

ARTICLE

**From weapons to wheels:
young Sierra Leonean ex-combatants
become motorbike taxi-riders**

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ABSTRACT

The disarmament and reintegration process of the more than 70,000 ex-combatants who participated in the decade long armed conflict in Sierra Leone has come to a closure. Most ex-combatants have drifted back to the rural and mining areas, working respectively as (semi-)subsistence farmers or low-paid diamond diggers. There is however a small group of urban-based former fighters making their living by riding motorbikes as a local taxi. This is an interesting phenomenon for two reasons; it is a totally new economic development in Sierra Leone, and the bike riders have organised themselves as a membership-based trade association drawing some inspiration from modalities associated with former fighting groups. The basis of this - much needed - modern and organic solidarity, so it is argued, lies in recognition of the general applicability of the law of contract to social life. It suggests that whatever the roots of the war in Sierra Leone – rural oppression, ghetto life, greed-not-grievance – the way forward lies through building not only employment opportunities for young people but also the institutional capital to protect and advance those opportunities.

Introduction²

The decade long armed conflict (1991-2002) in Sierra Leone between the rebel faction the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone (henceforth RUF) and successive military and democratic governments –most time supported by *Kamajors*³ - has been well documented⁴. Following the signing of the Lomé peace accord in July 1999 between the Sierra Leone government and the RUF, the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (henceforth DDR) process of combatants started. However, it was only in February 2004 that the DDR programme was finally concluded. During that 5 year period more than 72,000 combatants, including nearly 7,000 child soldiers were disarmed and reintegrated⁵.

But the term *reintegration* of ex-combatants is somehow a peculiar one. It suggests that the ex-combatants need to be supported and equipped to make their re-entry to peaceful society successful, but does not ask if there is still something into which to reintegrate. It is assumed that the physical and social structures of communities exist, and continue to function. This assumption is especially troubling if and where these pre-war structures might be suspected of playing some kind of catalytic role in conflict generation⁶.

² This article is based on research carried out as part of my PhD (see Peters, K. 2006. *Footpaths to Reintegration: Armed Conflict, Youth and the Rural Crisis in Sierra Leone*. Wageningen University Thesis.) I am grateful to my former PhD supervisor Paul Richards and to The Netherland Organisation for Scientific Research – Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (NOW-WOTRO) for funding my PhD research.

³ The *Kamajors* were the main Civil Defence Force, employing initiated hunters - in Mende, the main language of the south and east referred to as *kamajoi* or *kamasoi* [sing.], *kamajoisia* [pl.] - and used by successive governments as a proxy force against the rebels.

⁴ See for instance: Richards, P. 1996. *Fighting for the Rainforest: War, Youth & Resources in Sierra Leone*. (reprinted with additional material 1998). Oxford: James Currey; Abdullah, I. (ed.), 2004. *Between Democracy and Terror: the Sierra Leone Civil War*. Dakar: Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa; Keen, D. 2005. *Conflict & Collusion in Sierra Leone* Oxford: James Currey.

⁵ NCDDR 2004. National Committee for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration. Final Reports: http://www.daco-sl.org/encyclopedia/5_gov/5_3ncddr.htm

⁶ cf. Archibald, S. & Richards, P. 2002. "Conversion to Human Rights? Popular Debate about War and Justice in Central Sierra Leone", *Africa* 72, (3): pp. 339-367

Many villages, communities and towns in Sierra Leone suffered extensive destruction during the conflict, and many inhabitants were forced to seek refuge at some time or other. Over the decade long war more than half of the population of the country was displaced. The process of re-claiming and re-inhabiting villages and towns was already under way during the war, since the conflict was often localised. But it was only after the war that the bulk of displaced people returned to the worst affected areas. And return was more than a matter of making villages and towns function again: roads had to be safe and repaired to allow transport to resume, it was necessary to re-start legal institutions and re-elect local authorities, schools and clinics had to be rebuilt, and often, reconciliation activities were needed to make normal life possible again.

