, where they are prepared for their future roles as wives and mothers. For many of these young women 'being taken into the bush' has now acquired another meaning: they were captured, taken away from their communities and kin, they became wives and mothers and have now returned from the bush, often as single mothers or as unmarried adult women. They have, therefore, made the transition from girl to woman in very difficult circumstances while in the bush.

What then is the most relevant difference here between the discourse on youth and gender regarding the link with their position in the violent conflict in Sierra Leone and the way it has shaped reintegration in the aftermath? In its simplest form, we could argue that young men's social personhood is defined through their productive roles while young women's social personhood is constructed around their reproductive roles. Boys grow up to become men, girls grow up to become wives and mothers. Within this framework that constructs a gender-specific social personhood, a woman's social and cultural position is in effect inherently perceived as relational. Productive roles are public in that they come about in society's economic and political domain. Reproductive roles are private because they happen in highly personal relations of women with men. In the contemporary discourse on youth, their involvement (as in young men's participation) in the war in Sierra Leone has been linked to their problematic position in society, which is considered to be a public matter. Their involvement is therefore inherently political. Women's involvement in the war has predominantly been perceived as relational to that of men. While the position of youth is acknowledged as a condition that has predisposed this particular group in the society to conscription, women's involvement is still seen as a result of the war itself. In public discourse in Sierra Leone it is not linked to any framework outside the context of violent conflict that defines gender relations but remains locked in this particular context of violent conflict. And though women can be addressed as an associate in the violence through their feminine tasks and roles, they are rarely addressed as the initiators or autonomous contributors.

Youth involvement, which is explicitly and publicly identified as a probable root cause of the war or at least as having contributed to the prolongation and spread of the conflict, is thus more likely to become an incentive for social transformation in the aftermath than young women's involvement which is perceived as having been derived from men's actions. While this opens up space for young men to negotiate and alter their position in the community in the course of their reintegration, young women are confronted with a harmed social personhood. I would further argue that because women's experiences in conflict are merely understood within the context of conflict, this obscures gender relations and ideas on women's roles that subsequently limit their options to escape the violence and its consequences once the conflict ended. The underlying notions on gender that define this womanhood remained unaltered during the war. To survive, women are trying in their reintegration to restore their damaged personhood. And though in practice adjustments can and will be made, in the process of restoration the existing notions of gender-specific personhood and gender relations are more likely to be reproduced than to be transformed.

The implications this has for women are most clearly visible in the way they perceive their forced wartime marriage arrangements in the aftermath of the conflict. Women who had either left their 'bush husband' when peace came or those who were left by ex-combatants were often highly concerned with their status as an unmarried adult woman (or single mother). For them, this was what visibly distinguished them from other women in the community and also placed them in a less privileged position within the community. Although forced marriages were a controversial aspect of the war, its widespread practice has not changed the importance of marriage as a key social institution in Sierra Leone society. Nor has the importance assigned to the marital status of women changed significantly. Hence, the damage done to women's socio-cultural personhood by forced marriage arrangements can only be restored through a new marriage. Chapter Six explained how this keeps women in a vulnerable position in the community in relation to men. It also explains why some women have decided to stay with their wartime husbands, although the meaning of this marriage has altered and sometimes been formalized by the family. I have argued that women are actors who reproduce the cultural framework of gender notions based on a hegemonic understanding of these relations. And, as mentioned earlier, in doing so, marriage for many of these women appears to be a tool for reintegration and at the same time becomes an important indicator of successful reintegration.

### Reintegration revisited

The way women have reintegrated and (re-)established social relations in the communities they now live in, has been extensively described and analyzed in

the previous chapters. The question now is what all these individual stories collected in Makeni and in the village, which are presented in their social-geographical context, might tell us about reintegration itself. I argue that although one can distinguish central issues in reintegration as a socio-cultural process in the (re-)establishment of relations, in the end it is both highly diversified and highly contextual. As obvious as this may sound, reintegration is still too often approached as homogeneous (as in the same for all ex-combatants or all women) or as individual (parallel to but not in interaction with the context).

The central issue in shaping the course of individual reintegration of women in Sierra Leone appears to be whether relations with immediate kin and her original community were maintained or could be (re-)established. This involved the reconsideration of wartime marriages and access to assets and entitlements through social relations, which can bring reciprocity. Reintegration is about individuals reintegrating themselves in a process shaped by one's agency which induces diversity. Individual women, who might share the same experiences, such as having been captured and taken into the bush, attach different meanings to these experiences. Some women have decided that their wartime marriage was indeed exclusively a 'war thing' and they left their captors once peace arrived. Others remained in their marriages because they felt some sort of responsibility to their husband and any children who may have been born during the war. Specific detailed circumstances in the different personal histories have shown significant diversity. When comparing the stories of Mende women in Makeni and the women in the village, one can for example conclude that it made a difference whether women were taken away from their communities and for how long. The further and longer away, the deeper the break with kinship and community has become and the more difficult it is to restore (or the longer and more difficult it has become to 'come back from the bush'). I have shown that the decision as to whether to go back to family or not is not solely dependent on actual tangible situations but is fed by subjective expectations and the personal feelings of the women involved, which influenced the way they fulfilled role expectations. Women have at times justified their reluctance to go back home with the view that they could be better daughters to their families by not returning empty-handed or as someone who has prospered from the war.

The community and society (the two spheres of interest in this study) have both influenced individual day-to-day reintegration, giving it its contextual character. Society's influence is reflected in the way that the national political historical background of the conflict and the general political and cultural discourse on youth and gender shape options for reintegration, as was argued in the previous section. The community and society as contexts are, however, not fixed and non-responsive entities as objects for reintegration. The change in discourse

on youth resembles the interaction between context and those who reproduce and transform it. Context responds to those by whom it is created, so that reintegration is interactive. It is inherently a cultural process and with that it carries the same essential characteristic, that of a mutually influential relationship between individual and cultural context.

