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Citation

Ellis, S. (1995). Liberia 1989-1994: a study of ethnic and spiritual violence. *African Affairs: The Journal Of The Royal African Society*, 94(375), 165-197. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/9097>

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African Affairs, Vol. 94, No. 375. (Apr., 1995), pp. 165-197.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0001-9909%28199504%2994%3A375%3C165%3AL1ASOE%3E2.0.CO%3B2-I>

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LIBERIA 1989–1994 A STUDY OF ETHNIC AND SPIRITUAL VIOLENCE

STEPHEN ELLIS

MANY PEOPLE HAVE NOTED that the war in Liberia which began in 1989 has been peculiarly horrible.¹ Even professional soldiers from other countries taking part in peace-keeping duties, who may be assumed to be hardened to acts of violence, recoil before the savagery of the Liberian conflict in which cannibalism, random violence and tortures of every sort imaginable have become commonplace. During the earliest phase of the war Western journalists were particularly fascinated by the images which the conflict produced, particularly of young fighters dressed in women's clothing, wearing bizarre accoutrements, such as shower-caps or women's wigs, human bones, and the like. The fact that many fighters were children added another grotesque ingredient. One British newspaper carried a photograph of uniformed peace-keeping soldiers trying to attract their enemy out of the bush by offering them toys and sweets, while another had a picture of a Liberian militiaman looting a large teddy-bear from a Monrovia shop.²

A Ghanaian businessman who had lived in Liberia for over 30 years and who was caught up in the violence noted what he called the 'animal' character of the war, and wrote that of all the wars he had heard or read about,

In all frankness the Liberian civil and guerrilla war topped and surpassed [all other wars] in form and character, in intensity, in depravity, in savagery, in barbarism and in horror . . .

As far as the men behind the war were concerned, one should be forewarned that the world could be breeding a new species of mankind with no contrite hearts, with no compassion, with no regard for law and order and whose ambitions in life have no bounds at the peril of others.

It has started off in Liberia, but one should beware that there are many more Charles Taylors and Prince Johnsons, the new species of human kind, around not only in Liberia, but in other places, especially in Africa today.³

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1. Much of the information in this article was acquired during a field trip to Monrovia and Buchanan, Liberia, in July 1994. The article was drafted in August 1994 and takes no account of developments after that date. I am grateful to Fred van der Kraaij for his encouragement and for supplying literature from his own collection and to Binaifer Nowrojee and Jeanette Carter for their insights into Liberian politics, as well as to others who must remain anonymous.

2. Paul Richards, 'Rebellion in Liberia and Sierra Leone: a Crisis of Youth?', in O. W. Furley (ed.), *Conflict in Africa* (Tauris Academic Studies, London, 1995).

3. Leonard Brehun, *Liberia: the War of Horror* (Adwinsa Publications, Accra, 1991), p. 113.

The present article examines how Liberia descended into conflict and why it took such violent form, suggesting that the causes are not only political, but may also be explained in religious or spiritual terms.

The NPFL invasion and the civil war

In some respects Liberia's agony may be traced to 12 April 1980, when a group of lower-ranks soldiers led by Master Sergeant Samuel Doe seized power in a coup. But the civil war itself may be dated more precisely to 24 December 1989, when 100 or more fighters claiming allegiance to the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) led by Charles Taylor, an organization hitherto unknown to the outside world and even to most people in Monrovia, advanced over the border from Côte d'Ivoire to attack the town of Butuo in Nimba County.

Faced with this invasion, President Doe, who had civilianized his regime in the manner of an Eyadéma or a Mobutu, at first appeared confident that his armed forces could contain the threat.⁴ Remaining in the seat of government, the Executive Mansion in Monrovia, Doe despatched to Nimba County units of the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), the government army whose senior ranks were dominated by members of Doe's own Krahn ethnic group. Arriving in Nimba County, the AFL carried out collective punishments against local villagers, killing, looting and raping, singling out people from the Gio and Mano ethnic groups whom they regarded as supporters of the invasion by reason of their ethnic identity alone.⁵ There was already a history of enmity between Doe's own Krahn, on the one hand, and the Gio and Mano on the other, resulting from the politics of the military after the 1980 coup, which had already led to bloodshed in 1985. A report written by a US human rights' monitoring group in 1986 made clear how extensive was the hatred of the Krahn generally even by the mid-1980s, and predicted, all too accurately, 'the prospect of massive reprisals against the Krahn if President Doe is violently removed from power'.⁶ This was exactly what was to happen after 1989, as Gio and Mano people from Nimba County especially sought revenge, while Krahn soldiers fought to maintain their power.

While Doe seemed to calculate that the best strategy was to sit tight and tempt the rebels into a pitched battle, during the early part of 1990 the

4. For a short summary, see e.g. Yekutieli Gershoni, 'From ECOWAS to ECOMOG. The Liberian Crisis and the Struggle for Political Hegemony in West Africa', *Liberian Studies Journal*, XVIII, i (1993), pp. 21-43. Much of the following material was also widely reported in the international press in 1990. Leading sources include the *Liberia Newsletter* published by the Liberia Working Group in Bremen, Germany; the *Liberian Studies Journal*, which includes useful reprints of primary sources; and *West Africa* magazine. I am also grateful to Kofi Woods for making available back-numbers of Liberian newspapers.

5. Africa Watch, *Liberia: Flight from Terror: Testimony of Abuses in Nimba County* (New York, 1990). Reprinted in the *Liberian Studies Journal*, XV, i (1990), pp. 142-161.

6. Lawyers' Committee on Human Rights, *Liberia: a Promise Betrayed* (New York, 1986), p. 23.

NPFL made rapid progress. The core group of NPFL guerrillas, Libyan-trained and supplemented by mercenaries from Burkina Faso supplied by President Blaise Compaore and by internationalist revolutionaries from Gambia and Sierra Leone, distributed arms to the Gio and Mano villagers of Nimba County, knowing that the weapons would be used indiscriminately to attack Krahn and anyone suspected of complicity with the Doe government. So hated was the Doe government that the NPFL attack was welcomed by many Liberians and the violence rapidly spread out of control. Armed bands claiming allegiance to the NPFL launched pogroms against people suspected of being Krahn or Mandingo, another ethnic group regarded as supporters of the Doe government. NPFL war-bands moved into Grand Gedeh County, the Krahn heartland, committing atrocities against people guilty of speaking the same mother-tongue as Doe. By mid-1990, NPFL bands were investing the outskirts of Monrovia. Doe responded by distributing weapons to Krahn and Mandingo civilians and his soldiers killed hundreds of Gio and Mano civilians in the capital, as well as some leading political opponents.⁷ Liberia's capital city became the site of a protracted battle, with President Doe and his AFL soldiers holding the Executive Mansion, the seat of government, and areas of the city surrounding it, with the Atlantic Ocean at their backs, while the NPFL held other parts of the city. By the end of the year, perhaps two-thirds of Liberia's 125,000 Krahn had fled the country and tens of thousands of people, not only Krahn, had been killed.⁸ Altogether, as many as 700,000 people may have fled the country.⁹

In July 1990, several hundred of Taylor's fighters broke away to form a third group, the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL), which also occupied a part of Monrovia. The INPFL was led by the psychopathic Prince Yormie Johnson, himself a Nimba County man, a former soldier in Doe's army who had fled abroad in the early 1980s and had subsequently received military training in Libya. Before his split from the NPFL, Johnson had been the NPFL training officer and he took with him the core of experienced NPFL fighters, notably the Libyan-trained Special Commandos, leaving Taylor with few trained men but only thousands of civilians, many from Nimba, who had acquired weapons and joined the NPFL on its progress south. Monrovia was effectively divided into three zones, each infested by a separate group. By most accounts daily life was least affected in Johnson's zone. Although Johnson himself was given to acts of extreme violence, particularly when he was drunk, his

7. Africa Watch, *Flight from Terror*.

8. Africa Watch, *Liberia: a Human Rights Disaster*, (New York, 1990), p. 1. Reprinted in *Liberian Studies Journal*, XVI, 1 (1991), pp. 129-155.

9. Amnesty International, *Annual Report 1991* (London, 1991), entry on Liberia.

men were less desperate than Doe's armed forces, who felt themselves trapped, and more disciplined than Taylor's freebooters.

There were numerous calls for international intervention to stabilize the situation, and there was in particular a general expectation that the USA would intervene in what had long amounted to an unofficial US colony. In June 1990, US warships with 2,000 marines on board anchored off the coast but contented themselves with evacuating US nationals. They went no further to restore order, President George Bush declaring that Liberia was not worth the life of a single US marine. There seems to be widespread agreement that most Liberians, brought up in the shadow of Uncle Sam, would have accepted a US intervention. But at a crucial point, in August 1990, something happened elsewhere in the world which took up all America's attention and definitely ruled out any possibility of US intervention in Liberia: Iraq invaded Kuwait.

Other countries in West Africa were alarmed by the Liberian situation. President Ibrahim Babangida of Nigeria was a personal friend of Samuel Doe. Moreover the Nigerian military government regarded itself as a regional hegemon and, in the first months of the post-Cold War era, saw the Liberian emergency as offering a chance, or a duty, to intervene elsewhere in West Africa and to legitimate itself as a regional peace-keeper, a sub-contractor to the United Nations. There was probably also an element of Nigerian rivalry with francophone West Africa, and particularly with the leading country of the French-speaking bloc, Côte d'Ivoire. The francophone world had recognized the Biafra breakaway in the 1960s, and French policy traditionally had been to regard the existence of the English-speaking countries of West Africa as a threat to the cohesion of the francophone bloc. Since Taylor's NPFL was known to have the backing of Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso and others, Nigeria felt itself challenged. Some sources have also alleged a degree of personal interest in Babangida's decision to intervene in Liberia, suggesting that he had business interests there, but this remains unproven.