If there was not so much at stake, one could describe the post-war rehabilitation of villages, communities and towns as exciting. To some extent this rehabilitation is as much a fight as the war – a fight in which contested claims concerning rights and positions surface. Some players “stood their ground”, remaining in the village and towns during the war, and subsequently claim privileges, varying from farming land, dwellings, to a voice on the village council, as reward for their efforts, which they view as keeping alive the possibility of return for those who fled. Then there are the early returnees, often younger inhabitants, who pioneered much of the actual physical rehabilitation of the villages and towns. Older people, or those who had the means to seek refuge in neighbouring countries, returned later. Generally, the last to return were the local authorities and patrons or “big men”, who - through their contacts or money - had the means to escape the bitterness of war and limit the impact of the conflict on themselves and their families. They returned with the hope or expectation that everything would return to “normal”, i.e. the pre-war situation would re-assert itself. But new powerful players and groups have arisen during the war. These include local Civil Defence Forces (henceforth CDF) commanders, who played an active role in protecting the villages and towns, and now lay claim to influence over daily matters, and women, displaced to urban centres where they saw a different, more emancipated lifestyle, who are unwilling to accept the pre-war situation anymore. As

a result, local traditional authorities are challenged by commoners, both ex-combatants and civilians, who claim that their “*eyes are open*” as a result of the war. That there is more at stake than only the physical reconstruction of war-torn villages and communities becomes all the more clear when one realises that some of the root causes of the conflict must be sought in the marginalisation of young people through the pre-war attitudes of elders and traditional leaders⁷. Where the DDR process has been for many ex-combatants a test of the sincerity of the government and its proclaimed new direction, the process of post-war reconstruction and rehabilitation of villages and communities is the test for local authorities and traditional values; will it be business as usual based on pre-war (traditional) institutions⁸ as tools for exploitation by local and national elites, or are changes going to take place based on more inclusive and democratic principles? Or to put it plainly - what social lessons (if any) have been learnt from the war?

It is extremely difficult to give a general answer to the question how the reintegration process is going in Sierra Leone. Since there are so many factors influencing the reintegration process of an ex-combatant, it is perhaps not an exaggeration to state that every single ex-combatant represents a unique combination of factors. Some of these factors are obvious; for example if an ex-combatant has received a DDR toolkit⁹ or not,¹⁰ or whether he or she has been fighting with the RUF or with the CDF¹¹. But

⁷ cf. Peters, K. 2004. *Re-examining Voluntarism. Youth Combatants in Sierra Leone*. Institute for Security Studies Monograph 100, Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies; Archibald, S. & Richards, P. 2002. Conversion to Human Rights?

⁸ An example of one of these traditional institutions is the customary court, controlled by the village elite and court chairmen who are “paying themselves” through arbitrary and excessive fines and exactions on young people (Richards, P. 2005. “War as Smoke and Mirrors: Sierra Leone 1991-2, 1994-5, 1995-6”, *Anthropological Quarterly*, 28, 377-402, 2005). Exploitation of the labour of young people through customary law is a long standing practice (cf. Jones 1983) in Sierra Leone and the wider region (cf. Jones, A. 1983. *From Slaves to Palm Kernels: A History of the Galinhas Country (West Africa) 1730 – 1890*. Wiesbaden: Steiner).

⁹ One of the options – and the most popular one - for the disarmed and demobilised combatants was to follow a 6 to 9 months skills training, such as carpentry, masonry, tailoring, hair dressing etc.. A monthly allowance (normally about Le 60,000 (approx. \$30)) for the ex-combatant in training was attached to this package. A toolkit with basic, but relevant tools was received upon graduation.

¹⁰ But even in these straightforward cases complicating factors arise such as the possible stigmatisation (an obstacle for reintegration) that might take place after an ex-combatant arrives with a toolkit (a marker of DDR support, and thus of having been a combatant) in his or her village.

¹¹ A combatant with a RUF history who behaved badly in his or her village might not return home after the war but might then reintegrate smoothly in another location.

there are also many factors not taken into account in quantitative research¹² that nevertheless play a role in the reintegration process: is the ex-combatant the oldest son of the father or does he have older brothers? Is the father still alive or already deceased? This affects whether or not the ex-combatant can assert control over resources, or is dependent on the willingness of older family members to be reconciled. The ex-combatant might indicate that land is owned, but how far is it away from the village or town and what is its quality? How long has the ex-combatant fought, and how severe is any trauma that he or she might have developed? Was he or she initiated into the secret society (Poro for men, Sande for women) before or during the war? Non-initiates will be regarded as an outsider or child, whatever their age, etc. The case story presented hereafter is to give a sense of one of the multiple trajectories of reintegration. Indeed, “align” might be a better term than “reintegrate”. It deals with a partial answer to the problem of lack of employment (and/or control over jobs by patrons). An interesting urban economic niche for ex-combatants unwilling to return to their rural communities is described. Some make their living by riding motorbikes as a local taxi. What makes this case so interesting, besides the fact that it is a new (post-war) development, is that the bike riders have organised themselves as a membership-based trade association drawing some inspiration from modalities associated with former fighting groups. But first some background information is given about the urban centres where this self-initiated reintegration activity takes place.

