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# Hunter Militias and the International Human Rights Discourse in Sierra Leone and Beyond

Mariane C. Ferme and Danny Hoffman

*In this article, we examine how irregular combatants in the “hunter” militias in Sierra Leone defined themselves and their objectives in dialogue with the human-rights discourse of international humanitarian organizations that intervened in the conflict and the peace initiatives that punctuated it, particularly from the mid-1990s onwards. We suggest that the moral subject envisioned by international doctrines of humanitarianism overlapped with codes of conduct prescribed in the course of initiations into hunting militias, especially in areas where these militias remained accountable and loyal to local political hierarchies. This undermines any simple notion of a total moral breakdown and disregard for civilian lives and rights. However, we also suggest that once militias left their local functions of grassroots civil defense units and moved beyond the territories where they were recruited, they made strategic decisions in combat based on a selective interpretation of humanitarian discourse and practices. This transformation shows how changing perceptions of the terms of engagement produced sometimes diverging, other times parallel interpretations of the moral dilemmas at stake, as the conflict (and its containment) shifted in scale to broader national, regional, and international arenas.*

## Introduction

During the 1990s, the conflict zone that moved across the border regions of Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea brought international initiatives to help put an end to violence, and eventually work toward reconstruction in its aftermath. Sierra Leone became the centerpiece of pacification efforts in the region, as the international community poured in some US\$2 billion to shore up the peace process in the country. By April 2002, the United

Nations peacekeeping force (UNAMSIL) accounted for more than 18,000 among military personnel, military observers, civilian police, and local and international civilian support staff, with an annual budget of US\$717.6 million. This was the largest U.N. deployment anywhere in the world, in a relatively small country, which has only about 4.5 million inhabitants. The interventions of other humanitarian organizations have been equally impressive: for example, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), one of the major actors in promoting humanitarian conduct in war and its aftermath through training programs in cooperation with the armed forces, had a 2002 budget of about US\$14.5 million for Sierra Leone.<sup>1</sup>

In this article, we are especially interested in the contributions this massive intervention made by the United Nations, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and other entities to the spread of a human-rights discourse that shaped the ways in which irregular combatants—in particular those known as hunters, *Kamajors*, and later, Civil Defense Forces (CDF)—came to define themselves and their goals. Far from arguing for a top-down change instigated by the introduction of a new discourse and of all the premises on which it is predicated (e.g., universalizing claims of equal worth of any human life, autonomous subjectivity, etc.), we show instead how the “practices of the self” and ethical codes developed within the hunting militias—which were in part inherited from regional political and social history—overlapped remarkably with the kind of subjectivity envisioned by international doctrines of humanitarian combat. This interpretation undermines the notion that irregular combatants have more disregard for civilian lives and rights than regular armies—even though in our analysis we do point to evidence that irregulars did commit atrocities during the war. But our emphasis here is on the strategic decisions in combat that show a selective engagement with humanitarian discourse and practices as a result of the fighters’ awareness of international responses to different kinds of conduct in war, as they gained experience in different conflicts. In particular, ethnographic evidence suggests that in this regard attitudes changed with the increasing engagement of international actors, especially after 1996, and with the shift in fighting from Sierra Leone, where in January 2002 the war was declared formally over, to areas across the border in Liberia.<sup>2</sup>

### The *Kamajors*

The *Kamajors* are a predominantly Mende militia, the largest and most powerful of a heterogeneous group of ethnic paramilitaries loosely allied under the umbrella of the Civil Defense Forces (CDF) in Sierra Leone. The term *kamajor* is generally translated in Sierra Leone and in the international media as “traditional hunter,” a translation that fails to capture the variable social roles a *kamajor* held before the war in different parts of the country, and more importantly, the variable nature of his life and codes of conduct in organized hunting associations. Furthermore, the

portrayal of *kamajors* as a kind of premodern archetype is contradicted by their historical association with modern technology and weaponry (Ferme 2001a; Griaule 1965; Legassick 1966).<sup>3</sup> The small number of *kamajors* in the southeastern Mende chiefdoms where they emerged as a fighting force numbered perhaps one or two to a village or collection of villages, and were responsible for hunting game, but also for protecting the community from human and animal dangers with their weapons. For this reason, in historical narratives and folktales of the Upper Guinea region of West Africa (an area roughly overlapping with the three countries comprising the Mano River Union: Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone), the distinction between hunters and warriors sometimes was blurred.<sup>4</sup> The *kamajor* was supposed to command secret knowledge and protective medicines relating to hunting activities in the forest, but these could easily be coopted for secretive political dealings in urban settings (where during the twenty years preceding the civil war urban hunting societies composed primarily of youth often became embroiled in partisan thuggery), and, with the unfolding of the war, they inevitably also lost their link to local codes of accountability as they moved farther afield from the territories where they were recruited as grassroot militias. To wit:

In invoking Mande hunting folklore and a much more ancient historical heritage, participants in the war, and analysts too, downplay crucial events in which hunting societies became implicated, through sometimes sinister alliances, with the government of the day on both local and national arenas, and in the domains of politics as much as of cultural performances (Ferme 2001a: 131).

In the early 1990s, local hunters' familiarity with the rural terrain led to their employment by the military as trackers and guides in the bush war against the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone. Not surprisingly, the origin stories that describe the early days of the movement are highly politicized and variable; nevertheless, there is general agreement that the "original" hunter-militiamen were *tamaboros* from the Koranko-dominated areas of the North. These and other militias intervened in the Mende-speaking southeastern part of the country, where the early phases of the civil war unfolded, and among the militias organizing in this region the *kamajors* eventually emerged as the largest group. The *gbethi* organized later, and their own leaders recognized that they never succeeded in capturing the degree of attention that the *kamajors* achieved.<sup>5</sup>

Conventional wisdom associated the *tamaboros* with Koranko ethnicity, the *gbethis* with the Temne, and the *donsos* with the Kono. All three ethnic and linguistic groups are identified geographically with the north of the country. In addition, toward the end of the war, the peninsula around and including Freetown on the Atlantic coast was, at least officially, considered to be the domain of the OBHS, or "Organized Body of Hunting