Some other countries in the region felt themselves threatened by the NPFL invasion for other reasons. The NPFL was receiving backing from Libya, which had a history of political and military adventurism in West Africa. During visits to Libya probably between 1986 and 1989, Taylor had met a number of Gambians who had taken part in a coup attempt in Banjul in 1981 with Libyan backing and had taken refuge in Libya afterwards. They included Kukoi Samba Sanyang, known to the NPFL as 'Dr Manning'.¹⁰ At the beginning of operations in 1989, Dr Manning

10. On Sanyang's role in the 1981 coup attempt, Arnold Hughes, 'The Attempted Gambian Coup d'Etat of 27 July 1981', in *idem* (ed.), *The Gambia: Studies in Society and Politics* (African Studies Series No. 3, Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham 1991), pp. 92-106. This also documents the relationship between Liberian and Gambian radicals before 1980, notably on p. 96.

was officially listed as Taylor's vice-president, although he soon abandoned the NPFL after being edged out of the leadership by Taylor, and retired to manage a bar in Ouagadougou.¹¹ Since various Sierra Leonean and some Ghanaian adventurers had also made common cause with Taylor, it was feared by governments throughout the region that a Taylor victory in Liberia would lead to further insurrections or coups elsewhere in the English-speaking countries of West Africa.¹²

Under President Babangida's leadership, and with the encouragement of the USA, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) hastily dusted off the Non-Aggression treaty which its members had signed in 1978 and assembled a peace-keeping force whose main component was Nigerian. This intervention force, known as the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), arrived in Monrovia on 24 August 1990. From the outset, Taylor opposed ECOMOG, and most particularly the Nigerian element, seeing it as the obstacle between himself and the presidency, which by mid-1990 was within his sight. NPFL forces attacked ECOMOG troops even as they disembarked at the Free Port in Monrovia in August 1990.¹³

On 9 September 1990, President Doe was captured by the INPFL of Prince Johnson, one of the three factions disputing control of Monrovia, when he ventured outside his Executive Mansion for a meeting with ECOMOG. The fact that he was captured while on a negotiation mission, and that it was by Johnson rather than by the NPFL, generated all manner of conspiracy theories. Already seriously wounded during his capture, President Doe was mutilated, tortured and killed by the INPFL in the presence of Prince Johnson in the early hours of the next morning. The ordeal was recorded on video, copies of which Johnson took pleasure in showing to visitors to his headquarters. Copies went on general sale in cities throughout West Africa, and extracts were even broadcast on British television news.

After Doe's murder, the NPFL consolidated its control of the whole of Liberia outside Monrovia while the city itself remained under the control of ECOMOG, with a small area held by Johnson's INPFL. The situation stabilized somewhat. The ECOWAS states agreed to install an Interim Government of National Unity (IGNU) headed by Professor Amos Sawyer, an academic and political activist who had been one of Doe's main political opponents. The IGNU government which was sworn in on 22

11. Author's interview, Monrovia, 24 July 1994; Barki Ghanaboma, '“Enfant terrible” Explains', *West Africa*, 4–10 May 1992, p. 756.

12. This fear was actually realised in an unexpected way: two coups, in Sierra Leone (1992) and Gambia (1994), have been successfully carried out by troops who had returned from peace-keeping service in Liberia.

13. E. John Inegbedion, 'ECOMOG in Comparative Perspective', in Timothy G. Shaw and Julius Emeka Okolo (eds.), *The Political Economy of Foreign Policy in ECOWAS* (Macmillan, London, 1994), pp. 218–244.

November 1990 was not recognized by the NPFL, which formed its own administration of the areas of Liberia under its control, with headquarters in Gbarnga, Bong County, although IGNU received backing from many West African states.

Subsequent developments further complicated the situation. An organization formed in 1991 by Liberians who had taken refuge in Sierra Leone, known as the United Liberation Movement for Democracy (ULIMO), began to participate in armed combat inside Liberia with the backing of the Freetown government. ULIMO included a number of former soldiers of the AFL, as well as other elements, mostly Krahn and Mandingo civilians who had taken up arms in opposition to the NPFL.¹⁴ ULIMO was formed from three existing components. One was a Muslim organization founded in February 1990, the Movement for the Redemption of Liberian Muslims, based in Guinea and led by Alhaji G. V. Kromah, a former Assistant Minister for Information who was playing both with a religious and an ethnic definition of the Mandingo constituency he was cultivating. The second was the Liberian United Defence Force led by General Albert Karpheh, a Krahn, a former Doe minister who had most recently served as ambassador to Sierra Leone. The third element was the Liberian Peace Council established by another former Doe minister, Dr George Boley, also a Krahn. (Boley was shortly to leave the ULIMO leadership). Although ULIMO was officially founded in Conakry on 29 May 1991, it had in fact been born in Freetown some two months earlier as a result of contacts between a group of ex-Doe ministers and the government of Sierra Leone.¹⁵ The latter wanted the support of the Liberian exiles to fight against the NPFL after Charles Taylor in March 1991 had launched a campaign to destabilize Sierra Leone under the nominal leadership of Foday Sankoh and a group called the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), Taylor's aim being to punish the Sierra Leonean government for its participation in ECOMOG.

On 15 October 1992, the NPFL, which had previously been taking part in international peace negotiations, launched a surprise attack on the centre of Monrovia which was defended by ECOMOG with assistance from forces which acknowledged political allegiance to President Sawyer and his IGNU. In its efforts to mobilize all available means to defend the city, ECOMOG rearmed the Armed Forces of Liberia, the remnants of Doe's old army which had been eclipsed since 1990 but which was now relegitimated as the armed forces of an internationally recognized government, the IGNU. The attack, known as Operation Octopus, led to fierce

14. On this period, see Africa Watch, *Liberia: the Cycle of Abuse. Human Rights Violations since the November Ceasefire* (New York, 21 November 1991). Reprinted in *Liberian Studies Journal*, XVII, i (1992), pp. 128-164.

15. James Butty, 'What Does ULIMO Want?', *West Africa*, 7-13 September 1992, p. 1519.

fighting in Monrovia. There was widespread murder, rape and looting by the NPFL as it advanced towards the heart of the city. The NPFL also abducted thousands of people whom it transported to its own headquarters at Gbarnga in the interior of Liberia. During this second battle for Monrovia ECOMOG took a major part in the conflict for the first time. Outraged by Charles Taylor's bad faith in launching Operation Octopus, ECOMOG passed onto the offensive, using aircraft to bombard NPFL positions, which led to civilian deaths.¹⁶ Although ECOMOG was not able to defeat the NPFL decisively, it and its allies did succeed in defending Monrovia, which remained under the formal control of the Interim Government. The INPFL of Prince Johnson collapsed. Some former INPFL members rejoined the NPFL. Johnson himself retired to live abroad. By early 1993 Liberia was in effect partitioned into two zones. Monrovia and its outskirts were controlled by ECOMOG, with formal sovereignty being held by President Sawyer's government, and the other nine-tenths or so of the country, referred to by Charles Taylor as 'Greater Liberia', controlled by the NPFL from its capital at Gbarnga. ULIMO was launching attacks against the NPFL from areas close to the Sierra Leonean border, as well as doing battle with Taylor's surrogates, the RUF, inside Sierra Leone itself. Taylor cultivated all the attributes of a sovereign government, with ministries and even his own currency. A private bank opened its doors for business in Gbarnga, and foreign diplomats including representatives of the French and German governments visited Taylor in his headquarters, in effect treating him as a head of state. Few diplomats had much enthusiasm for Taylor, although some were captivated by his undoubted suavity and intelligence. Others reasoned that since he was the *de facto* ruler of most of Liberia, there was every reason to maintain relations with him. Taylor encouraged foreign companies to do business as usual in territories which he controlled, exporting iron ore, diamonds and timber from his zone in return for taxes which were paid to him personally.¹⁷

On 6 June 1993, as negotiations were in progress towards agreeing a peace plan and a ceasefire, the attention of the world media was drawn to a massacre of some 600 displaced people, mostly women and children, at a camp in the Firestone Plantation, the world's biggest rubber plantation which had been disputed between the NPFL and the AFL, still legally the armed forces of the government. An inquiry instituted by the Secretary General of the United Nations, and conducted by Amos Wako, attorney general of Kenya, concluded that the Harbel massacre had been carried out

16. Africa Watch, *Liberia: Waging War to Keep the Peace. The ECOMOG Intervention and Human Rights* (New York, June 1993). Reprinted in *Liberian Studies Journal*, XVIII, ii (1993), pp. 278-318.

17. William Reno, 'Foreign Firms and the Financing of Charles Taylor's NPFL', *Liberian Studies Journal*, XVIII, ii (1993), pp. 175-87, supplemented by author's interviews.

by the AFL, although other reports concluded that it was the work of the NPFL, which appeared to many observers to be more likely.¹⁸ It was probably ordered by Taylor as a means of gaining world attention and increasing the pressure for a ceasefire, which he now considered in his interest. If so, the Harbel massacre had the desired effect.

On 25 July 1993, the three main Liberian armed factions, under pressure from the international community, signed a ceasefire in Cotonou, Benin. These three—the NPFL, the AFL, and ULIMO—agreed to cease hostilities and to maintain the positions which they occupied. In the meantime, provision was made for the establishment of a transitional government, which was to contain representatives of ULIMO and the NPFL as well as others nominated by the outgoing Government of National Unity. This was accompanied by a timetable for elections and a return to full democratic government. ECOMOG was to remain in place as a monitoring force. The Secretary General of the UN established a United Nations Observer Mission (UNOMIL) after complaints by the NPFL that ECOMOG was not an impartial force, since it had taken an active role in fighting against the NPFL in the past. UNOMIL's task was to report to the UN Secretary General on the peace process. The Cotonou Accord provided for the disarmament of the three factions which were its signatories to proceed concomitant with the establishment of the transitional government. They were to disarm to ECOMOG.