Provincial towns before the war

There are only four larger towns in provincial Sierra Leone, viz. Bo, Kenema, Makeni and Koidu. Kenema is the provincial capital of the east, about 300 kilometres east of the capital Freetown, somewhat adjacent to the Liberian border, and between 6 and 10 hours by public transport from the national capital. It is located by a gap in the north-

¹² cf. Stavrou, A., Burton, P., Johnson, S., Peters, K. & Vincent, J. 2003. *NCDDR Ex-combatants 2003 Tracer Study*. Unpublished report, Sierra Leone Multi-Donor Trust Fund.; Humphreys, M. & J. Weinstein 2004 *What the Fighters Say: a Survey of ex-Combatants in Sierra Leone, June-August 2003*. CGSD Working Paper No. 20. New York: Columbia University

south ridge of the Kambui Hills, a finger of rain forest - now much depleted - providing direct connection to the three Gola forest reserves containing the greater part of the country's remaining high forest, located to the south and east. Bo, the provincial capital of the south, is about ninety kilometres west of Kenema, on the same main road to and from the capital. Travelling time by bush taxi to Freetown can vary between 5 to 8 hours, depending on the time of the year, since a large part of the (once paved) road has become a dirt track. Both Kenema and Bo are found within the Mende-speaking part of the country. Makeni, the provincial capital of the north, currently about 4 to 7 hours from Freetown by taxi, lies north-east of Freetown on the edge of the boli-lands (seasonally flooded ancient lagoons at the foot of the highland escarpment that trends NW-SE across the country). The main language of the region around Makeni is Temne. Koidu, the capital of Kono district and the main diamond-mining centre in Sierra Leone, is a further 3 to 6 hour journey east of Makeni (depending on time of year), making the travel time from Freetown a whole day's journey. The hilly terrain around Koidu is the homeland of the Kono people, but as the major diamond region, has attracted labourers from all parts of Sierra Leone, and, like Freetown, can be considered a true melting pot.

These four provincial towns have long been a magnet to young people from rural areas. The effects of the discovery of diamonds in the 1930s have been huge. Large groups of mainly young people migrated from all over the country to the diamond centres to work as tributors and diggers on a seasonal basis¹³. There are three main diamond regions – the area around Kono, the Sewa trench east of Bo, and Tongo Field, north of Kenema, though a fourth area south of Kenema District (Zimmi) has become increasingly important, and served as an important source of capital for the CDF during the war¹⁴. Kenema, Bo and Makeni are provincial head-quarters, and noted for government services, including regional education. Koidu is a true diamond

¹³ cf. Laan, H. van der 1965. *The Sierra Leone Diamonds: an Economic Study covering the Years 1952-1961*. London: Oxford University Press; Greenhalch, P. 1985. *West African Diamonds 1919-83. An Economic History*. Manchester University Press.

¹⁴ Fithen, C. 1999. *Diamonds and War in Sierra Leone: Cultural Strategies for Commercial Adaptation to Endemic Low-intensity Conflict*. (unpublished PhD thesis, Department of Anthropology, University College London).

boom town, with few functions other than servicing the diamond trade. When the Sierra Leone Selection Trust¹⁵ was based at Yengema (in effect a suburb) Koidu town was rich, with 24 hours electricity supply and many places of entertainment. At one stage there were direct daily flights between Freetown and Koidu. Kenema is the country's second largest diamond area, drawing product not only from Tongo Field to the north but also from Zimmi in the south. It is also renowned as the centre of the country's timber business. Before the war a government factory prepared timber (mainly for the national market) and made decent-quality furniture. A privately-owned (French) saw-mill in Panguma also channelled product through Kenema. The timber business has revived in the post-war building and repair boom, but most of the logging and plank making is done by local chain saw operators in an uncontrolled manner. The protected forests of the Kambui North Reserve above Kenema have practically disappeared since the war ended. Although Bo is also an important diamond centre, channelling much of the product from the Sewa trench, it is a more diversified city than Koidu or Kenema, serving as a regional centre for trade in agricultural products, including rice, palm kernels and cassava, and noted as the country's most important educational centre: the Bo government school for sons of chiefs (1906) was among the first secondary schools to be located in the protectorate¹⁶. Today – in addition to numerous secondary schools - it also has a large teacher training college and a para-medical training centre. Thus, there are other opportunities than diamonds alone that draw young people to Bo. It is noted as the provincial town least damaged by the war, and much of this is to be explained by the fact that its inter-ethnic youth population (in which students and apprentices played an important part) decided to resist the RUF¹⁷, and then again avoided serious division

¹⁵ Sierra Leone Selection Trust, a De Beers subsidiary, and later, a joint venture, linking De Beers and the state, used industrial techniques, both to mine alluvium and also to exploit kimberlite, though never on a major scale.