Societies," composed of Krios and young men of other ethnic groups, whose primary residence was the capital. But, as mentioned earlier, these ethnic markers were as much an artifact of the unfolding political and military alliances as of any fixed identity predating the war. The role of these militias in combat was formalized in 1995, with the crucial intervention in the conflict of South African mercenaries working for the private security firm Executive Outcomes. This force was brought in by the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC), the military junta that ruled Sierra Leone between 1992 and 1996, to help combat the RUF rebels. Indeed, Executive Outcomes's systematic deployment and training of hunters and CDF forces may account at least in part for their military successes where the earlier deployment of Nepalese Gurkha mercenaries had failed. By the middle of the decade, then, the number of *kamajors* (and their counterparts from other ethnic groups) grew substantially as communities mobilized to defend themselves when the national army failed to do so, and in some cases joined in preying on rural communities. In Sierra Leone, *kamajor* came to refer to any man initiated into the militia, whether he had previously been a hunter or not (and most had not).<sup>6</sup> When President Kabbah and the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) came to power in 1996, these militias played an increasingly important security role in the country, especially after the departure of Executive Outcomes mercenaries later that year. The newly-elected president appointed the *kamajor* leader Chief Sam Hinga Norman as Deputy Minister of Defense. These factors, along with cuts in military personnel and in their food subsidies, led to the alienation of sectors within the military, which organized a coup in May 1997 (Zack-Williams 1999:152). Thus even at that time the logic of clientelism that had characterized the "corrupt APC times" against which the fighting factions declared themselves was still at work, albeit in favor of different elements. The military were being held accountable for their earlier complicities with rebels in the phase of conflict during which the hunter groups emerged as grassroots local defense militias. By the 1996 elections, disgruntled military cadres perceived themselves excluded from the dividends of "democratization" efforts—political and economic favors, access to training and employment, ministerial posts—which were at the time supported by the international community (Ferre 1999: 160–191; Kandeh 2004)

The advent to power of the Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC)–RUF alliance in the May 1997 coup marked another turning point in the transformation of the *kamajor* militias, this time pushing them beyond national boundaries and giving them a regional scope of action. The ranks of the *kamajors* swelled again as irregulars were called upon to help reinstall the SLPP government-in-exile—a recruitment that extended into Liberia and Guinea and included Liberian mercenaries and Sierra Leoneans living in the region's refugee camps. In particular, the location in Guinea of President Kabbah's Sierra Leonean government in exile during the AFRC-RUF "interregnum" of May 1997–February 1998 contributed to the regionalization of CDF operations, even as the election of Charles Taylor to the

Presidency in Liberia appeared to put an end to widespread hostilities on the Liberian front. *Kamajors* operating in Sierra Leone found themselves among the main targets of the brutal AFRC-RUF regime—a fact that pushed the CDF leadership to accelerate the process of professionalizing the hunters through training, which in turn marked distinctions among the cadres, depending on whether they could handle firearms or not, and on which firearms they had been trained to use. Additionally, during this period, the esoteric ritual aspects of induction into the CDF-*kamajor* militias became more important (and the cost of initiation more expensive), and centrally controlled by a handful of initiators.

That this emphasis on large, centralized initiations and their concurrent esoteric prescriptions were in many ways the product of the transformation of the hunter militias during the course of the war, and particularly its later stages, is underscored by a conversation with one demobilized former ground commander in April 2002. The man described the “junta time” (the May 1997–February 1998 period, in which the AFRC-RUF junta was in power<sup>7</sup>) as the most fearful for hunters. In this particular rural area of Southeastern Sierra Leone, he said, the local militia until that time had been *honta gbama gbama* ‘mere hunters.’ This included the period of service under the NPRC military junta, which relinquished power in the early months of 1996, a time when the organization of the hunter militias had already achieved a considerable degree of formalization. The demobilized hunter showed a fading yellow ID card bearing the NPRC logo and identifying him as a “combatant.” Though the card bore no issue date, he said he had acquired it after joining the hunters in 1994, when he and most of the villagers from the chiefdom he inhabited escaped rebels occupying the area and took refuge in several U.N.-sponsored camps near the provincial headquarter town of Bo. Already at this time he was portrayed in photographs wearing amulets and exotic bodily decorations said to be associated with “traditional” hunting, but, he said, it was in 1997 that he joined the *halei*—the medicine, secret society—which made him and his fellow recruits into *kamajors*.

The language shifts are important here: for the more haphazard, locally organized militia activities he had engaged in beginning in 1994, this Mende man identified himself through the vernacularized version of the English word *hunter*. Ironically, the Mende word, *kamajor*, was restricted to describing his status once he had undergone the expensive initiation in Bo, during the “junta time” (he mentioned paying 50,000 leones to be initiated).<sup>8</sup> Thus, the shift from mere hunters to *kamajors* occurred as these forces became institutionalized at the national level, trained and armed in parallel with the government army, headed by a Deputy Minister of Defense (in exile during the “junta time”), and initiated en masse in large towns. Indeed, the man carried two CDF picture-identity cards in addition to his NPRC-era “combatant” identification: the oldest was issued in 1998, at a stage in which hunter militias had already undergone the transformation into Civil Defense Forces. The (Mende) “indigenization” and exoticization

of the hunters' status coincided with the increased centralization and urbanization of their organizational structures—and their incorporation within the state apparatus. By then, too, segments of the hunter militias had already operated across the borders with Guinea and Liberia, and in the process had acquired international experience and networks.

The militia came to be known everywhere by its Mende name, despite the fact that some of the earliest hunter militias active in the war were from the non-Mende-speaking North. This underscores the ascent during the war—beginning with the 1996 election of President Kabbah's SLPP—of a political establishment whose power base was in the largely Mende South-east, despite the nine-month interruption to this process brought about by the AFRC-RUF coup. The more inclusive English term *hunters* was used to characterize an earlier period, in which the status and practices of hunters' militias may have been closer to the domain of "tradition," and yet were already inextricably enmeshed in feedback loops, with their representations on an English-language-dominated international media, humanitarian, and diplomatic circuit.