After some delay due to disputes about its precise composition, the Transitional Government was finally formed on 7 March 1994, under a five-person Council of State. The latter was an unwieldy and probably unworkable construction included in the peace process at Taylor's insistence. Some 3,500 fighters were reported to have delivered their arms to ECOMOG by early July 1994, but there were clear signs that the peace process was in jeopardy. One of the factions, ULIMO, split along roughly ethnic lines after months of tension between rival groups. The immediate cause of the fighting which broke out between the two factions in March 1994 was a dispute about nominations to positions in the transitional government. Both ULIMO factions remained opposed to the NPFL. Moreover a new armed group, Boley's Liberian Peace Council (LPC), which had existed for two years but previously been dormant, appeared on the ground in late 1993 and began to attack areas under NPFL control in the south-east of the country. It appeared that the LPC

18. *The Harbel Area Massacres (at Carter Camp and Camp A)*. *White Paper of the Interim Government of National Unity on the Matter* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Monrovia, 21 June 1993); 'Report of the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) on June 6, 1993, Carter Camp Massacre in Harbel', unpublished document, Ministry of Defence, Monrovia; 'The Carter Camp Massacre: Results of an Investigation by the Panel of Inquiry . . .', unpublished, United Nations, New York, 10 September 1993; 'AFL Reaction to the Wako Commission Report', submitted to the UN Secretary General by Lieut-Gen. J. Hezekiah Bowen, AFL Chief of Staff, unpublished.

was resurrected by the Krahn faction within the AFL as a proxy force. The aim was for the Krahn warlords within the AFL to use the LPC to wage war while themselves being seen to observe the letter of the Cotonou Accord. In May 1994 the AFL's own Provost Marshall, Lieutenant-Colonel Amos Garlo, was killed while fighting with the LPC.¹⁹ ECOMOG maintained that it could not take any action in regard to the LPC since the latter was not a signatory to the Cotonou Accord, and that it therefore fell outside the ECOMOG mandate. It seemed that ECOMOG, or at least certain elements within it, far from remaining neutral, was using various Krahn-dominated groups, including the AFL, the LPC and ULIMO, as foot-soldiers in the fight against the NPFL.²⁰ There were reports of other armed groups springing up in different parts of the country, such as the Lofa Defence Force in Lofa County, and the Citizens' Defence Force in Maryland. Some sources believed that these were in whole or in part the creations of various parties to the Cotonou Peace Accord, designed to carry on the war by proxy. By mid-1994 fighting between rival factions was growing steadily more serious. The future both of ECOMOG and UNOMIL was also in doubt as it became evident that elections could not be held by the specified date of 7 September 1994.

It was possible to perceive certain trends in the progress of political or military events. In the first place it was apparent that the Cotonou Peace Accord had not brought peace but, on the contrary, had led to a multiplication of militias, which themselves were increasingly ethnically based. The faction which gained most from the events of 1993-4 was the Krahn fighters, the remnants of Doe's supporters, who by July 1994 controlled the general staff of the AFL, the LPC and one faction of ULIMO. It did not escape attention that the AFL's Krahn officers, who were said to include eight out of the army's nine generals, seemed to enjoy the sympathy of some of the leading officers of ECOMOG, particularly from the dominant Nigerian contingent. ECOMOG already controlled the ports of Monrovia, where the AFL had its headquarters, and Buchanan. In under a year of fighting following the Cotonou Peace Accord, largely through the medium of the LPC, the Krahn warlords of the AFL, the LPC, and the Johnson faction of ULIMO, had taken control of Liberia's remaining ports with the exception of Harper, thus taking a strategic position for future negotiations. It seemed plausible that the Nigerian army, which could not stay in Liberia indefinitely, was in effect cultivating the Krahn warlords as local collaborators and was not averse to

19. 'Top AFL Man killed in LPC Area', *The Inquirer*, 25 May 1994.

20. The present author concluded on the basis of evidence available that the LPC was in fact a proxy force under the control of Krahn officers of the AFL. cf. Janet Fleischman, 'An Uncivil War', *Africa Report*, May-June 1993, pp. 56-9.

seeing them take control of the country's ports. A year of peace had cost Taylor dear, since he had lost control of a large swathe of territory. He had been unable to make the transition he sought from warlord to politician.

Most estimates put the number of casualties of the period 1989–1994 at a minimum of 150,000 dead, compared with a pre-war population of only some two and a half million,²¹ meaning that as many as one Liberian out of every seventeen may have been a victim of the war, quite apart from those who were injured or suffered other trauma or material loss or the hundreds of thousands who fled abroad. Many survivors sought refuge in Monrovia, where ECOMOG guaranteed security and international relief organizations offered aid.

Despite the warnings made in the 1980s about the level of ethnic hatred which had built up during Doe's tenure of power, it appears that no one—neither President Doe, nor Charles Taylor, nor the latter's main sponsor, President Félix Houphouët-Boigny of Côte d'Ivoire—expected that the December 1989 attack would lead to the collapse of the Liberian state and a descent into anarchy. They seem to have expected that the invasion would lead to a coup of a relatively familiar type. Liberia, after all, is the oldest state in West Africa and one of only two African countries never to have been formally colonized. Certainly until the 1980s, it had been prosperous by African standards, it had the protection of the USA, it used US dollars as its currency, and Liberians were generally regarded throughout the region as rather docile people.

In the following section, we will attempt to examine some of the fault-lines which opened up in the collapse of the state's monopoly of violence after 1989, before going on to trace some of the new dynamics which this has produced.

The causes of collapse

With hindsight, some of the flaws in Liberia's system of government may be traced as far back as the presidency of William Tubman (1944–71), generally regarded as the heyday of the True Whig Party and the Liberian-American elite whose political vehicle it was.

The Liberian state owes its origins to the presence of settlers of American origin, former slaves who began to settle on West Africa's Grain Coast in the 1820s and who in 1847 proclaimed the republic of Liberia. From then on, as several of the leading historians of Liberia have noted,²²

21. For census figures see Christopher Clapham, 'Liberia: Physical and Social Geography', *Africa South of the Sahara 1994* (Europa Publications, London, 1994), p. 492.

22. Some of the many excellent histories of Liberia include J. Gus Liebenow, *Liberia: the Quest for Democracy* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1987); S. Byron Tarr and Elwood Dunn, *Liberia, a National Polity in Transition* (Scarecrow Press, Metuchen, New Jersey, and London, 1988); Amos Sawyer, *The Emergence of Autocracy in Liberia: Tragedy and Challenge* (Institute for Contemporary Studies, San Francisco, 1992).

although Liberia was never formally colonized, its history in many respects was comparable to that of colonies of settlement, with the major difference that the settlers were themselves ultimately of African origin. Like European colonists in other parts of the continent, the American-Liberian elite regarded itself as culturally superior to the peoples of the hinterland, the 'country people' or the 'tribal people', and dominated the political system. The True Whig Party built up a formidable patronage machine which reached its height under Tubman, who in effect made Liberia into Africa's first 'party-state' and personalized authority more than any of his predecessors, making the presidency 'the ultimate source of individual livelihood . . . All incomes were perceived to be derived from President Tubman. Accordingly, all praises went to him'.²³ The personalization of authority was both a reflection and a cause of the failure to build autonomous institutions, the result of which was to be fatal when the state later fell into the hands of an individual less qualified to govern the country than Tubman, a lawyer who had emerged through the True Whig political machine. Both Tubman and especially his successor William Tolbert (1971-80) sensed the weakness of their apparently monolithic rule and attempted to open the True Whig national patronage network to Liberians of indigenous origin, the 'country' people. Liberians of indigenous origin had previously been able to rise to prominent positions by attaching themselves to one or other of the important American-Liberian families.²⁴ But the gradual extension of the True Whig Party's creaky patronage system to a multitude of previously excluded Liberians coincided with the onset of economic problems caused by the oil price rises of the early 1970s, with the result that there was increased competition to obtain slices of a shrinking national cake.²⁵ Tolbert was eventually to become the victim of the classic dilemma of a reforming government, losing the support of his conservative base without being able to satisfy fully the new constituencies he was wooing, whose political appetite he had aroused.²⁶

The army was a key institution, especially as it too was used in the service of President Tolbert's strategy of extending his patronage machine to the 'country' people. From their inception in 1908, the Liberian armed forces were 'an instrument of internal repression',²⁷ used particularly to enforce the will of the Monrovia government in rural areas which had only recently been incorporated into the Liberian republic. Whereas the peasantry was

23. Sawyer, *The Emergence of Autocracy*, p. 285.

24. Sawyer, *The Emergence of Autocracy*, p. 288.

25. Dunn and Tarr, *A National Polity*, pp. 125-6.

26. cf. H. Bojma Fahnbulleh, 'Struggle for Democracy (2)', *West Africa*, 15-21 March 1993, pp. 418-420.

27. Amos Sawyer, *Effective Immediately: Dictatorship in Liberia 1980-1986: a Personal Perspective* (Liberia Working Group Paper No. 5, Liberia Working Group, Bremen, 1987), p. 5.

for many decades the favoured source of rank and file recruits, particularly men from the supposedly warlike 'tribes' of Lofa County, the emphasis under Tolbert turned to recruiting among the urban unemployed, not least as a means of reducing vagrancy. But soldiers of 'country' origin still found their advancement blocked by an American-Liberian officer corps. As Amos Sawyer noted, Tolbert's recruitment policy not only upset the ethnic balance within the armed forces, but also introduced into the soldiery some people from the most alienated sector of society, the urban unemployed, which boded ill for future standards of military behaviour.²⁸ This became clear to most people only after 1980, when Master Sergeant Doe and his companions from the lower ranks took power. The Doe regime, whether in its initial military guise or in its later civilianized form, was not merely brutal; it had what Sawyer called a 'marauding nature' which he attributed to 'its social basis and historical circumstances'.²⁹ Writing after six years of Doe's increasingly personalized government, Sawyer characterized the period accurately enough as 'six years of rape and plunder by armed marauders whose ideology is to search for cash and whose ambition is to retain power to accumulate and protect wealth'.³⁰ Since the state had historically been used as a means of personal enrichment, it was not illogical for Doe to use it for the same purpose. Nevertheless, the speed with which he and his military supporters acquired wealth and the brutality which they employed were of a different order from what had gone before.

At the heart of the Doe government was a man who had no conception of power other than as a display of accumulation and force, surrounded by cronies and lieutenants, many of them fellow-Krahn. These people were simply not interested in investigating technical problems of government or the measures for their solution.³¹ Their perspective was generally short-term and, at least after Doe's execution in 1981 of his rival fellow-putschist, Deputy Head of State Thomas Weh Syen, Doe personally was caught in a Macbethian logic which compelled him to spill ever more blood merely to retain power. He certainly could not contemplate leaving power, even if he had been inclined to do so, for fear of reprisals.³² As we have noted, many Krahn, even the many who had not shared the spoils of government, were afraid of a change of regime for the same reason.³³ Doe, in basing his power on his own ethnic group, was in a sense blackmailing all Krahn, since they knew that, whatever their personal circumstances, his departure would lead to violence against them.

28. Sawyer, *Effective Immediately*, p. 5.

29. Sawyer, *Effective Immediately*, p. 5.

30. Sawyer, *Effective Immediately*, p. 8.

31. Sawyer, *Effective Immediately*, p. 4.

32. Dunn and Tarr, *A National Polity*, p. 97.

33. Above, note 6.

Doe had abolished the political machine of the True Whig Party and he needed to replace it with another political system of some sort. In its early months the new junta, the People's Redemption Council (PRC), had the support of some left-wing intellectuals who saw it as a means of implementing their own programmes, but that relationship soon ended. In spite of the general short-termism of his government, there is evidence that one of the few areas where Doe thought on a strategic level was in the building of ethnic alliances. He used the immense powers of the presidency which he had inherited, and the patronage attached to it, to create ethnic constituencies since he had neither the time nor the skills to build any other type of political apparatus. In the first months after the 1980 coup, the regime enjoyed widespread popularity precisely because of its ethnic character, since Doe and his fellow-putschists could claim convincingly enough to have struck a blow against the American-Liberian oligarchy represented by the True Whig Party, and thus to have emancipated the 'country' people. However, the construction of a workable political system soon required further definition if it was to attract the lasting support of at least some of those 'country' people whom the junta claimed to represent.

