

Was the Brutality of War in Sierra Leone a Reflection of Primitive Barbarism?

Written by Amy Jo Davies

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AMY JO DAVIES, MAR 7 2016

To what Extent was the Brutality of the War in Sierra Leone a Reflection of Primitive Barbarism of Sierra Leone Society?

Introduction

A highly controversial debate surrounds the nature of conflict. The primitive barbarism argument understands the motivations and events within conflict to be a result of backward human behaviour, where violence is irrational and where greed fuels ruthless actors. This essay challenges primitive barbarism as a reflection of the brutality of the war in Sierra Leone, arguing that the concept exemplifies an ignorant portrayal of warfare in Africa which contributes to a wider misunderstanding within the largely journalistic approach. Instead, it is argued that the war should be understood within the context of neopatrimonial state failure, where unjust power structures have augmented deep rooted social and political grievances which are the prevalent factors driving the war. Whilst the economic dimension is taken into account, this is not the main focus as resources and greed are evident in most conflicts and are not alone enough to unpack the tragic confluence of events in Sierra Leone. Regarding the brutality of violence, literature from both Africa studies and Counter-Insurgency will be utilised to analyse how the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) use callous methods as part of a calculated strategy, and not as the primitive barbarism argument suggests a result of inhumane, random aggression. Due to the scope of this essay, the emphasis will be on the RUF within rural areas before the formation of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council in 1997 (Abdullah, 1998). Overall it is argued that a more nuanced understanding of the conflict is necessary as the primitive barbarism argument is inherently short-sighted. Thus a combination of interrelated factors suggest why the brutality and duration of conflict escalated as it did, but in particular this essay will focus on the failure of neopatrimonialism creating political and social grievances which the RUF as a calculated insurgent group utilised.

Primitive Barbarism

In the 1994 article 'The Coming Anarchy', Kaplan outlines how new barbarism characterises conflict in West Africa, where 'scarcity, crime, overpopulation, tribalism, and disease are rapidly destroying the social fabric of our planet'. A disastrous rendering of Sierra Leone is perpetuated through fear mongering discourse. The essentialist perception of conflict is understood as a result of clash of civilisations, environmental breakdown and resource competition which manifests into random violence that is incomprehensible to external actors. However this flawed perspective is not held by Kaplan alone, the journalistic approach has a tendency to portray the immediacy of conflict, neglecting longer term developments and the contextual knowledge gained with extensive study and field research. The Economists' (2000) generalised demonstration of Africa as 'The Hopeless Continent' and the New York Times' (1995) depiction of Sierra Leone 'not a part of the third world – it is the fourth, or better yet, the fifth world', are dangerous reflections of news as such journalism is a powerful opinion shaper. As Boas describes:

'Through the media we are fed horror states of red-eye, drugged monsters in the form of young men who seemingly kill without purpose or remorse. Their only objective seems to be their own survival and the 'pleasure' to be found in rape and looting. The reasons for this are seemingly greed and hatred in their most basic forms' (2001, p697).

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In contrast to the primordial understanding that tribalism is a natural state for Africa where conflict is inevitable, this essay supports a social constructivist view that ethnicity and identity has been constructed and politicised (Berman, 2010). Thus primordial suggestions within the primitive barbarism argument are best described as 'The New Racism' (Barker, 1981). An Us-Them dichotomy is perpetuated by the media in particular which plays on an emotional association to a national consciousness to securitise issues. As in the coverage of the war in Sierra Leone, a shallow reflection of events disseminates human differences, when in fact in biological terms, we are all alike, and thus differences are constructed and accentuated (Barker, 1981). This essay will focus on critiquing primordial barbarisms' perception of random violence, and greed based motivations reflecting a tribal condition in Africa, the arguments regarding the environment and overpopulation as causes for war are beyond the scope of this essay, however Richards (1996) provides a persuasive analysis proving that these issues are not directly linked to conflict.