With the formal declaration of an end to the war in Sierra Leone in January 2002, the *kamajors* no longer have a recognized status in that country, though participation in the movement remains a point of identification for many combatants, and demobilization resources allocated to former members are an important factor in shaping new forms of social distinction in postwar communities: however, the formal end to combat in Sierra Leone brought about a deeper division between the demobilizing elements and the professionalized segments of the CDF; many of the latter moved across the Liberian and Guinean borders to support the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) against Charles Taylor's regime. These tended to be combatants with family ties on both sides of the border, or those who had previously spent time in Liberia working and/or fighting with one of the factions in the earlier Liberian civil war. Given the extensive networks of trade and migration (voluntary and forced) throughout the Mano River region, this amounted to a substantial number of young men who expressed some degree of personal connection to communities across the national borders—an identification underscored by ethnic and linguistic allegiances that do not map onto official state boundaries. The largely unmet expectations of peacetime employment and education opportunities through Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration programs (DDR), as well as pressure from patrons with a vested interest in overthrowing the Taylor regime, have led many within this highly mobile demographic toward participation in the next phase of the now long-running Mano River War.<sup>9</sup>

## “*Kamajor, Baa Woteh*”

Conventional wisdom holds that the use of young men as irregular combatants outside the purview of the state security apparatus has led to horrific human-rights violations and an abandonment of international regulations governing armed conflict. Summarizing a 1997 U.N. report on the use and proliferation of light weapons, Andre Stemmet (2001:92) relates what has become the standard interpretation of unconventional combat troops:

The UN panel pointed out that irregular forces have little regard for the norms of international law and do not distinguish between combatants and non-combatants, with women and children, the most vulnerable groups in society, often being the main victims.

It is certainly true that few *kamajors* are conversant in the letter of international law governing peace and conflict. Still, the heart of the accusation that groups like the *kamajors* “have little regard for the norms of international law” is not that they don’t follow it to the letter, but that they don’t subscribe to its spirit—a presumably self-evident moral code of decent behavior, applicable even in times of war.<sup>10</sup> In other words, they are aware of the international pressure to act in accordance with the rules of ethical engagement in war, as prescribed by the various treaties. However, in the context of a civil war of this duration, the very distinction between foe and civilian, outsider and insider, adult and child becomes blurred. In this conflict, there were moral aporia posed by the blurred distinctions between enemy factions (as indicated by the figure of the *sobel* mentioned earlier), which jeopardized the very possibility of applying consistently the demands of international laws regarding conduct in war.

There is no doubt that *kamajors* committed serious abuses during the course of the war.<sup>11</sup> No armed force, conventional or irregular, is able to regulate completely the behavior of all its members. This was especially true by the late stages of the war, as evidenced by the indictment in the Special Court of Chief Sam Hinga Norman for war crimes committed after November 1996. But the fact of being irregular combatants is not the determining factor the United Nations and the popular imaginary suppose it to be (not to mention the fact that such thinking gives too much credit to those combatants who happen to wear the insignia of the state). On the contrary, *kamajor* identity is largely built around exactly those norms of right conduct that lie at the heart of international regulations and the discourse of human rights promoted by global NGOs. To a point, it is an ethical foundation that served to limit abuses: like many irregular militias, *kamajors* emerged from a social context with conceptions of right behavior and moral conduct that remained relevant despite (in fact, because of) the war—a social context that reflected both standing ideas about the moral responsibilities of manhood and political citizenship, and more recent political histories.

The phrase “*Kamajor, baa woteh*” occurs repeatedly in war songs, praise-poems, and conversations with ex-combatants recounting the war; in many ways, it encapsulates the movement’s understanding of itself. “*Kamajor, do not turn back*” is more than a mantra against retreat from the front. It is meant to suggest a moral foundation at the heart of *kamajor* identity. Although parts of the Mende-dominated Southeast of Sierra Leone were subject to attacks and occasional occupation by the RUF, the greatest threat for much of the duration of the war came from the so-called *sobel*s (soldier-rebels), who in some cases collaborated with the RUF and frequently impersonated them or used their presence as an excuse to solicit protection money or stage ambushes of their own (Abdullah 1997; Abdullah and Muana 1998; Ferme 2001b; Reno 1998; Richards 1996; Zack-Williams 1997). Even now, the highway between Bo and Kenema is littered with the burnt skeletons of vehicles—the result of a fairly common ruse, in which Sierra Leone Army (SLA) soldiers insisted that travelers join military convoys for protection from rebel attacks only to stage such attacks themselves. SLA troops set up checkpoints around both Bo and Kenema, and villagers from the surrounding communities who had been sheltering in the towns at night for security were “taxed” by soldiers as they came and went from their fields—ostensibly a contribution to the war effort.

It is against this backdrop that the majority of *kamajors* were recruited, and against which their identity was forged. It was a conception defined largely in the negative: we are the ones who do not do what soldiers do—namely, turn against the civilians, whom a military force is created to protect. *Kamajor, baa woteh*, then, is partly an injunction against preying on the noncombatant populace. The result was a lower incidence of abuses committed by the *kamajors* than their counterparts in other factions, despite a similar demographic profile (though with the end of the war, more CDF abuses than originally suspected are being uncovered, particularly in cases where the link between individual *kamajor* units and their home communities was broken by deployment elsewhere in the country).<sup>12</sup>

The account of one CDF member’s role in the infamous January 1999 rebel attack on Freetown, where thousands of casualties resulted from atrocities perpetrated by all parties to the conflict, illustrates aspects of the ethical codes governing this force’s conduct. Interviewed in 2002 in Bo, a CDF commanding officer made an important distinction between goods that were legitimate versus illegitimate targets for looting.<sup>13</sup> He began listing goods he and his men looted, starting with a fleet of motorbikes from UNICEF. Next came computers from another U.N. office, then bottles of beer and packets of rum from the national brewery. “There were truckloads of fowl from Grafton,” he said, referring to a village in the greater Freetown area known for its chicken farms. “We ate well then. In war, you eat very well.” In some ways, this Commanding Officer (CO)’s recollections of the January 6<sup>th</sup> invasion confirm the worst about the war in Sierra Leone; however, his account also suggests an awareness of boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate appropriations, and of where these were to be

respected in this particular combat setting. The U.N. material, he said, should have been the legitimate property of the people of Sierra Leone as the designated recipients of U.N. assistance (assistance that many combatants feel is denied them by the illicit appropriation of those resources by U.N. bureaucrats on the ground). The products of the national brewery were both legitimate spoils and necessary provisions for a fighting unit (again, often denied the rightful beneficiaries by corrupt middlemen). "But you know," he said, "I'm proud that we never looted the center of the city. We could have destroyed Freetown, but in the center of the city, no one touched a thing." He went on to explain that targeting the businesses of "the people" would have been both morally reprehensible and politically indefensible for a military whose purpose was the protection of the civilian populace.