Doe seems to have been conscious of the political possibilities of ethnic affiliation from the moment that, as the most senior of the non-commissioned officers to have staged the 1980 coup, he was appointed chairman of the PRC. His own ethnic group, the Krahn, formed only some five per cent of the Liberian population and did not include significant numbers of wealthy or educated people. Not only were few Krahn equipped to serve in senior government positions, but Doe himself hardly knew how to run a government. He had no relevant experience, spoke poor English and was functionally illiterate. He urgently needed advisors who could teach him how to use the instruments of politics and government, and he found one such in the person of Dr George Boley, one of the few Krahn to have received higher education (a doctorate in education from an American university) and to have been an activist in a national political party. Boley was appointed Minister of State, responsible for political affairs, on the very day of the coup. He later occupied other ministerial positions in the Doe government and he produced a book supportive of the new government.³⁴ Although Boley was gradually sidelined, and Doe was to take advice on ethnic politics from other intellectuals whom he recruited,³⁵ Boley's participation in the early months of the Doe government introduced him to the circle of Krahn warlords whom Doe was to create and promote.³⁶ Doe doubled the strength of the

34. G. E. Saigbe Boley, *Liberia: the Rise and Fall of the First Republic* (Macmillan, London, 1983).

35. Tarr and Dunn, *A National Policy*, pp. 112-4.

36. Some interesting comments on Boley's career are to be found in S. Byron Tarr, 'Founding the Liberia Action Party', *Liberian Studies Journal*, XV, i (1990), pp. 13-47.

AFL from three to six thousand after 1980, and particularly promoted Krahn within the officer corps. By 1986 the numbers had once more been reduced as he purged rivals from other ethnic groups.³⁷ Doe's consolidation of his personal power within the junta, and the rapid recruitment and promotion of Krahn within the armed forces, quickly led to specifically ethnic tensions within the armed forces, not to mention an accentuation of clan and lineage divisions among the Krahn themselves.³⁸ The construction of ethnic patronage systems by rival soldiers, starting from scratch, in the shortest possible time, was probably the single most important cause of Liberia's subsequent collapse.

The crucial conflict within the junta was between Doe and his fellow-putschist Thomas Quiwonkpa. After the coup the latter became commanding general of the Armed Forces of Liberia, while Doe cultivated a more political role as chairman of the PRC. Unlike Doe, who immediately began to cultivate a presidential style although carefully eschewing the title of president for some years, Quiwonkpa continued to live in the barracks and remained popular with the soldiers. He also spoke on occasion about the need for returning the country to civilian rule, which earned him a reputation as a moderate. Like his rival Doe, Quiwonkpa needed both to build an ethnic base and to take advice from someone who knew how to work the levers of government. His ethnic base he found in the Gio and Mano soldiers of his home area, Nimba County. One source of advice he found in a little-known American-Liberian whose wife was from Nimba and was a distant relative of Quiwonkpa. This advisor was one Charles Taylor.³⁹ A showdown between Quiwonkpa and Doe in 1983 led to Quiwonkpa fleeing into exile and his ill-fated attempt to return at the head of a coup attempt in November 1985.

The personal rivalry between Doe and Quiwonkpa was translated into tension between Krahn and Gio and Mano, their respective ethnic constituencies, within the armed forces, especially since there was a degree of traditional rivalry between Krahn and Gio and Mano as a result of competition for land in the rural areas where both groups lived.⁴⁰ After the failed coup of 1985, the struggle spread from the army into society at large, as Doe's soldiers purged Gio and Mano from the armed forces and punished Gio and Mano generally, looting and killing as a form of collective punishment with exceptional savagery.⁴¹

37. Sawyer, *Effective Immediately*, p. 6.

38. Sawyer, *Effective Immediately*, pp. 13–14.

39. Author's interview in Monrovia, 26 July 1994. Taylor's current companion, Agnes Reeves, is not his legal wife and is not to be confused with Quiwonkpa's kinswoman.

40. Augustine Kanneh, 'Mandingo Integration in the Liberian Political Economy', *Liberian Studies Journal*, XVIII, 1 (1993), p. 55.

41. Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights, *Liberia: a Promise Betrayed*, esp. pp. 45–105.

In addition to promoting Krahn to positions of influence, Doe's creation of an ethnically-based clientele also led him to cultivate another ethnic group, the Mandingo.⁴² The latter is the name of a diaspora of traders especially which has its origins in present-day Guinea, but which has over the centuries spread over a considerable area, including throughout Liberia. Virtually all Mandingo are Muslims, and indeed the name Mandingo is generally applied in Liberia to traders of different ethnic origin who take on the appearance of Muslim culture. Despite the length of time that Mandingo have lived in Liberia they are nevertheless perceived by many Liberians as outsiders, not authentically Liberian. This appears to be largely because of their religion and their commercial vocation, both of which provide the Mandingo with a distinctive set of cultural attributes, such as in dress, Koranic education, and gender relations. Mandingo men are generally polygamous, and although they often take wives from different ethnic groups, male family-heads are renowned for their reluctance to allow their own womenfolk to marry into other groups. In many villages in the 1980s, the local trader, money-lender or shop-keeper was a Mandingo.

The two last True Whig Party presidents, Tubman and Tolbert, both cultivated the Mandingo community because of its commercial importance. From the early 1980s, when Doe's ethnic politics obliged him to address the problem posed by Quiwonkpa's cultivation of a support-base in the armed forces among Gio and Mano soldiers, Doe made a conscious effort to build a rival political constituency in Nimba County by favouring the Mandingo, who are quite numerous there. He appointed Mandingo officials to official positions in Nimba County and encouraged them to purchase land. At the national level, Alhaji G. V. Kromah, a journalist by training, became Assistant Minister of Information and began to cultivate a reputation as the Mandingos' national leader, although Mandingo had previously tended to shy away from politics, regarding it as incompatible with their business interests. In 1986, in the aftermath of the Quiwonkpa coup attempt, Doe explicitly recognized the Mandingo to be a Liberian ethnic group, which intensely annoyed many Liberians who persisted in regarding the Mandingo as foreigners.⁴³

Quiwonkpa's legacy: the NPFL

In view of Doe's and Quiwonkpa's rival cultivation of ethnic constituencies in 1980–83, it is not surprising that Doe and his Krahn supporters in the army considered Quiwonkpa's 1985 attempted putsch to be backed by Gio and Mano in general, including civilians. Many Gio and Mano soldiers, some of them survivors of Quiwonkpa's coup, as well as civilians

42. Tarr and Dunn, *A National Policy*, pp. 112–4.

43. Brehun, *War of Horror*, p. 31. cf. 'Mandingoes: Who are They?', *Torchlight*, 28 July–3 August 1994.

fleeing the massacres in Nimba County, fled to Côte d'Ivoire where they received sympathetic treatment from the government of President Houphouët-Boigny, who had himself never forgiven Doe for his execution of prominent True Whig Party officials in 1980, among whom was A. B. Tolbert, a son of President Tolbert who had married Houphouët-Boigny's adopted daughter.⁴⁴ The latter, after the death of her husband, became a close friend of Captain Blaise Compaore, later president of Burkina Faso.

Refugees from Nimba County and Gio and Mano soldiers who had fled for their lives in 1985 joined a previous wave of Liberian exiles, remnants of the True Whig Party oligarchy who had left the country in 1980. It was from this common hatred of Doe that the NPFL was born. According to Tom Woweiyu, a long-standing opponent of Doe who was to become one of the NPFL's leaders, the organization was actually founded by Quiwonkpa himself, and Liberian exiles in Côte d'Ivoire particularly supported it, although it appears to have had little formal structure until 1989. Only in the late 1980s did Charles Taylor come to be regarded as its leader.⁴⁵

Taylor is an American-Liberian, born in 1948, who had gained a degree in economics in the USA, where he became prominent in the Liberian students' movement before returning to Liberia shortly before the coup of 1980. He was, and is, a man of boundless ambition. As soon as the coup took place, Taylor, largely through his wife's family relations to Quiwonkpa, succeeded in ingratiating himself with the new junta which was in dire need of managerial talent. Cleverly, instead of seeking a minister's portfolio, Taylor successfully lobbied for the directorship of the obscure General Services Agency, a government procurement office. By arguing that economies of scale could be made by ordering equipment in bulk rather than through individual ministries, Taylor centralized government procurement in his own hands and was able to take commissions from each contract in such a manner as to amass a fortune within a very short time. He was also, briefly, Deputy Minister of Commerce. In 1983, under investigation for a \$900,000 fraud, and seeing the career of his military patron Quiwonkpa in decline, Taylor fled to the USA, where he was arrested by the police under an extradition treaty with the Liberian government. He succeeded in escaping from a maximum security prison in Massachusetts by paying a bribe, allegedly of \$50,000.⁴⁶ He then passed through Mexico, Spain and France before settling in Accra in late

44. S. Byron Tarr, 'The Ecomog Initiative' in, 'Liberia: a Liberian perspective', *Issue*, **XXI**, i-ii, 1993, pp. 78-9.

45. Press conference by Tom Woweiyu, Monrovia, 19 July 1994. Reproduced in *The News*, 22 July 1994.

46. 'Fahnbulleh on the Guns and the Actors', *New Democrat*, 21-27 July 1994. Text of a speech delivered at the University of Liberia on 1 July 1994 by H. Boima Fahnbulleh.

1985 or 1986. On his travels Taylor acquired a working knowledge of French.