Greed Critique

The economist position disputes grievances as the main driver of wars, supporting the narrative of how actors 'do well out of war' (Collier, 1999; Keen, 2012). In Sierra Leone, resource competition is suggested to fuel greed-based wars, where 'diamonds sustain the rebels who terrorise the place' (The Economist, 2000). To some extent it is true that in Sierra Leone economic motivations were apparent on behalf of RUF commanders and Nigerian peacekeepers doing illicit diamond deals, and security was privatised as seen in the role of PMC Executive Outcomes (Silberfein, 2004). Furthermore the loose border controls and international dimension of blood diamonds suggest that economic motives were a factor. Rhetoric from RUF leaders such as Foday Sankoh declaring that; 'We're not going to give up our guns or diamonds to anybody. This is how we will get POWER right now!' (In Reno, 2002, p853), thus contributes to assumptions of greed. However, through a statistical-based analysis, the economist arguments neglect genuine social and political grievances which are rooted in issues of inequality (Stewart, 2008). More nuance is required to develop who actually benefits from resource competition in conflict, as in Sierra Leone the greed theory does apply to some extent to rebel and army commanders, political elites, chiefs and international diamond buyers. But for the vast majority of Sierra Leone society, greed was not a motivation (Boas and Dunn, 2007). Additionally, economic motivations in most wars are inevitable, thus they should not be utilised to justify overlooking social and political complexities.

Neopatrimonial State Failure

In contrast to the journalistic approach framing the war as primitive barbarism, and the economist approach emphasising greed theory; the political scientist approach provides a more comprehensive analysis to understand the war in Sierra Leone. The failure of neopatrimonialism created the context for unrest, and the continued patronage networks contributed to the duration and escalation of the conflict. Neopatrimonialism refers to a cyclical system, where access to resources and opportunities in return for political support is exchanged between patron and client. Within these patriarchal power structures, 'big men' use personality politics to access resources through the 'gate', which is outlined by (Cooper, 2002) as the externally recognised legal and political institute. As Beresford (2015) argues, corruption is a pervasive symptom but is not synonymous of gatekeeper politics. Big men aim to access resources for both public and private interests, consequently the lines between formal and informal networks are blurred. Reno (2002) examines how in Sierra Leone, big men can wield political authority through private access to the diamond resource. Such informal markets and the networks which benefit from them have the effect of decaying the official state institutions. This notion of a weakened façade of formal institutions hiding the networks of the criminalised state is coined as the 'Shadow State' (Reno, 1995). As access to resources is dominated through these informal and often corrupt networks, basic services and infrastructure are neglected or unfairly distributed along patronage channels. In Sierra Leone, the looting of the state by big men and the erosion of formal institutions created a volatile pre-war environment which Allen (1999) argues created a situation where terminal spoils led the explosion and subsequent collapse of the state. The conflict has shown how society has augmented prolonged discontent with neopatrimonial rule through violence, however the informal patronage networks continued in this new context of war.

Chieftdoms

The Chieftdoms are critical actors within the patronage networks in Sierra Leone. Much of the post-war literature

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refers to the reinstatement of the paramount Chiefs as a bolstering of the centralised elitism which provoked the grievances driving the war (Hanlon, 2005; Fanthorpe, 2005). The Chiefs power extends from colonial indirect rule, this autonomy is rooted in the isolation and underdevelopment of rural areas and is characterised by corruption and mismanagement, where again formal institutions are eroded by informal networks. For example, Minikin (1973) notes that elections involve an individual not showing support for a political party, but for a candidate that your faction within the Chiefdom supports. Then once in power, the politician will place a client on the Chiefdom council in order to access local resources and the Chief will in turn receive political favour (Fanthorpe, 2005). Evidently, Sierra Leone society suffer from this endemic corruption, although it must be noted that they too are actors within the patronage networks and can gain from every-day corruption (De-Sarden, 1999). But as the networks favour those in power, and are often based upon ethnic or kinship ties, the system is unjust. For instance the post-war Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Sierra Leone highlighted that elites were to blame for the peasant grievances in the war:

‘Successive political elites plundered the nation’s assets, including its mineral riches, at the expense of the national good. Youths became easy prey for unscrupulous forces who exploited their disenchantment to wreak vengeance against the ruling elite. The Commission holds the political elite of successive regimes in the post-independence period responsible for creating the conditions for conflict.’ (TRC, 2004).

Political and Social Grievances

An example of peasant grievances stemming from the Chiefdom system is the informal courts, where ad hoc fines are often paid off through coercive labour to the village elites. Mokuwa et al (2001) have carried out an ethnographic study into the issue of bride-service. Traditional bride negotiations must involve an elder male family member or patron, thus following their aid in finding a wife, the young man is in debt to this patron who will generally require unpaid labour. Polygamy is relatively common amongst wealthy village elders, who will pay for a women, and then manage her marriage negotiation to a poorer man. Through the informal courts and dominance of the Chiefs, young men in particular can face labour exploitation or fines. In particular, at peak harvest season, Mokuwa et al (2011) found a significant rise in agricultural labour requirement tied to bride-service debts. Richards (2005) persuasively argues that these rigid marriage requirements and forced labour were significant factors for the grievances which fuelled RUF recruitment. Consequently the importance of finding nuanced understanding to the nature of conflict is vital, as here the peasant grievances against the unequal power relations of the Chiefdoms is evident and provides the cultural depth which primitive barbarism neglects.