Other examples of commitment to a moral code of conduct in warfare on the part of *kamajors* are their battle names, which often expressed similar values. Thus one former *kamajor* claimed that his battle name had been *Ko go Ngewova*, "To fight for God," because "God will reward me for my fighting. . . . I seek no earthly reward."<sup>14</sup> In some instances, the moral rectitude expressed in battle names draws from the presumption of political legitimacy, as evidenced by the popularity of names such as "Democracy" and "Justice" as field monikers. And while the story related by the CDF commander earlier suggests that in practice earthly rewards were not always disdained, or at least not by all *kamajors*, the picture offered by these accounts is hardly one of random looting and attacks or revelry in wanton violence.

The moral resonances of *kamajor* identity were made manifest in a series of taboos and restrictions imposed on individual combatants by their initiation into the militia. Every *kamajor* was required to pass through a series of instructions designed to instill the rules of behavior expected of an initiate, and most importantly to provide them with the medicine that makes their bodies impervious to enemy fire. Some of these restrictions were general and coincided with taboos demarcating gendered space and the practices of everyday life predating the war; for instance, prohibitions on eating particular foods, or sitting on overturned rice mortars (Ferme 2001b). Others specifically stressed a military discipline: a *kamajor* was prohibited from looting villages, committing rape, and even having contact with a woman while in battle dress. The penalty for failure to abide by these restrictions was the loss of the occult protections—a serious penalty indeed for an active combatant. What's more, most *kamajors* had previously been instructed in the accepted standards of moral conduct by initiation into the Poro secret society, the bush training-school that imparts to young Mende men the expectations of manhood, including the moral conduct of war and the relationship of a man to his community.

Although the genealogy of the movement is a contested and polarizing issue, it is clear that the precursors to the *kamajors* as an organized body were mobilizations of Poro (to which the majority of the region's adult male population belongs). The early mobilization of men in Kenema were

referred to as *hindo hindo* ‘man man,’ the words with which Poro members are called together, and drew on the same tenets of masculine responsibilities and punishments for nonparticipation that characterize Poro. We would also suggest that a significant impetus behind the taboos was that it defined *kamajor* behavior as against the behavior of those who posed the greatest threat to the community—the officially sanctioned state security apparatus. In this sense, then, the foundation of *kamajor* identity is an ethical one, and one in keeping with the spirit of those international accords of war which irregular combatants are assumed to ignore, as well as the discourse of international rights propagated through the U.N. agencies and NGOs.

The *kamajors’* relationship to those international norms, and the discourse of human rights through which they are promulgated, go further still. In addition to reading aloud to their men from military manuals, commanders or their literate secretaries sometimes read from reports and guidelines by Amnesty International and other human-rights organizations as part of their training programs—for the express reason that a legitimate fighting force needed to be conversant in the laws of war. Although the slowness with which the international community (as well as the Freetown elite) acknowledged the war in Sierra Leone has now become an article of faith, we want to signal here precisely the kind of “work” this faith produces, namely the active misrecognition that the United Nations, NGOs, and monitoring organizations were an important and enduring presence in the warscape of the country.<sup>15</sup> Through direct contact with combatants, the circulation of published reports (particularly among the CDF leadership), and international media (such as the widely monitored BBC “Focus on Africa” reports), these bodies expressed “world opinions” about the war, how it was, and how it should be conducted, which were accessible to combatants in the bush. If anything, the *kamajors* overestimated the extent to which recognized militaries educate their soldiers in human-rights issues, but the result was that the treatment of civilians and prisoners of war was made an issue in the training of combatants. CDF training manuals further reflect what was perceived to be the international standards that marked a legitimate fighting force.<sup>16</sup>

Thus a 1999 report by the CDF-restructuring committee entitled “Recommended Values and Standards” states, after a list of 17 “values and standards,” that:

One of our ultimate desires in taking arms was to restore RULE of LAW of this country. It is therefore obligatory that as peace and tranquility gain momentum in the country, every CDF personnel is subject to the Civil Law wherever he finds himself serving, and has a duty to uphold it. In that respect, CDF personnel are not different from other citizens, and therefore shall be punished for all civil and criminal offences as stipulated in the constitution of this country. . . . In addition, we have resolved in our Restructuring process

that when deployed on operations, CDF are subjected to the laws of armed conflict and to the laws of the locality in which they find themselves deployed. (RSLCDF 1999)

The report makes clear that “the values and standards laid down herein be read and explained in the simplest language and form, to all CDF personnel.” A second document recording the proceedings of a national consultative conference in 2000 places the CDF within a history of “legitimate” civil-defense movements, including the U.S. government’s creation of volunteer forces during World War II and the Korean conflict (RSLCDF 2000). As the passage above suggests, the increasing awareness of international and national laws does not come at the expense of “the laws of locality,” the local ethical and legal codes in operation in specific sites of operation—the attention to which was from the inception one of the distinctive features of hunter militias, in contrast with other parties to the war.

In addition to the regulations on individual conduct, the movement as a whole was cast in terms largely derived from a global political context. In the wake of the 1997 coup, when the *kamajors* and their counterparts joined with ECOMOG, the Nigeria-led West African peacekeeping force, to reinstall the SLPP government, “We Fight for Democracy” became the group’s official slogan, a move that linked its cause to the defense of a universal principle of rightful self-governance. In contrast to the Cold War mantras of revolution and “militariat” governance, adopted by armed factions throughout the continent (including the RUF rebels and the AFRC junta), the *kamajor* leadership was careful to frame its cause in an internationally recognized discourse of the defense of a free society under military threat—an action that international norms governing conflict condone as a legitimate justification for violence. A similar logic governed the discussions over the name of the movement that emerged as the LURD in Liberia, in which certain members of the CDF command played an important role. Of numerous militant-sounding alternatives, Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy was eventually selected as the name that conveyed an appropriate level of commitment to an ideal thought to be palatable to an international audience. What’s more, *kamajors* everywhere routinely referred to their activities, and indeed to their very reason for being, as “the defense of life and property,” suggesting a level of standardized inculcation at work in the movement. In Sierra Leone, they considered themselves the “true” state military when the national forces revealed themselves to be simply another armed faction cloaked in the state seal, and took steps to organize and indoctrinate their members with training and a philosophy concomitant with that role.