Once back in West Africa, Taylor was able to make contact with other exiled opponents of the Doe government and, together with them, he sought international backing for an armed resistance movement. In the context of the Cold War, this posed a delicate problem: since the USA was a confirmed backer of the Doe government, the US government was excluded as a source of support. To turn to the Soviet bloc in these circumstances was out of the question since the USA would never allow a Soviet client to take power in Liberia. So committed was the USA to supporting the existing government of Liberia that for some years it actually gave Doe more financial help than it gave to any other government in sub-Saharan Africa, despite his appalling human rights record.⁴⁷ Taylor, as a fugitive from US justice, had little to lose by seeking help from other sources whereas most American-Liberians valued their rights of entry to the USA too highly to risk dabbling with anti-American governments. In Accra Taylor befriended the Burkinabè ambassador, Memunu Ouattara, at a time when Captain Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso and Chairman Jerry Rawlings of Ghana were close friends, and both had quite close relations with Libya. It was largely because of his dabbling in revolutionary politics that Taylor was twice detained by Ghanaian security. (He was also, at various times in the 1980s, detained in both Sierra Leone and Guinea).⁴⁸ Taylor's companion Agnes Reeves and other Liberian exiles in Accra succeeded in contacting the new ruler of Burkina Faso, Blaise Compaore, who prevailed upon the Ghanaian authorities to release Taylor into his own custody. Compaore had close relations with President Houphouët-Boigny, and also, like his predecessor Sankara, with the revolutionary government in Libya. Taylor was able to travel to Tripoli and make direct contact there. The Libyan government, smarting from its defeats in Chad, was seeking new avenues to extend its influence in West Africa, and cultivated its relations with both the government of Burkina Faso and with Taylor. Taylor, a most persuasive talker, was able to convince the Libyan government of his revolutionary credentials.

By these means Taylor was able to build international support from the unlikely trio of Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso and Libya, providing the group of exiled Liberians with the international backing which they had previously lacked. Colonel Gaddafi's Libya was the focus for revolutionaries and adventurers of every type and there, and in Burkina Faso, Taylor met

47. Africa Watch, *A Human Rights Disaster*, p. 27.

48. Kwesi Yankah and Lazarus D. Maayang, 'Charles Taylor: Dark Days in Ghana', *Uhuru* (Accra), 5 (1990), pp. 39-42. Much of this fascinating interview with a former cell-mate of Taylor in Accra was confirmed by my own interviews, including in March 1991 with a person who had been imprisoned with Taylor in Freetown.

a number of West African revolutionaries. He was able to arrange for a small group of Liberians to receive military training in Libya and then resettle in Burkina Faso, most of them former farmers or soldiers from Nimba County who had fled the repression after 1985. One of the most influential of these was Quiwonkpa's former aide-de-camp, Prince Johnson. It was Taylor's leadership of this group which enabled him to claim to be chairman of the NPFL. Thus Charles Taylor, an obscure former official of the Doe government who was known, if at all, as a fugitive from criminal justice, succeeded in becoming the head of an exiled combination of Nimba County farmers and soldiers and members of the American-Liberian elite which had ruled the country before 1980, the whole purporting to be a pro-Libyan revolutionary movement.

The emergence of the warlords

In response to the NPFL's 24 December 1989 attack on Butuo, it was not only AFL soldiers who went to fight against the insurgents. Alhaji Kromah, striving to secure his ambition of becoming the national leader of Liberia's Mandingo community, travelled to Nimba and, sporting a military uniform and a gun, urged Mandingo people to support Doe's forces and called on Muslim businessmen to help finance the war. This was to be fatal for thousands of Mandingo. When NPFL forces succeeded in occupying Nimba County, they extracted a terrible revenge on Mandingos.⁴⁹ Taylor was unable to control his fighters and to prevent the spread of widespread massacres and atrocities,⁵⁰ although he was also to encourage massacres in some cases for political reasons. Taylor exploited the violence he had unleashed to cement his own position as the leader of the NPFL, making skillful use of his satellite-telephone to conduct interviews with the BBC's Africa Service, a vital asset as Taylor once admitted publicly,⁵¹ and by the formation of the Small Boy Units, squads of adolescents or pre-teens, many orphaned by the AFL's counter-insurgency activities, whom he formed into a personal guard, inculcated with his own cult of personality in a way which was harder to achieve with units of adult fighters. Taylor was soon to build up a formidable personal power, which cowed other NPFL leaders, and he did not hesitate to assassinate potential rivals within the organization, especially politicians with a following among the Gio and Mano, and most notably Jackson Doe, presumed to have been the real winner of the rigged presidential election of 1985 and thus a potential president of Liberia.⁵²

49. Africa Watch, *Liberia: A Human Rights Disaster*, pp. 5-11.

50. Tarr, 'The Ecomog Initiative', p. 78.

51. Reported in *New Democrat*, 23-29 June 1994.

52. Press conference by Tom Woweiyu, Monrovia, 19 July 1994. Reproduced in *The News*, 22 July 1994.

During 1990 large number of Krahn and Mandingo fled to Sierra Leone to escape the massacres taking place, and began to regroup there, starting their own movement in exile, ULIMO, as we have described. An internal struggle within the fledgling ULIMO led to the murder in obscure circumstances of General Karpeh in Kenema, Sierra Leone, in May 1992, and later of Major Solomon Kamara, a prominent Kromah supporter. In effect ULIMO became the site of a struggle between Mandingo elements led by Kromah with support in Conakry, and Krahn politicians, who had support in Freetown, a rivalry of which Karpeh and Kamara were victims.

The factional rivalry within ULIMO was to erupt into major bloodshed only in March 1994, when rival ULIMO war-bands began raiding each other's territory, especially in Cape Mount county along the Sierra Leonean border. Although the power-struggle which emerged into the open in March 1994 did not represent a fundamental Mandingo-Krahn rivalry, it led to territorial raiding. As with the Krahn-Mandingo/Gio-Mano rivalries, the Krahn-Mandingo split in ULIMO did not have its origins in any generalized ethnic hatreds, but in the factionalism of ambitious politicians seeking to carve themselves a following. Once small groups of combatants, identifying themselves by ethnic labels, had begun to fight, and their activities had been reported in the media or by word of mouth, it easily led to more generalized suspicion of one group towards another.⁵³ All of Liberia's current ethnic feuds started at the top and spread downwards. To a great extent, all have been manufactured by people hungry for power, using violence as a means of political recruitment. Victims of militia violence from various part of Liberia, interviewed in July 1994, reported that war-bands in fact were generally composed of people speaking various Liberian languages. This supports the view that the ethnic labels generally attached to the various militias are ideological representations used by politicians as a means of creating constituencies. They then acquire a certain political substance over the course of time. It is interesting to note, moreover, that the warlord who failed most spectacularly—Prince Johnson—did so precisely because he neglected to cultivate an ethnic base, that is to say a political constituency.

The misconceived Cotonou Peace Accord of July 1993 served only to encourage the mobilization of ethnic constituencies by warlords. At the time of the Cotonou Peace Accord, Taylor appears to have reasoned that violence had secured for him as much as it could, and that a political strategy would yield greater fruits in the future, by legitimizing his *de facto* control of nine-tenths of Liberian territory, and would enable him to undermine the fragile political institutions in Monrovia from within, by planting his own placemen within a transitional government in what was

53. Professor NNK, 'The ULIMO Leadership Crisis: not a Krahn-Mandingo War', *Monrovia Daily News*, 29 June 1994.

widely perceived as a 'Trojan Horse' strategy. Although opinions on the subject differ, a persuasive interpretation is that Taylor genuinely wished to respect the Cotonou Peace Accord as he perceived that a new political phase would deliver to him the prize he craved but had not achieved by violence alone: the presidency. It seems likely that some of the other signatories or parties to the Accord had no such aim and envisaged instead a two-track strategy of signing a peace treaty while pursuing a military goal through surrogate forces constructed on an ethnic base. Hence, there was abundant evidence that the Krahn faction within the AFL, backed by others possibly including some elements of ECOMOG, decided to use the Liberian Peace Council as a means of continuing the war.⁵⁴

By mid-1994 it had become clear that not only had the Cotonou peace process broken down irretrievably but that, in the absence of any real political trust or commitment, it had had the effect of splintering the existing armies. The AFL had spawned the LPC and itself showed signs of internal divisions between Krahn and non-Krahn elements.⁵⁵ ULIMO was split into two ethnically-defined factions, one loosely owing allegiance to Alhaji Kromah and consisting largely of Mandingo fighters, the other largely Krahn under one Roosevelt Johnson. On the side of the NPFL, Taylor had encouraged the creation of a Lofa Defence Force, also as a means of waging surrogate war. Within the NPFL some of Taylor's key lieutenants defected after they had arrived to take up posts in the Transitional Government in Monrovia, denouncing Taylor and singing the praises of ECOMOG. Probably the most important of these were Sam Dokie, Interior Minister in the Transitional Government, and Tom Woweiyu, Taylor's former defence chief. Dokie was from Nimba County and Woweiyu from Grand Bassa County. Both had personal followings among segments of Taylor's fighters, dangerously separating Taylor, the American-Liberian, from his fighters, many of them Gio and Mano. There were vague reports of still other armies, such as the Citizens' Defence Force in Maryland County, the Bassa Defence Force, and so on.

Not only were the militias becoming increasingly ethnicized all over Liberia, but it was apparent that to a large extent, violence had become divorced from politics in any normal definition of the word. The nominal heads of several militias—Alhaji Kromah of ULIMO:Mandingo, George Boley of the LPC, and Charles Taylor of the NPFL—had all been senior officials of the Doe government who had learned there the deadly skills of ethnic politics built on clientelism and violence. But they had only tenuous control of the actual fighters. Taylor was even unable to stop some of his most senior commanders from doing battle with each

54. This is based on the author's own observations in July 1994.

55. 'Split Mounts in the AFL', *New Democrat*, 28 July-3 August 1994.

other.⁵⁶ The United Nations estimated in 1994 that there were some 60,000 Liberians under arms,⁵⁷ of whom few had received any formal military training and none of whom (with the partial exception of the AFL) was paid. The fighters were mostly not soldiers at all, but armed civilians, sometimes very young, who lived by the gun, stealing what they needed or wanted. This produced its own *logique de guerre*. War-bands based themselves in any area where there were exploitable resources, especially diamond-producing areas, or where villagers were still producing crops, or places where humanitarian convoys could be looted. They would defend these strategic positions against all comers while raiding the territory of rival militias with the aim of looting, damaging the enemy's core population, and commandeering slave labour, in a way probably akin to the mode of warfare practiced in the days of the slave trade.⁵⁸ This has produced a mosaic of militia zones of control, where civilians have some degree of protection but must pay tribute in kind to the local warlord, and constantly shifting frontier zones in which civilians are liable to raiding from all sides. The aim is control of people and acquisition of booty more than it is to control territory in the conventional military manner. Armies prey upon the unarmed civilian population, looting their belongings, stealing their food, and forcing them to head-load the victims' own goods back to the militias' base areas. Already by late 1990, some of the original core of NPFL fighters, originally dispossessed farmers from Nimba County, had made enough money through looting as to leave the army and return home with their booty.⁵⁹ By 1994, Nimba County was said to be remarkably peaceful, possibly the most peaceful part of the country, and many of the original Libyan-trained NPFL fighters had settled down as shop-keepers and businessmen, having had successful careers as fighters. 'You wouldn't know that was where the war started', one government minister commented in July 1994.⁶⁰

In conventional military terms, none of the various armies in Liberia was very formidable. Displaced people from Cape Mount County, victims of raids by ULIMO:Kromah faction, reported a typical pattern of attack. War-bands up to 40 strong would reconnoitre a village often using a local youth whom they had persuaded to inform them of the lay-out of the village and, above all, of which people had possessions worth looting. The war-band would then attack, instilling the maximum fear in unarmed villagers by perpetrating some acts of exemplary violence. They would

56. 'NPFL on the Rampage', *The News*, 25 July 1994.