Political and social grievances can be understood on a spectrum of structural violence (Kelly, 1998). Conceptualising violence beyond direct and physical constraints, Galtung (1969) identifies poverty and inequality as forms of structural violence. In pre and post war Sierra Leone, the lack of opportunity and human integration, but also lack of violence suggests that there is a negative peace. However, during the war, both direct and indirect violence were interrelated and perpetuated, contributing to the intensity of the brutality which was built upon deep-rooted patterns of violence and marginalisation embedded in society. The rage against dysfunctional neopatrimonialism and the looting of the state by big men under the shadow economy, led to an eruption of violence and a marginalised support base for the RUF. In contrast to the notion of war as business, in this case war can be seen as social exclusion (Richards, 1995).

RUF and COIN

The Counter-Insurgency (COIN) literature is useful here to analyse the RUF from a military perspective. To prove that in contrast to the primitive barbarism view that crazed, gluttonous rebels partake in ‘shapeless and formless conflict’, the RUF can largely be seen as a traditional insurgency group, with contemporary features. Notwithstanding that their use of violence was truly barbaric, but it was part of a calculated strategy of dirty war as opposed to random aggression.

Traditionally insurgencies were revolutionary aimed at over-throwing states, whereas contemporary insurgencies tend to focus more on a global ideology and gaining control of resources (Boas and Dunn, 2007). In Sierra Leone, the first phase of the war saw the RUF adopting a traditionalist approach. The RUF’s discourse had a clear populist

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theme, emphasising political and social grievances such as education and housing. Its political aims of overthrowing a dysfunctional state, hierarchical structure and reliance on the population situate it within a revolutionary framework (Spear, 2013; Kilcullen, 2006). Furthermore, their agenda is within a specific regional context, where rural areas are central, suggesting that they lack the global character of contemporary insurgencies (Jones and Smith, 2010). The contemporary features demonstrated are directly linked to the diamond resource, the RUF focuses on mining as opposed to civilian administration and is linked internationally through the trade. Before its shift to a more survivalist movement, it seems that the RUF can originally be described as a traditional insurgent group, with revolutionary goals but with a resource dimension (Richards, 1996).

Recruitment

When examining the RUF's recruitment strategy, it is clear that they effectively manipulated social and political grievances within a broader context of disengagement with the neopatrimonial state amongst the young in particular. A consequence of the Shadow State is that formal state functions in building infrastructure and service provision are undermined as access to resources are restricted to informal networks. The RUF's social makeup is reflective of the marginalisation of agricultural labourers and students. Mokuwa et al (2011) report that one in five RUF recruits were farmers, 42 per cent were school pupils and one quarter referred to being unable to find a marital partner through the rigid traditional system, whereas a small minority listed diamonds as a motivation. Again proving the significance of grievances rather than greed in driving the conflict.

The RUF as a group dependent on the population, directed its rhetoric to control of the masses through either strategies of repression, or winning the hearts and minds (Kilcullen, p122). For example the populist motto, 'no more master, no more slave' (Mokuwa et al, 2011, p362) referred to unpaid agricultural labour, and the raiding of underdeveloped, rural schools for recruits is reflective of both the shocking tactic of child soldiers, but also the effective dirty war strategy of manipulating the disenfranchised. Richards (1996) highlights how deep rooted structural violence, such as lack of educational opportunities, impacted upon youth radicalisation. The RUF is referred to as an apprenticeship where recruits learn a bush education. Furthermore culture and media were utilised to ignite frustrations at the dysfunctional state. For example, the film Rambo epitomised feelings of anger and disengagement with unjust power structures, thus the natural environment of the rainforest and bush knowledge were essential tools to overcome the status quo. Rather than inciting violence under the guise of new barbarism, Richards describes this use of media as 'cultural inventiveness' (1996, p114). The RUF's political aim of accountable governance can be overlooked due to the extent of brutal violence, whilst the recruitment strategies were extremely harsh and many faced 'choiceless decisions' (Coulter, 2008, p68), the RUF was able to gain widespread support by playing on social and political grievances.