There is evidence that the ethical constraints linked to initiation into a “*kamajor* medicine society” during the war are still at work in the reverse process of demobilization with the war’s ending, at least for the rank-and-file of the movement who returned to rural areas they inhabited before the outbreak of the war. In January 2002, with the completion of

the disarmament phase of the DDR campaign, the war in Sierra Leone was declared officially over, and the demobilization and reintegration programs proceeded apace. At that point, no weapons and hunting regalia (clothes, headdresses, protective amulets) could be displayed, and the reason given was that this would “spoil the medicine” and visit disaster on the culprit. During the weeks leading up to the May 2002 elections, this prohibition may have contributed to the relative absence of violence, which had characterized pre-electoral campaigning in rural areas in previous elections. Another factor was the spread of a discourse of rights and democracy that had paradoxically taken hold during the thick of the war, with the intensification of human-rights initiatives at all levels, including in training combat forces in international human-rights law and war conventions. In the post-war phase, this discourse was linked to the electoral process and governance more generally. Two demobilized *kamajors* in Sierra Leone discussing the pacification process—for which they praised Kabbah’s SLPP regime that at the time was seeking reelection—had this to say on the matter:

We have democracy now, we didn’t before, because now we have rights. Right now, here, I have rights; that man too—he said, pointing to the friend walking alongside him—has rights. . . . All of us, every single one of us has rights. Things were not this way during the APC time [the All Peoples’ Congress single-party government, which had been in power in 1991, when the war began, and had dominated politics during most of the previous two decades].<sup>17</sup>

During this conversation, the emphasis in spoken and body language was on the novelty of the *individual* aspect of these rights—on the fact that, for the first time, this young man felt authorized to speak as an individual distinct from his friend over there, to whom he pointed, and to a more senior man, who was also part of the group. In repeating for each of them that they had rights in the same words, he was stressing their *sameness* in this respect. He emphasized the importance of this by turning once again to the elder and repeating his formula, thus implicitly stressing the changed situation with respect to the “APC times”: the old male-dominated, gerontocratic, hierarchical order no longer held sway—or at least was being challenged.

This stance went beyond the rhetorical domain to changed practices, for instance whenever resources intended for collectivities (local teachers, rural villages, professional associations, members of political bodies) were distributed. Where in prewar years a corporatist logic would have governed such distributions, which would have been handed over to a senior member of the group for allocation within associations, rural extended households, and so on, now there was an insistence that this be done on an individual basis, no matter how time-consuming the process, or how small the amount that ended up in the hands of each woman or man, young or old. Thus the discourse of rights affected a much broader segment of the

population than the *kamajors*, though in many settings these were among the main agents for the introduction of this discourse. But as we shall see below, the *kamajors'* adherence to codes of moral responsibility also had strong roots in particular localities, and thus underwent a transformation with the shift and reduction of their activities under the LURD umbrella in Guinea and Liberia.

## Combatants and Noncombatants

If the international human-rights discourse promoted by the United Nations and NGOs operating in Sierra Leone articulates with certain *kamajor* ideals of legitimate conduct at war, that discourse was nevertheless selectively and strategically applied by the militia. Particularly in the later stages of the conflict (and now as some of them participate with the LURD faction in Liberia), the *kamajors* drew on both the rhetoric employed by the international community and lessons learned from the implementation of crisis-response programs in ways that often run counter to the intentions of the international agencies.

As mentioned earlier, the charge that irregular fighting forces do not distinguish between combatants and noncombatants as asserted in the 1997 U.N. report mentioned earlier rests on assumptions that are untrue of both the *kamajors* and conventional fighting forces. On the one hand, it assumes that professional militaries are defined by their strict adherence to the civilian-soldier distinction. As Michael Walzer has demonstrated through the U.S. experience in Vietnam, however, that distinction is inevitably a fiction:

The American rules have only the appearance of recognizing and attending to the combatant/non-combatant distinction. In fact, they set up a new distinction: between loyal and disloyal, or friendly and hostile non-combatants. (1977:193)

Those who claim to draw a firm line between combatants and noncombatants rely primarily on a "Clausewitzian" view of war, a conception of armed conflict as the exclusive domain of men on the battlefield that is no longer relevant, if ever it was. Instead, Walzer and others<sup>18</sup> suggest that warfare, at least in its contemporary manifestations, undermines clear categories; and implicitly, that the identification of combatants and noncombatants is both strategic and political. For the *kamajors*, then, the distinction is hardly irrelevant—but it is highly flexible and highly contingent, and does not rest on the *a priori* equation of noncombatants with "victims."

That the category "combatant" holds connotations outside the conventional sense of an active battlefield participant—connotations often strategically employed socially and in dealings with the international community—is demonstrated by a popular *kamajor* war song that claims

that to fight and defeat the rebels is the very essence of manhood. When asked if there were Mende men who would not join the *kamajors*, an older *kamajor* at the CDF office in Bo in August 2000 replied that if such a person could be found (and he doubted it), he would “be no better than women or children.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, to be a Mende man is in a sense to accept the responsibility of fighting in the defense of a community—of being a “combatant.” Clearly, not every Mende male actually joined the *kamajors*. When asked about specific individuals and whether their nonparticipation was an indication that they were not “real men,” there were inevitably extenuating circumstances that explained why the individual did not participate in the movement—usually that he had a job in town, was a student and therefore busy with education, or was pursuing a religious vocation. Nevertheless, by virtue of their initiation in the men’s Poro society, which dominates male sociality in this region, by giving what financial or material assistance they could, or by providing skilled labor in some cases (preparing official CDF documents, for example) such men were considered “combatants” in the sense that their status as Mende men was not called into question.