57. United Nations Security Council, *Third Progress Report of the Secretary General on the United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia* (S/1994/463, New York, 18 April 1994).

58. cf. Stephen P. Reyna, *Wars without End: the Political Economy of a Precolonial African State* (University Press of New England, Hanover and London, 1990), for an interesting analysis of the mechanics of systems of this type.

59. Brehun, *War of Horror*, p. 89.

60. Interview with minister of the LNTG, 26 July 1994.

then assemble the people and read out lists of names of those whom they knew to have goods worth looting. A common tactic was to capture women, and threaten to kill them unless their husbands paid ransom-money. Having looted everything worth taking, the war-band would then abduct some men to act as porters. Attempted escape would be met by instant death.⁶¹ Refugees from LPC attacks in Grand Bassa County reported being attacked by smaller groups, of perhaps 10 men, who would systematically torture them, typically by beating and by branding them with heated matchets. They would then take all the goods they could find and force men to head-load the booty to their base.⁶² In all cases, rape, including gang-rape, and other gratuitous violence, were commonplace.

In the core-zones under NPFL control, Taylor largely allowed people to go about their normal business, taking a tax on external trade which he supervised personally and demanding levies of young men for his army, in a manner strikingly reminiscent of pre-19th century war-leaders.⁶³ Farmers liable to attacks from the various war-bands fled to the relative safety of the main cities, especially Monrovia. Only rarely did the militias attack each other head on. For the most part, they preyed on civilians. At the same time, senior commanders, who were adults, preyed on their soldiers. As one junior NPFL fighter put it, 'you go to dey front, you fight, anything good you get, dey take it from you, dat why you see some of those boys to the Front dey don't want to come to Gbarnga because if dey bring anything good, dey will take it from them'.⁶⁴ On occasion rival warlords from the same militia would fight over the division of spoils of war.⁶⁵ A veritable mode of production had evolved in which the main aim was enrichment through looting, and wealth was sucked upwards within the militias' rudimentary hierarchies, from fighters to their officers. All the armed factions included a sprinkling of ex-soldiers from Doe's old AFL who had defected at some time or other. Just as Doe's government had had, in Sawyer's phrase, 'a marauding nature',⁶⁶ so too did the armed groups which eventually succeeded it and which it had in fact spawned.

The international peace-keeping force, ECOMOG, showed signs of demoralization and had itself taken on 'a marauding nature', looting where possible, and even wholesaling stolen goods looted by some Liberian

61. Interviews in Monrovia with refugees from Cape Mount County, 22 July 1994.

62. Interviews in Buchanan with refugees from Grand Bassa County, 29 July 1994; Human Rights Watch Africa, *Liberia: Human Rights Abuses by the Liberian Peace Council and the Need for International Oversight* (New York, 17 May 1994).

63. Reno, 'Foreign firms', p. 183.

64. Quoted in John H. T. Stewart, 'Taylor's Greater Liberia', *New Democrat*, 23-29 June 1994.

65. Author's interviews in Monrovia, 26 July 1994, and Buchanan, 29 July 1994.

66. Sawyer, *Effective Immediately*, p. 5.

militias. There are indications that some factions, and also some ECOMOG soldiers, have taken to international drug-trading.⁶⁷

Liberian concepts of power

Many Liberians, or probably most Liberians, have tried to understand what has happened to their lives by reference to religion. Paul Gifford has demonstrated how, already during the Doe years, there was a spectacular growth in evangelical churches during the 1980s.⁶⁸ Whereas Gifford interprets this phenomenon as a flight from reality, a refusal to take real political action by seeking refuge in a world beyond, there is room for advancing other interpretations for the growth in evangelical and spiritual churches.

Although the political culture of Liberia is not uniform, and there are significant variations between different language groups, there are nevertheless some general comments which one might make. In addition to Liberia's modern, secular institutions of government, imported by the 19th century settlers and articulated officially in the English language, there exists another political culture, or other cultures, with deep historical roots. As Amos Sawyer points out, the political culture of the peoples living in Liberia in the pre-modern period (that is, the complex of symbols and attitudes concerning power which constitute the country's 'governmentality'⁶⁹) was rooted in spiritual beliefs closely associated with the occupation and cultivation of land.⁷⁰ Among the Mande-speaking peoples who constitute perhaps half the country's population, the most evident aspect of governance which has survived in institutional form at the local level is the Poro and Sende secret societies.⁷¹ Although the Poro and Sende as such are strongest in the western and northern parts of Liberia, similar secret cults exist in other parts of the country. Even Liberians of American origin have created their own secret societies, like the

67. 'Libéria: trafics d'une guerre oubliée', *La Dépêche Internationale des Drogues*, 28 (Feb. 1994), pp. 6-7. I am grateful to Jean-François Bayart for this reference. Cf. the recollections of a former cell-mate of Charles Taylor, who recalls that '[Taylor] insisted that the major concern of African governments should be the prevention of domestic consumption of hard drugs. Once people are exporting such drugs from Africa, they should be allowed. He further stressed that we should think of cultivating coca and marijuana ... as major exports. He was particularly peeved about the fact that African governments complain of lack of capital when they have the easy option of granting banking facilities to drug barons who have billions of dollars for laundering'. Yankah and Maayang, 'Charles Taylor: Dark Days in Ghana', p. 40.

68. Paul Gifford, *Christianity in Doe's Liberia* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993).

69. A term favoured by Michael Foucault and used in regard to Africa notably by Jean-François Bayart, *L'Etat en Afrique: la politique du ventre* (Fayard, Paris, 1989), pp. 13-14.

70. Sawyer, *The Emergence of Autocracy*, pp. 43-60.

71. The following is based largely on Beryl L. Bellman, *The Language of Secrecy: Symbols and Metaphors in Poro Ritual* (Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1984); and Kenneth Little, 'The Political Function of the Poro', part I, *Africa*, XXXV, iv (1965), pp. 349-365, and part II, *Africa*, XXXVI, i (1966), pp. 62-72. For a summary of the literature on the Poro society, Gunther Schröder, *Eine Verborgene Dimension Gesellschaftlicher Wirklichkeit* (Liberia Working Group Paper No. 6, Liberia Working Group, Bremen, 1988), pp. 3-12.

Freemasons and the United Brothers of Friendship, which became veritable cults of a type familiar to pre-settler Liberian culture.⁷² Perhaps the only major population group which does not participate in Poro or similar cults is the Mandingo, whose Muslim identity excludes them from the Poro and Sende or similar societies, although the Mandingo generally are widely regarded as experts in magic and various forms of esoteric religious knowledge.

The Poro and Sende are ancient, dating from before the 17th century. In many parts of Liberia the Poro represented the most important political institution certainly until the mid-20th century,⁷³ with chiefs being purely civic authorities subject to the real control of the Poro. While the rise of Tubman's party-state certainly eroded the power of the Poro, Presidents Tubman, Tolbert and Doe all found it necessary to have themselves proclaimed supreme authorities of the Poro as a buttress to their power. A good definition of the Poro is that of Harley:

The Poro may be thought of as an attempt to reduce the all pervading spirit world to an organization in which man might contact the spirit world and interpret it to the people, where men became spirits, and took on godhead.⁷⁴

The designation of Poro (for males) and Sende (for females) as secret societies is in some respects rather misleading, as every adult Mande-speaker is in principle a member of the appropriate society. As Bellman explains, the secrecy attached to Poro ritual is less an attempt to keep knowledge restricted than to transmit certain messages to members in an esoteric form. Since boys are initiated into the Poro in order to become men, the essence of the message encoded in the Poro rituals concerns the proper understanding of the power of manhood, including one of its immanent features, violence.

At the heart of Poro initiation is a ritual of death, represented as the act of being eaten by a wild spirit, and rebirth in adulthood. The initiation rituals include the infliction of physical pain and are designed to cause the maximum effect on the impressionable adolescents who undergo them, by enacting a theatre of terror. Elders of the society wearing spirit-masks abduct future initiates from their house at the beginning of the period of ritual confinement. The power attributed to the spirits of the bush, represented by masked officers of the society, is both terrifying and morally ambiguous. Inherent in the understanding or acquisition of the power represented by the bush-spirits is that of sacrifice and the eating of human flesh and blood, represented symbolically by animal sacrifice and often by the ritual scarifying of an initiate, symbolizing his spiritual death and resurrection. Thus the Poro initiation rituals, as well as educating boys in

72. Schröder, *Eine Verborgene Dimension*, pp. 38–51.

73. Bellman, *The Language of Secrecy*, p. 8.

74. Quoted in Little, 'Poro', p. 355.

the duties of manhood, also demonstrate that the power of the wild and dangerous spirits of the bush has been tamed and made socially productive by the Poro, and that it has been domesticated to underpin political order. Within the Poro are other, more exclusive, societies which include cults of ritual murder.⁷⁵ Although there does not exist such rich documentation on other masking societies or cults of symbolic violence in non-Mande areas of Liberia, they appear to use a rather similar symbolism.⁷⁶

In many respects this popular and deeply-rooted political culture has been inadequately discussed in the literature on Liberian politics, probably because it does not conform to the modern, secular political institutions which have earned the country its place in the international community of nations. The Poro and similar cults have appeared to many writers to be provincial rather than national, and archaic rather than modern. Political analysts have tended to concentrate their attention on the modern and elite political institutions represented by the national government rather than such institutions as the Poro society, which were felt to be material for study by anthropologists or other specialists. And inasmuch as anthropologists have studied the Poro and similar societies, it has tended to be without reference to national or 'modern' politics.⁷⁷ Before 1980 at least, elements of this occulted aspect of Liberian political culture were visible to outside observers only at particular moments or in specific contexts.