Data collected in Makeni and in the village reveal the influence of context at a community level. As a setting for reintegration, the village is characterized structurally as a community in which category identities such as youth, ex-combatants and elders are to a large extent personalized. One could say that people here are 'known' publicly. During the war, bridging relations between certain groups of combatants and civilians were at first forcibly established but in its aftermath such relations have been affirmed in community labour and the formalization of wartime marriage arrangements with young women from the village. This process relies on local and communal perceptions of combatants and their wives. In this village, the community has responded explicitly by asking certain ex-combatants and their wives to leave. But at the same time, for those who were allowed to stay, traditional structures have been opened up and women's and ex-combatants' reintegration was able to follow existing paths, making it an organic, integrated and community-based process.

In a town like Makeni it is less clear how the community as a whole is responding to reintegration. The process has taken a more individual (but not isolated) and fragmented course. As a former RUF stronghold, Makeni attracted many ex-combatants and their wives. The anonymity and urban promises of economic development have added others who forcibly (ex-combatants who were asked to leave elsewhere) or voluntarily are trying to make a future here. So whereas the village community could select those who they allowed to reintegrate, a town like Makeni has had to absorb anyone who wants to settle there. This creates a population with a range of very different personal histories. People in such a context appeared to a greater extent to be perceived in their category identities that are in this context less personalized and have become linked with the history of violent conflict. Examples of this are the perception of the Makeni motorbike drivers as 'rebel drivers' or Mende women as the mere embodiment of the war which arrived in town through Mende country. Being strangers in town and without access to kinship networks, women have to find new ways to reintegrate in such a context. I have argued that bonding relations that came about under force while in the bush have been transformed into social relations of marriage and friendship in which reciprocity has been found. We have also seen that, for example, a church community can offer both bonding (among those of the same faith) and bridging relations (between strangers and civilians) for some women. This could be related to the church providing not only a community in a



structural sense but also a faith that offers a shared perception of individual and communal experiences.

Women who are on their way back from the bush follow either existing paths or try to find new ways. In both approaches, the direction the road takes is shaped in relation to its environment, and by building roads the scenery changes. Reintegration's diversity is intensified by being contextual.

### Where to go from here

With this study I hope to have shown how qualitative anthropological research can contribute to our understanding of reintegration as a social and cultural process in all its diversity. Its comparative and descriptive character illuminates relevant issues for individuals who reintegrate in relation to their social and cultural context and the way they occur in day-to-day life. Though this study was not designed to be an example of applied anthropological research, and notwithstanding the fact that scholarly knowledge has value in its own right, to finalize this study I will attempt to think through what my ideas on reintegration as a highly diversified and contextual process of the (re-)establishment of social relations might imply for reintegration policy and programming.

Firstly I would recommend the development of a reintegration policy based on the notion that people reintegrate in interaction with their context. This is the opposite of what often happens in practice – that policy and reintegration programmes are established to reintegrate people. Reintegration is, in my opinion, not something that can be externally imposed on people. The best one can do is to maximize the options that help people to find new ways. The basis of any such policy should be to promote choice within a wide variety of reintegration programme options, recognizing individuals' agency and diversity in the relevant cultural context. Programmes would in that case not be made for countries as a whole but would be adjusted to the local contextual needs and possibilities.

Secondly I observed that policy and programming is often very explicitly linked to certain target groups. However, this often carries connotations for potential users that are unacceptable. For many women, applying for a programme specifically and explicitly designed for ex-combatants (wives) was problematic because they did not identify themselves as (the wife of) an ex-combatant. But had it been designed as a programme simply for women, it might well have fulfilled the same needs. Making and implementing programmes for specific war-related categories emphasizes bonding relations while for better development bridging relations might be more useful. It would be better to develop a programme for youth rather than for ex-combatants, and to offer programmes that benefit women in a certain community rather than offer a programme exclusively for former captives.

I mentioned in the opening chapter that interest in issues concerning youth combatants and young women's situations in conflict and the way they proceed in the aftermath comes from professionals in the fields of psychology/psychiatry and legal aid and human rights. The former are predominantly interested in the way individuals cope with the experience of violence and the latter focus on the question of how to ensure justice and promote reconciliation. For this study I wanted to add a socio-cultural perspective but, having done so, I believe that further study should explore the intersection between these fields of expertise. How does grassroots reintegration influence the way one copes with the experience of war? Does the notion of 'the war *don don*' help individuals to rebuild their lives and move on or does it interfere with personal coping and psychological recovery? How are the proceedings of the Sierra Leone court and TRC influencing grassroots reintegration? Do these procedures actually bring people together in the communities or do they merely emphasize problematic divisions? Some people in Sierra Leone are complaining that too much money is being spent on only a few individuals while many are suffering from inflation and other problems of underdevelopment. There are serious questions to ask about the way the international global discourse on justice and human rights relates to grassroots reintegration and reconciliation in Sierra Leone.

In the week that I was writing this final chapter, a long time after I had returned from the field, I was pleasantly surprised by a phone call from one of the main participants in Makeni. The sad news she had was that one of the other girls had passed away a year ago. She herself had left town to settle in Freetown where she is now attending classes at nursing school. She is with her mother's sister and her children, who she gave birth to during the war, are now seven and eleven years old and are both going to school. She said she was engaged to be married and was doing fine.

During the war, women started wearing pants underneath their *lappas* so they would not end up naked if they had to run away into the bush, and they continue to do so. Though they still look traditionally dressed, underneath the history of war remains and things have inevitably changed. The most important understanding gained during this study is that, for these women, reintegration means not becoming naked on their way back from the bush.



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