Distinctions among different categories of combatants were drawn by the *kamajors* themselves, depending on the kinds of weapons they used. Thus alongside gun-toting *kamajors*, many more demobilized hunters claimed to have fought with cutlasses—a man’s working tool in ordinary agricultural activities. Many more “hunters” fought with this instrument than with guns, and while this detail may fit in with the more gruesome impressions left in the international audience by media images of bodily mutilations, *kamajors* were among the parties in this conflict who largely abstained from this form of injury. Instead, accounts of the activities of cutlass-toting combatants suggest that their role was often more to frighten the enemy with their numbers and demeanor than to actually inflict bodily harm. Thus it is not only the distinction between combatant and noncombatant to which we need to attend, but also that among different categories of combatant and different moments in the life of combatant-farmers.

The deployment of the term “combatant” became highly politically charged in the context of the U.N.-sponsored disarmament process. According to the certificate issued by U.N. military observers to those who had been registered at the disarmament centers, a legitimate “ex-combatant” was defined only as anyone who:

demonstrated to the observer’s satisfaction that he/she has participated as an active combatant of one of the fighting forces in Sierra Leone at the time of the Lome Peace Agreement;<sup>20</sup> and . . . having delivered at least one personal weapon or belonging to a group of at most five combatants delivering at least one group weapon.

By specifying that five people could claim combatant status by presenting a single weapon, these regulations in fact helped produce the situation that

characterized many rural demobilized villages in April-May 2002 in Sierra Leone, where the majority of the adult male population could claim to have been enrolled among the CDF (and had the IDs to prove it), by turning in only a few firearms. How exactly the observer was meant to be satisfied of the connection between weapons and combatants was not made clear, and in the CDF areas, where actual weapons were frequently held in the possession of various commanders and handed out only as needed, the determination of who qualified as a combatant became the prerogative of a few highly influential people in the organization. In many cases, these determinations were based not on actual field experience, but on the willingness to pass on to a CDF patron a percentage of the commodities and financial inducements given to ex-combatants.<sup>21</sup> This practice of in essence “selling” spots in the disarmament process was widely condemned by the rank and file; nevertheless, even *kamajors* with verified combat experience who were shut out of the disarmament process by the patronage system in favor of men with no battlefield credentials maintained that no commander would give a spot to someone who was not in some sense a combatant (though this does not mean that they felt the system was particularly fair).

At the same time, even a man who is a *kamajor* is not himself always a combatant, in the sense that he is not always the person he is in combat. One of the key elements in the effectiveness of the hunting regalia and other protective materials is that it transforms the wearer, heating his heart to the point that he becomes something other than human, imbued with the forces of chaos and, in the hunting tradition, of the dangerous forest: he becomes something more than himself. If the links between masculinity, “combatant” status, and battlefield experience are flexible and contingent, the equation of female or child with noncombatant is even more open to highly localized and strategic deployment. The U.N. report cited above explicitly equates women and children with noncombatants and victims—a distinction that rests on the powerless passivity of the latter, in opposition to the aggressive power of the former. But in Mende cosmology, as in much of West Africa, a different calculus is in play. Women are not necessarily regarded as weaker, but the agents of a power that is wild and dangerous (Moran 1995). Among the many ways this manifested itself in Sierra Leone’s wartime context was through persistent rumors that prostitutes were smuggling weapons into Freetown for the RUF, and that women with babies on their backs were likely to be ferrying concealed ammunition or small arms through security checkpoints. For the *kamajors* it is also articulated in the prohibitions on contact with women while in battle dress. If not generally combatants in the literal sense of armed agents, women nevertheless defy any easy categorization as passive, nonthreatening bystanders in the drama of war.<sup>22</sup>

The same can be said of children. The widespread use of child soldiers has been one of the hallmarks of conflicts throughout Africa. Fearless and doggedly determined to follow orders, children and adolescents served, and continue to serve, quite effectively in frontline combat units. This willingness

to mobilize children as fighters must be understood within a context that does not assume the innocence of children *a priori*. Instead, children are often considered as chaotic works in process, threatening and mischievous by nature—and in many cases not fully socialized for not having undergone the rites and educational processes that make adults a person in the eyes of the community (Ferme 2001b; Goodwin-Gill and Cohn 1994). Even so, during the disarmament, CDF commanders frequently employed the U.N.'s conceptual equation of children with victimhood and lack of agency to take advantage of a provision in the disarmament protocols that allowed for the automatic enrollment in the DDR program of any person "being an underage combatant, accompanying minor, unaccompanied minor, or any other participant under the age of 18, presenting with any of the fighting factions" whether they possessed a firearm or not. That this was, however, a calculated deployment of the U.N. framework was evident at the Bo disarmament center in November 2001, when commanders initially attempted to pass underage combatants as adults because minors did not receive the financial benefits package given to adults, and could not therefore provide a percentage to their patrons (Hoffman 2003).

Thus, the distinction between combatant and noncombatant becomes meaningful and defined through practices, as evidenced by one of the more disturbing aspects of fighting in the Mano River Union countries, namely attacks on undefended villages and the mutilation of unarmed civilians. Such attacks became emblematic of conflicts in the region, and characterized wars that despite their length featured on the one hand surprisingly few encounters between armed factions, and on the other hand disproportionate civilian casualty rates.<sup>23</sup> The result has become an international cliché—the African "uncivil" war, marked by wanton killing and no purpose more sophisticated than indiscriminate marauding.

To leave it at that is to ignore some important philosophical and strategic underpinnings to the apparently senseless violence. As Paul Richards (1996) has demonstrated, for example, the tactical use of amputations has a symbolic dimension. By the later stages of the conflict in Sierra Leone, and with the shift of fighting back into Liberia, these acts have taken on a more directly material dimension. A CDF commander now affiliated with the LURD militia in Liberia explained in April 2002 that the CDF had learned its lessons from the international community's response to the RUF. Like many combatants in the CDF and the Sierra Leone Army (not to mention civilians who did not participate in any of the factions), his feeling was that RUF fighters had been disproportionately "rewarded" for their atrocities by an international community willing to give them anything to keep them from returning to the bush.<sup>24</sup> There were therefore, he maintained, two crucial strategic advantages to attacking unarmed civilians. First, such tactics served to convince villagers that the government was powerless to protect them, reinforcing a common local understanding that politicians and political factions which openly display their capacity for violence also possess the strength to protect those who accept them as patrons.<sup>25</sup> In the fighting

in Liberia, this logic helped explain the occurrence of attacks on targets that could not be held (villages deep in government territory, for example) or those that seem to have no specific military value. Second, and most important, such attacks and the dramatic demonstration of bodily violence against unarmed civilians were, in the words of the CO, “the best way to be taken seriously” by the United Nations and other (wealthy) international agencies willing to contribute resources to ending such practices. Another commander, now also with LURD, put it even more bluntly: when the time would come to attack Monrovia, he said, the important thing would be to hit the city dramatically enough to force the U.N. to intercede, “saying ‘stop the killing, stop the shooting,’ and all that bullshit,” and thereby devote resources to provision ex-combatants and rebuild the nation.<sup>26</sup> In short, the networks of information—the international media, representatives of the U.N., NGOs operating in the region—which conveyed a language of rights that became a part of the discourse of combatants simultaneously ensured that this discourse would be applied only selectively, and often in ways antithetical to the purported mission of those same organizations.<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