Perhaps the point at which it was most evident that, behind the apparent transparency of Liberia's official, written, legal institutions of government, there lay other systems of political symbolism, was when occasional reports surfaced of human sacrifices carried out by politicians in the pursuit of power. Although this is a subject which, in the past, has been difficult to investigate and to document, many Liberians today claim that some candidates for senior political office during the years of True Whig government would routinely seek magical aid from so-called 'heart men' or spiritual experts. Quite how frequent such consultations were is impossible to ascertain precisely, but certainly there were occasional publicly-known cases, and it seems to have been widely believed in Liberia that the search for great power, such as that wielded by a government minister or even a member of parliament, could be facilitated by the sacrifice of a human being, on the advice of a ritual expert. One way of analysing this would be to say that the metaphors of the Poro society and similar cults had

75. Liebenow, *Quest for Democracy*, p. 41.

76. cf. Günter Schröder and Dieter Seibel, *Ethnographic Survey of Southeastern Liberia: the Liberian Kyan and the Sapo* (Liberian Studies Monograph Series No. 3, Liberian Studies Association in America, Newark, Delaware, 1974), pp. 82-88.

77. A distinguished exception to these remarks is Warren L. d'Azevedo, 'A Tribal Reaction to Nationalism', parts I-IV, in *Liberian Studies Journal* I, ii (1969), pp. 1-22; II, i (1969), pp. 43-63; II, ii (1970), pp. 99-115; III, i (1970-1), pp. 1-19.

been adopted even by the American-Liberian national political elite,⁷⁸ in the sense that it had become generally believed that the consumption of the vital organs of a human victim, especially the heart, could impart great power. In 1979, in a celebrated case, some prominent figures from the True Whig Party in Maryland County, Tubman's old fief, were convicted by a court of law for committing a ritual murder of this type. A beleaguered President Tolbert allowed the sentence of death to be carried out. Indeed, there are grounds to suppose that the exceptionally public nature of this case was a reflection of divisions within the True Whig Party between the conservatives and the new elements, especially 'country' people whom Tolbert was courting, which were to hasten Tolbert's downfall.⁷⁹ Ten years later, Defence Minister Gray Allison, a man raised in an American-Liberian family, was sentenced to death for a similar offence, at a time when a spate of ritual murders was reported.⁸⁰ The available evidence suggests that these cases were exceptional only in being brought to court and exposed to the scrutiny of the modern institutions of government represented by the national laws.

Doe, an uneducated man and one with a rural Liberian culture rather than the American-Liberian background of his predecessors, was well-known for his unrelenting search for supernatural power. He attended both church and mosque.⁸¹ Sawyer notes Doe's penchant for personal audiences with people claiming to have supernatural inspiration, and his imprisonment of those he believed to be false prophets.⁸² In the spiritual as in the political realm, Doe had destroyed the system of his predecessor by sacking the imposing Masonic Temple which, from its hill-top site, physically dominates Monrovia, and thereafter he had to improvise a means of spiritual control. On the first anniversary of the 1980 coup, Doe erected a monument on the road outside the Executive Mansion, one of the main arteries of Monrovia, known as the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. The monument consists of a plinth displaying an inscription commemorating the liberation of Liberia, by soldiers of the AFL, from decades of government by what is termed a 'clique', meaning the American-Liberian elite of the True Whig Party. On top of the plinth is a statue of an AFL soldier with rifle at the ready, bayonet fixed. Monrovia is convinced that Doe inaugurated the statue with a human sacrifice, burying alive an

78. Bellman, *The Language of Secrecy*, pp. 14, 17.

79. A documentary reference to this case is H. Boima Fahnbulleh, 'Struggle for Democracy (2)', *West Africa*, 15-21 March 1993, pp. 418-20. The fact that such an important case seems to have passed without mention in standard histories of the Tolbert period is itself testimony to the extent to which this aspect of Liberian political culture has been occulted in the past.

80. On the Gray Allison case, *West Africa*, 10-16 July 1989, p. 1150; 21-27 July 1989, p. 1397; 28 August-3 Sept. 1989, p. 1442. Other trials of ritual murder cases at the same period are reported in *West Africa*, 6-12 Feb. 1989, p. 206 and 24-30 July 1989, p. 1229.

81. Konneh, 'Mandingo Integration', p. 54.

82. Sawyer, *Effective Immediately*, p. 29.

AFL trooper beneath it. True or not—and it would certainly be in keeping with what is known of Doe's methods to have taken such a precaution—many Monrovia's are convinced that this was the case. When, in 1990, NPFL forces had invested the University of Liberia, a few hundred yards from the Executive Mansion, where Doe was besieged with hundreds of his soldiers, the NPFL fighters believed that the statue which stood in the no man's land between themselves and Doe's men in the Executive Mansion constituted a powerful magical protection for Doe and that he could never be defeated while it stood. The military under Doe generally cultivated what Sawyer refers to as a 'magico-super naturalism', believing that their possession of the powerful technology of modern warfare endowed them with spiritual power.⁸³ So great was Doe's reputation for cultivating occult forces that his suite of rooms in the Executive Mansion remained sealed and undisturbed even after the IGNU had occupied the building in 1990.⁸⁴ The Mansion was, in a manner of speaking, haunted by the terrible spirits which Doe had invoked in the years that he lived there.

As Byron Tarr, a former government minister, has commented, Liberians have an 'eschatological belief that God or a spirit brother would solve their problems'.⁸⁵ But if virtually all Liberians have an abiding belief that the problems related to worldly power (which we might call political problems) can be understood only by reference to the world of spirits, then, according to this logic, there has been a problem for some time, and certainly since 1980, in that the spirit world is itself disordered. Tubman and Tolbert both adopted spiritual policies analogous to their political strategies, using imported, American-style institutions or systems of symbolism (Christianity, Freemasonry and the True Whig Party) as the most obvious bases of their power, but also using the conventions of indigenous symbolism such as the Poro. Since 1980 it has become increasingly difficult to play in these different registers simultaneously as the various systems of ritual mediation have fragmented. There has been a multiplication of churches, as Gifford has noted, many of them placing great emphasis on spiritual healing, in effect assimilating some of the symbolic language of older Liberian cultures. Islam has also spread since 1980, with non-Mandingo increasingly being converted.⁸⁶ The power of the Poro society has over a period of decades been eroded by the actions of national governments and the churches. These days there is a bewildering variety of individuals—prophets, priests, marabouts, preachers, healers and 'heartmen'—who claim to have expertise in the spirit world. None at

83. Sawyer, *Effective Immediately*, p. 11.

84. Personal communication by Binaifer Nowrojee. On the symbolism of the Executive Mansion building, see John Momoh, 'Prized Edifice', *West Africa*, 25–31 March 1991, p. 439.

85. Tarr, 'The Ecomog Initiative', p. 77.

86. Konneh, 'Mandingo Integration', pp. 54–5.

present can make a convincing claim to have tamed the violence of the spirits which made itself apparent in the 1980s and, most particularly, after 1989. Doe, true to his 'marauding' nature, attempted to acquire protection from experts of all sorts without ever lending his influence to the construction of any ordered system of spiritual power. The evidence that power in Liberia has temporarily escaped all institutional control—the essential purpose of both religion and government—is there for all to see.

There can be no doubt that most Liberians have interpreted the violence which has ravaged their country since 24 December 1989 in terms of movements in the spirit world as well as in other terms.⁸⁷ This emerges from some testimonies, as well as from a reading of the symbolic actions of those involved. In some cases, the appalling atrocities committed by fighters, particularly the practice of cannibalism, contain direct references to the symbolic language of Poro or similar cultic rituals. Charles Taylor himself has been reported, probably accurately according to some who know him well, to have drunk the blood of sacrificial victims. A former associate has stated that Taylor and his closest aides form an elite society known as the Top Twenty, which practises a cult of cannibalism.⁸⁸ Naturally, first-hand evidence of such events is rather difficult to acquire, but credible documentary sources exist nonetheless. The number of those who have seen convincing evidence of acts of cannibalism and similar ritualized violence includes both Liberians and foreigners, including generals, bishops, United Nations officials, aid workers and others. There are eye-witness accounts by professional journalists and other trained observers of incidents of public cannibalism after the Quiwonkpa coup of 1985,⁸⁹ including a Nigerian journalist, for example, who saw Quiwonkpa's body being used in 'a macabre cannibalistic ritual by some of Doe's soldiers who, astonishingly in these modern times, still believe that by eating bits of a great warrior's body, some of that greatness would come to them. The heart, of course, was the prize delicacy and it is traditionally shared on a hierarchical basis'.⁹⁰

The extreme violence of these ritualized acts is not incompatible with modernity. On the contrary, the modern technology of communication serves to strengthen and amplify the symbolic language involved. The most obvious example of this is the video made by Prince Johnson of the torture and murder of Samuel Doe in September 1990, which Johnson showed to visitors to his headquarters, no doubt calculating that it would enhance his prestige as a warrior. One ULIMO commander, Stephen Dorley, had photographs of himself taken committing atrocities including

87. cf. Brehun, *War of Horror*, pp. 27–8, 52–3, 90–1.