Reno (2002) argues that the original populist agenda the RUF promoted was undermined by continued patronage networks which monopolised commerce and economic opportunities. As the state collapses, and patrimonial networks alter, patron-client relations shift but are still apparent. For instance, the gatekeepers are the same elites but working within military circles, and the 'cake' is arms and protection (Beresford, 2015). In this context, the genuine grievances and revolutionary aspirations to make significant changes to the power order are undermined. For example, the fluidity of fighters between factions, the forming of a RUF-army coalition and the post-war reinstatement of the paramount chiefs suggest that the rebellion against neopatrimonialism has failed. But the central point here is that the RUF originally was a calculated organisation with a political agenda, despite their dirty war tactics they should be understood through a more nuanced framework than primitive barbarism.

Brutality of the War

The brutality of the war in Sierra Leone is understood by the primitive barbarism perspective to be a result of chaotic, inhumane behaviour. Kaplan argues that 'a pre-modern formlessness governs the battlefield, evoking the wars in Medieval Europe' (Kaplan, 1994). At a shallow level, the extent of brutality, the lack of heavy weapons, the reliance on the forest, and ambush tactics correspond with Kaplan's portrayal of new barbarism. However this perception is significantly flawed as it neglects the symbolism of violence, and the military strategies employed. For example, the method of cutting hands was in response to the states call to unite and hold hands, and again it was used against

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female farmers to send a message to hungry recruits not to join the harvest which was a callous but effective strategy preventing defections (Richards, 1996). Due to the RUF's lack of heavy machinery, fear tactics and cultural bush knowledge were used to overcome the arms asymmetry. Displacement was a tactic to gain control of mining areas and create an environment of upheaval. As Richards's states; 'The tactics have been fully effective in disorientating, traumatizing, and demoralizing victims of violence. In short, they are devilishly well-calculated' (1996 p16).

The RUF are often assumed to be an undisciplined group with no policy guidelines (Abdullah, 1998). However, Marks' (2015) ethnographic research into the RUF's strict rape policy disputes such assumptions. The role of female combatants in the RUF broke social taboos regarding gender relations as women undertook multifaceted roles as 'fighters, rape victims, looters, mothers, lovers' (Coulter, 2008, p69). Again the realignment of patronage networks to a war setting meant that as a bush wife, women would be able to access resources within new sexual contracts (Pateman, 1990). In this context, the RUF enforced strict rules regarding rape which was punishable and preventative rape measures such as 'Operation Fine Girl' sought to marry fighters to eradicate their desire to rape. Although, inter-marital rape was perceived as acceptable, commanders would be above the rule of law regarding rape, and there was a key distinction between rape policy at the frontline and the bases. There was more discipline and some room for female power structures, for instance 2/3rds of bush wives didn't run away (Marks, 2015). Therefore the complex nature of organisational structures within insurgent groups where individuals can navigate power hierarchies must not be oversimplified by assumptions of random brutality and disorganised rebellion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay has provided a critical analysis of primitive barbarism of Sierra Leone society as an explanation for the brutality of the conflict. This concept contributes to the flaw within the journalistic approach of making shallow judgements concerning the immediacy of war, thus is best described as 'The New Racism' (Barker, 1982). Greed as a central motivation has been disputed, as although there are undoubtedly economic factors as in all wars, they do not apply to the majority of Sierra Leone society and do not explain the duration and intensity of violence. Instead the impact of social and political grievances provide more insight into the brutality. In the context of dysfunctional neopatrimonialism, 'big men' erode the authority formal institutions through the informal networks of the Shadow State (Reno, 2002). The subsequent lack of basic resources and underdevelopment has marginalised the rural youth in particular who are disengaged with unfair power structures. The paramount chiefs are high ranking actors who have manipulated patronage channels to dominate rural areas. Their corruption and mismanagement has resulted in deep rooted peasant grievances regarding exploitive labour through the informal court system. The disenfranchised agricultural labours and students made up the majority of recruits which the RUF targeted through populist discourse. The RUF as a largely traditionalist insurgent group used callous but calculated tactics in direct contradiction to the random violence highlighted by primitive barbarism. Through the militarist COIN perspective, the organisational complexities of the RUF have shown that its dirty war tactics are reflective of symbolic violence and military strategies employed to overcome arms asymmetry. Furthermore the anarchy implied by primitive barbarism is convincingly disputed by Marks (2015) ethnographic research on disciplined rape policy. Overall it is clear that primitive barbarism is inherently flawed in explaining the brutality of the war. More nuance is required, as the combination of grievances rooted in dysfunctional neopatrimonialism and the politically motivated dirty war insurgency tactics of the RUF explain the brutality of the violence.

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