In this piece, we have analyzed some of the ways in which the global discourse of human rights was selectively engaged and changed, over the course of the conflict that moved across the border zones of Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea. This discourse and its legal entailments was neither ignored by the largest faction of irregular combatants in the civil war in the Mano River region, nor adopted wholesale. Rather, it offered a sometimes new, sometimes familiar vocabulary for articulating ideals that could challenge oppressive social relations of interdependence, or reproduce them. But it also opened the way to more violence in new theaters of combat, in order to secure the material resources that accompanied the international community’s involvement in successive pacification efforts in the region. This involvement produced new articulations of ethical and legal principles as well, for the war and the violent dynamics it engendered were themselves productive of linkages among local, regional, and international scales. Indeed, part of the evidence for this history-in-the-making is the whole notion of “Mano River Union” as the organizing framework for this conflict, and this area as a “region” in the discourse of policy, media, and scholarly communities—but also as an organizing framework for strategic alliances among combatants on the ground. What since its formation in the 1970s until the outbreak of war was a relatively inactive customs and economic entity became during the conflict one of the key “regional” entities in an unfolding history and space of warfare, where as of this writing, international pacification efforts have moved once again into Liberia and even beyond, in Côte d’Ivoire—the very region where the conflict first began in 1990. In this sense, too, the fact that the CDF has a specifically Sierra

Leonean origin does not obviate our use of it as the key militia through which to examine a regional conflict, for our point is precisely that if not in its inception (though our evidence says otherwise), then in its history this organization has certainly become regional in its scope, and international in its engagements. While there were shifts over time in the CDF's tactical use of atrocities committed against civilians, these shifts were never outside the discourse of rights and responsibilities too often assumed to be lacking in irregular fighting forces.

Understanding the dynamics of the relationship between the *kamajors* and international human-rights discourse is of more than simply historical interest. As indicated above, the DDR campaign and other efforts to rebuild following the declared end of the war are being defined in many local communities by the wartime experiences demobilized fighters had with international agencies and the conceptual frameworks under which they operate. And while the CDF has been officially dismantled, there have been efforts on the part of some in the government of Sierra Leone to maintain a network of civil militias known as the Territorial Defense Forces, essentially institutionalizing within the state structure a force that was previously characterized by a more ambiguous relation to the state.

Finally, as mentioned above, a large number of *kamajors* moved into Liberia and joined the ranks of the LURD faction, which helped overthrow President Charles Taylor in August 2003 and continues to operate in the countryside at the time of this writing. As indicated above, its members have taken with them the lessons of wartime Sierra Leone. On the one hand, this led to a careful attention on the part of the LURD leadership to establishing a SOP and moral code of conduct in keeping with international expectations and in contrast to the perceived lawlessness of the Liberian armed forces and its associated militias. On the other hand, some of the *kamajors* interviewed in Freetown and in northern Liberia in April 2002 argued that the restrictions under which they operated in Sierra Leone did not apply across the border, maintaining that their status as mercenaries freed them from the constraints that held during their time in Sierra Leone.<sup>28</sup> As Sierra Leone proceeds with its Special Court for war crimes with the support of the United Nations and International NGOs, it is imperative that the postwar process unfold with an understanding of the ways in which the universal aspirations of the human-rights discourse relates to practices. Our analysis has shown that combatants are keen observers of how the discourse correlates with practices on the ground—for instance, those linking atrocities to external intervention, material rewards, and disarmament. However, it also has pointed to the ways in which human-rights discourse becomes locally meaningful, and unfolds against the backdrop of the cultural politics of hunting and warrior lore in this region.

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## NOTES

1. Sources for these figures are John Prendergast, International Crisis Group, Testimony to the American Congress, 2002 (<http://www.intl-crisis-group.org/projects/showreport.cfm?reportid=657>); <http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/unamsil/>; <http://www.icrc.org>. By May 2003, the U.N. force was reduced to 13,100 troops; it is scheduled for total withdrawal by December 2004.
2. The research on which this article is based was carried out in Sierra Leone and Liberia on *kamajor* militias by D. Hoffman in July–August 2000 and September 2001–April 2002. M.C. Ferme first began working on hunting and hunters in Sierra Leone in December 1984–86, as part of a project on gendered spheres of production and material cultura in the everyday life of agrarian communities in the rural southeast (see Ferme 1992), and on broader issues relating to migration, politics and religion in Sierra Leone (1990, 1993, 2002) and among the Sierra Leonean diaspora (1993, 1997, 2002–03).
3. On the hunter as a figure of modernity in relation to natural conservation in Guinea, see Leach 2000. On the role of *kamajors* in the Sierra Leone civil war, see also Muana 1997. The term *kamajor* is an anglicized form with various Mende pronunciations. Frequently, the term appears in written form as *kamajoh*, *kamajoi*, or *kamajo*, and in the plural as *kamajesia* or *kamasesia*. We use the anglicized form here because it is the most common in media reports, government documents, and the *kamajors'* own literature, which we examine here.
4. This is evidenced most clearly in narratives of violent and volatile figures, such as Musa Wo (Cosentino 1989) and in the myths around the foundation of Mende settlements by a hunter who, "conquers either man or nature and starts off a settlement" (Muana 1997:86); see also Ferme 2001b:26–30 and Little 1967, ch. 1).
5. Susan Shepler, personal communication with M.C. Ferme, 21 October 2002. For a discussion of the broader political context for understanding in the *kamajors* the strategic "mendezation" of a much more heterogeneous range of militias, as the outcome of developments during the war, see Ferme 2001a.
6. It is impossible to gauge accurately the number of *kamajors*, for reasons discussed later in this article. Many young men, and a smaller number of women, joined the militia for only a

short period, and existing records of who participated are partial at best. The CDF leadership frequently claimed to have some 99,000 fighters under its command. Disarmament figures supplied by the United Nations upon completion of the demobilization process put the total number of ex-combatants at just over 46,000, of which some 37,000 identified themselves as CDF fighters (see John Prendergast, International Crisis Group, Testimony to the American Congress, 2002 (<http://www.intl-crisis-group.org/projects/showreport.cfm?reportid=657>). For reasons having to do with how the disarmament was conducted the latter figure is not particularly reliable, but is more realistic than the former.