88. See *New Democrat*, 23–29 June 1994.

89. Lawyers' Committee, *A Promise Betrayed*, pp. 50–62.

90. Quoted in Lawyers' Committee, *A Promise Betrayed*, p. 58.

killing and mutilating prisoners. He proudly displayed these photos on the wall behind his desk to impress visitors with his power. One of the photos is of Dorley and some of his fighters standing over a corpse whose heart has been cut out.⁹¹ Incidents of cannibalism have been documented by the respected Catholic Justice and Peace Commission.⁹² The observation that there is a 'cultic' element to violence of this type does not imply that the militias fight primarily as a form of ritual behaviour. Clearly the prime motive is to gain wealth and power through violence, with the cultic aspects being a means of spreading terror and also of psychologically strengthening fighters, using a lexicon of symbols which is widely understood. Moreover it is not new for individuals who have become prominent through their pursuit of wealth and the size of their armed following to found their own cults. The historic Grand Gedeh 'big man' known as Old Man Krai appears to have done such a thing, and it is in fact from him that the name Krahn is said to be derived.⁹³

Before 1980, when greater order prevailed in Liberia, cultic violence of this nature was largely contained and ritualized by the Poro, the Freemasons and similar societies, and by the mainstream churches which were dominated by the American-Liberian elite. Even before 1980 such cults were used, or perhaps abused, by politicians and others seeking power through occult, but nevertheless ordered, rituals in which the power represented by violence and the capacity to dominate are represented symbolically, including sometimes by human sacrifice. It may be argued that, since all power is indeed morally ambiguous in the sense that it can be used for good or evil purposes, secret societies like the Poro play a crucial role in expressing this fact while maintaining a monopoly of acts of lethal violence. A system of socially legitimated control of violence is, after all, essential to order. This ritual control of violence allows civic authorities to forbid and to prosecute acts of violence committed outside the bounds of ritual control or, in other words, to maintain a monopoly of violence which is one of the defining characteristics of a coherent political order. In Poro and other masking rituals, the various violent bush-spirits who symbolically eat their victims are represented by society officials wearing masks. To be more precise, it is not the wearer of the mask who represents the spirit. Rather, the spirit lies in the mask itself, which then possesses its wearer as part of a ritual which imparts order to human society and provides civic authorities, such as chiefs, with their legitimacy. We may note that, although Christian churches are of course opposed to human sacrifice, this did not prevent prominent Christian laymen in the past from

91. Some of these photos were published in *The Eye*, 28 April 1994. Other photographs from the same source, seen by the present author, were unpublished.

92. 'Catholics Frown on "Eating of Humans"', *The Inquirer*, 25 July 1994.

93. Schröder and Seibel, *Ethnographic Survey*, esp. pp. 34, 87.

performing such gruesome rituals, including Presidents Tubman and Tolbert, who are both said to have performed ritual murders but were both prominent lay churchmen: Tolbert was president of the Baptist World Alliance.⁹⁴ The symbolic language of the masking societies is easily assimilated into Christian belief as a manifestation of the absolute struggle between the Holy Spirit and the forces of Satan. The Roman Catholic cathedral in Monrovia is dedicated to the Sacred Heart and is dominated by a vast mural showing the Sacred Heart of Jesus emanating rays of light. While the spiritual churches have assimilated much of the vocabulary of pre-Christian cults, they have used it in the service of a theology of moral absolutes.⁹⁵

In the civil war, in a world grown anarchic, acts of violence are daily performed in the familiar language of the secret society rituals, but now out of control. Ritual murders are no longer carried out by officers of established cults, but by unqualified adolescents. Whereas cultic violence is properly performed by society elders wearing masks, in Liberia today young fighters improvise masks with any objects they have to hand: dark glasses, women's wigs, shower caps, and so on, which they use to alter their spiritual character. Having committed atrocious acts of violence they routinely—and quite literally rather than metaphorically—eat their victims' vital organs and drink their blood and emerge reborn as warriors, using war-names in place of their given names. Just as an official of the Poro is possessed by a spirit when he puts on the appropriate mask, effectively becoming that spirit for the duration of the ceremony and therefore absolved of personal guilt,⁹⁶ so is a fighter possessed by spirits as he commits his acts of violence. The effect is no doubt enhanced by the consumption of alcohol, marijuana, amphetamines and other drugs which is commonplace among fighters.

The dangerous spirits which are believed to infest the world, and which in normal times are under the ritual control of qualified people, such as the elders of the Poro, are stalking Liberia and may enter anyone at any time, even children. All that is required is to have a gun.

Re-establishing order

By the middle of 1994 it seemed that there would never be an end to Liberia's agony. The peace process represented by the Cotonou Peace Accord had run out of steam, leaving no prospect of any political solution to the country's anarchy. Moreover the multiplication and ethnicization of the various militias seemed to preclude the possibility of any military

94. Author's interviews with Liberian government minister, 26 July 1994. cf. Brehun, *War of Horror*, pp. 1–2.

95. cf. Gerrie ter Haar, *Spirit of Africa: the Healing Ministry of Archbishop Milingo of Zambia* (Hurst & Co., London, 1992), esp. pp. 97–164.

96. Liebenow, *Quest for Democracy*, p. 42.

solution. ULIMO was split clearly into two factions, one Krahn-led, the other Mandingo-led. The AFL was increasingly divided into Krahn and non-Krahn, as was its surrogate the LPC, and the NPFL was also split along ethnic lines, with Taylor mistrusting anyone outside his inner circle of American-Liberians. There were reports, difficult to verify from Monrovia, of the creation of new ethnic militias such as the Bassa Defence Force, the Citizens' Defence Force, and others.

Some well-qualified observers, including Liberians whose family origins are in Lofa County, agree that the Lofa Defence Force, a militia which arose in late 1993 after the Coronou Peace Accord, is organized by the Poro society, which is particularly strong in Lofa. In November 1993, the LDF occupied the town of Zorzor, a centre of the Poro society. Observers were divided in their opinion as to the degree to which the LDF was merely a surrogate for the NPFL. In Lofa County, many peoples' view of NPFL administration appears to be less negative than their opinion of ULIMO. There are no particular antagonisms between the NPFL's Gio and Mano fighters and the peoples of Lofa County, with the important exception of the Mandingo who were quite numerous in Lofa County before the War. When the Mandingo-dominated faction of ULIMO under Alhaji Kromah began to raid NPFL territory in Lofa County in 1991, in revenge for NPFL attacks in Liberia and Sierra Leone, the raiders committed appalling atrocities and also desecrated Poro sites and cult objects, in effect declaring war in a spiritual as well as a military sense. In response, the Poro society was able to organize its own militia, its grassroots structure providing a perfect infrastructure for military activity, as it had in the Mande rising against British colonial rule in Sierra Leone in 1898.⁹⁷ Fired by revenge, there seems little doubt that the LDF is preparing to rid Lofa County of Mandingo and to desecrate the latter's mosques, in revenge for the humiliations inflicted by ULIMO:Kromah, in a bout of ethnic cleansing.

The emergence of the LDF, although difficult to document or identify precisely, may mark a significant development in Liberia's recent history. Unlike the other militias, it is not organized in the service of members of Liberia's national political class in search of a clientele, but by village elders owing their allegiance to a structure deeply-rooted in rural life. Its aim is not to obtain for its leaders a seat in a national government, and thus a chance to take a share of the 'national cake', but rather to rid its territory of outsiders and raiders of every sort. If it should succeed in this aim and spread to areas outside Lofa County, it holds the distant promise of bringing back stability to some rural communities at least. If so, it provides a hope, however slight, of ending the vicious circle of

97. Little, 'Poro', pt. I, pp. 350-1.

impoverishment and violence. Many observers believe that the majority of Liberia's 60,000 or so fighters are demoralized by the violence they have lived through and inflicted but lack opportunities to demobilize, having no means of livelihood other than looting and being afraid to go back to what remains of their families, or having no social context to which to return. A system of local self-defence might help in that regard.

The Poro society is essentially a system of socio-political control based on communication with the invisible world. We may differ with Gifford in suggesting that mediation with the invisible, rather than being a desperate irrelevance, is the precise opposite: it appears to offer the only realistic solution to Liberia's crisis. The country's spiritual anarchy underpins its other forms of anarchy, political and social, and in practice it may require to be reordered first.

As Ken Wilson has noted in a study of comparable violence in Mozambique,

It is highly significant that cults of violence and their associated magic can be countered not only by other cults of violence. Where military and political power is not promulgated on the basis of *de facto* strength, but through hegemony rooted in ritually established inequality and intimidation, a movement that can reject such authority can be extremely powerful.⁹⁸

A movement which is able to convince large numbers of Liberian civilians that it is possessed of spiritual power not only has a chance of encouraging the victims of militia violence to resist, but could also provoke large-scale desertions, given the widespread view that many of the fighters are disillusioned with their existence. As other writers have noted, religion is after all a ground for political discourse in the sense that it constitutes clusters of symbols which enable people to form 'a generalizing and productive political language'.⁹⁹ Thus the construction of a coherent system of spiritual communication may accompany the building of a coherent political order. In these circumstances representations of power expressed in a spiritual register may be seen not as a-political, but as the necessary accompaniment to a political project.¹⁰⁰

What a new political order will look like remains to be seen, of course. Despite all that has happened, the Liberian state has not disappeared. It is striking that, despite the years of civil war and ethnic division, none of the warlords proposes secession or the construction of a separate state. There remains a sense of Liberian identity expressed in language ('Liberian English') and in culture, although it is likely that the

98. K. B. Wilson, 'Cults of Violence and Counter-Violence in Mozambique', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, XVIII, iii (1992), p. 554.

99. Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa* (James Currey, London, 1992), p. 215.

100. There exists a vast literature on this subject, but see especially Achille Mbembe, *Afriques Indociles. Christianisme, pouvoir et Etat en société postcoloniale* (Karthala, Paris, 1988).

Mandingo, for example, precisely because of the degree to which their culture and their religious identity has been used for political purposes by first Doe and then Kromah, risk being excluded from that definition in future. But so profound is Liberia's crisis that it seems unlikely Liberia will ever be restored in its pre-1980 form and, given the structural flaws of that system, in particular its personalization and centralization of power, nor would that be a recipe for success.

Probably the one external power which has the means and, potentially at least, the motive to stabilize Liberia—the USA—has no Liberia policy at all. It seems unlikely, given the isolationism of US public life and the general marginalization of Africa in US foreign policy, that the US government will develop a coherent and effective Liberia policy in the foreseeable future. The solution to Liberia's problems, in these circumstances, can only come from within. The national political structure which reached its apogee under the True Whig Party has collapsed. The ethnic politics introduced by Doe has led to disaster.

Healing, in these circumstances, lies in the spiritual field at least as much as in the political one, and at the local level rather than the national one. The spirit world is the only domain in which constructive action is still detectable, and in this a leading role may fall to the churches. Unlike the Poro society or other traditional cults, they are universal in orientation, having the potential to incorporate all Liberians. In their own symbolic language, the Holy Spirit is pacific and universal in nature and can enter anybody. The Christian God can forgive any crime, no matter how terrible.¹⁰¹ In the case of the international and former missionary churches, they also have the connections and even the material resources to help in this process. Their greatest disability is the unwillingness to come to grips with the anarchic spiritual world of Liberia which may well necessitate assuming more of the symbolic language of Liberian spirituality than is the case at present.

101. See the interview with a child-fighter who, having been 'born again' in Christ, has 'taken an oath never to kill again. I'm now a complete born-again Christian and a child of God'. Charles Osagie-Usman, 'Mission of Revenge', *West Africa*, 7–13 February 1994, p. 205.