7. English-speaking Sierra Leoneans refer to this period as “the interregnum,” since it was preceded and followed by the first elected term in office of President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah—who was reelected to a second term in the May 2002 elections. The material analyzed here and in the next paragraph emerged from conversations between M. C. Ferme and JK, a former “GO” (Ground Officer), interviewed in Wunde Chiefdom, Sierra Leone, in April 2002.
8. In 1993, US\$1 was equivalent to roughly 250 leones, but by April 2002 the conversion rate was 2,300 leones. This was a very large amount of money for most rural Sierra Leoneans.
9. This movement of *kamajors* across the border has been documented by international observers such as the International Crisis Group (ICG 2003), as well as by the authors.
10. On the fact that international laws governing armed conflict are largely the articulation of a moral stance, rather than a practical guideline for action, see Walzer 1977:152.
11. For accounts of atrocities committed by all parties to the conflict, including the irregular militias, see Human Rights Watch 1998, 1999.
12. See Human Rights Watch 1998, 1999. Two reports (Human Rights Watch 2003; Physicians for Human Rights 2002) point out that the overwhelming majority of cases of sexual violence were committed by RUF and AFRC forces. As of this writing, investigators with both the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Special Court for war crimes have found that CDF abuses existed on a larger scale than previously thought, referring specifically to cases of cannibalism and human sacrifice. While it seems likely that the commission of atrocities by the pro government forces was more widespread than acknowledged by apologists for the forces, it seems equally unlikely that the so-called “accountability institutions” will discover so many heretofore unknown cases as to invalidate earlier reports about the relative responsibilities for atrocities of fighting factions in this war. There is also some cause to be cautious regarding accusations of cannibalism and human sacrifice, violent actions that no doubt occurred during the war as they did before it, but whose efficacy in producing terror operates at the level of rumors too, which amplify the events in space and time well beyond their actual incidence.
13. Personal communication with D. Hoffman, Bo town, Sierra Leone 4 April 2002.
14. MCB in conversation with M. C. Ferme, Jaiama-Bongor Chiefdom April 2002.
15. For example, *Médécins Sans Frontières* has had a presence in Sierra Leone since 1986. The Red Cross movement was present in Sierra Leone through its national chapter since well before that, and in 1993 the capture of ICRC employees by rebels occupying the diamond-mining region of Kono was among the earliest acts of aggression targeting employees of humanitarian organizations in the Sierra Leonean theater of conflict. This points to another register on which awareness of international responses to conflict played an important role all along

16. There does not seem to have been one standard written text for CDF units, though *kamajors*, particularly those trained by one of the more professional factions, frequently made reference in interviews to Standard Operating Procedures (SOP). At various points in the history of the movement, different publications appeared which purported to be the definitive statement on the history of the movement and the rules of the society—frequently slanted to support one or another feuding party within the CDF leadership. Indeed, the ability to put out a written handbook on CDF operations seems to have been one way of establishing legitimacy within the movement. Access to or possession of an “official” CDF document also signified a certain importance within the militia.
17. Personal communication with M.C. Ferme, Wunde Chiefdom, Sierra Leone, 18 April 2002.
18. See, for example, Lutz 2002.
19. Personal communication with D. Hoffman.
20. The Lome Peace Accords, signed on 7 July 1999, declared a cease-fire between the government, the CDF, and the RUF, and initiated the DDR campaign—which was suspended in 2000 after the May 8 incident in Freetown in which RUF leader Foday Sankoh’s bodyguards opened fire on a crowd of protestors, and resumed again nearly a year later.
21. Although it did not become a part of the official U.N. discourse on the disarmament and demobilization process, it is clear that U.N. personnel (at least those observers at disarmament centers) recognized that their own use of the term *combatant* did not accurately describe the realities of the process. As an observer with the New Zealand contingent put it at the disarmament center in Bo, November 2001, UNAMSIL’s objective was “to get weapons out of circulation”; who turned them in was largely irrelevant. Personal communication with D. Hoffman.
22. There was a small number of armed female CDF members; frequently, their gender marked them as particularly fearsome among their male counterparts. Perhaps the most famous of these is Mama Munda Fortune, the female *kamajor* initiator and the head of a fighting unit based in the Bo region known as the Kassela War Council. The early stages of the war also saw the rise to prominence of female initiators in the North.
23. It is extremely difficult to get accurate casualty figures for the war in Sierra Leone. One estimate puts the numbers at roughly 75,000 dead, 2 million displaced, and 20,000 mutilated (estimates by the Crimes of War Project, <http://www.crimesofwar.org/onnews/news-sierra3.html>).
24. Personal communication with D. Hoffman, Bo town Sierra Leone, 4 April 2002.
25. A point made by Ellis (1999) in relation to Charles Taylor’s election to the Liberian presidency despite having perpetrated atrocities in war.
26. Personal communication with D. Hoffman, Conakry, Guinea, 15 April 2003.
27. For more on the transformation in tactics of combatants participating in the fighting in Sierra Leone and Liberia, see Hoffman (forthcoming).
28. As mentioned earlier, the issue here seems to be less a question of payment than of locality. As much as the conflict in this region has moved across the national boundaries among Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone, at least some of the *kamajors* in Liberia felt that the constraints that applied at home did not travel to a “foreign” place. This may be reinforced by the fact that many of the material protections available to a *kamajor* are thought not to travel: hunting regalia are frequently said to be effective only in a limited area around the village, and cannot move beyond that sphere.

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