¹⁶ In the year 1808 the settlement for freed slaves on the peninsula of today's Sierra Leone was declared a Colony of the British Crown. In 1896 the British declared a protectorate over the hinterland (up to the boundaries of present day Sierra Leone, more or less). Sierra Leone gained independence on April 27th 1961.

¹⁷ Richards, *Fighting for the Rainforest*.

on ethnic lines during the war's later stages¹⁸. Bo was a main centre for the rise of the CDF, but there was a clear distinction between the unarmed civilian youths who protected Bo, mainly through excellent intelligence and coordination, and the young armed rural internal displaced people who flocked to the CDF. Makeni is the smallest of the four towns, but serves a diversified function for its region similar to Bo. It is a major market for agricultural produce (especially rice from the boli-lands), has a well-known gara (tie-and-die) industry, is noted for its schools and colleges, and serves as an ancillary centre for the Kono diamond trade. This last function was boosted during the period of rule of the northern-dominated All Peoples Congress regime, when a main paved road was built through Makeni to the Kono diamond fields, after the railway, through Bo and Kenema to Pendembu, in Kailahun was closed in the 1960s. A second paved road was made from Makeni to the far north of the country (Kabala) in the 1980s.

Provincial towns during the war

Prior to 1997 the four main provincial towns suffered from the war in only limited and indirect ways. Kenema, Bo and Koidu came under direct RUF attacks, but these were repulsed in both Bo and Kenema. It was only in Koidu that the RUF succeeded in holding the town for some months. Because of its economically strategic function Koidu has always been heavily defended by the army. At several stages government troops closed the area to civilians. Many Sierra Leoneans are cynical about the reasons, believing strategic necessity played a smaller part than the desire of influential army officers to gain free and unobserved movement for mining and looting purposes. The RUF was never effective in taking over the major towns of Sierra Leone – though it clearly hoped to rally youth in Bo and Kenema – but it was effective in cutting the towns off from the capital, by disrupting road communications. From early 1994 the RUF created bush camps in strategic areas and from there it

¹⁸ Fithen, C. & P. Richards 2005. "Making War, Crafting Peace: Militia Solidarities and Demobilization in Sierra Leone." In P. Richards, ed., *No Peace, no War: an Anthropology of Contemporary Armed Conflicts*, Oxford: Currey, pp. 117-136

organised its hit and run actions and ambushes. Usual targets were vehicles and convoys travelling on the roads between the major towns. As a result transport between the towns and the capital decreased day by day and at some stages ceased altogether. In mid-1996 the only feasible route from Freetown to Bo and Kenema, for example, was by air¹⁹. Clearly this had an enormous impact on the local economies and the food security situation in the towns. Food availability deteriorated for two main reasons: 1) local production of food in the countryside decreased due to threat of RUF raids and 2) many people from the rural areas had fled to the towns for safety reasons.

The position of the towns as relative safe havens changed suddenly after the military coup in May 1997. The issue was that many government soldiers, stationed in garrisons around these towns, declared for the new regime – the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (henceforth AFRC) - and as a result of the junta and RUF agreeing a power-sharing truce, official enemies became allies overnight. RUF units were invited into both provincial towns and the capital, while at the same time CDF fighters had to seek cover in the urban areas or retreat into the countryside. Only in Bo, and to a lesser extent Kenema, could it be said that the CDF stood its ground. In Bo, the Garrison was in a quite isolated position to the west of the city, and civilians, resisting the RUF attack in December 1994, but distrusting the role played by the army, briefly imposed on the soldiers a humiliating “curfew”, forbidding army units entry to Bo town. Several soldiers who “disobeyed” the curfew were treated as looters and lynched by the citizenry. After the 1997 coup neither army nor RUF had much stomach for subduing the feared vigilantes of Bo.

One by one these towns were taken over by CDF and ECOMOG²⁰ forces during the first half of 1998, as part of the Nigerian-led counter-attack on the junta, intended to

¹⁹ A Lebanese company opened up a daily service from Hastings airfield outside Freetown using elderly ex-Soviet 17-seater planes.

²⁰ ECOMOG: Economic Community of West African States Monitoring and Observation Group. This West African peacekeeping force, dominated by Nigerian contingents, already had troops in Sierra Leone before the war started. President Momoh of the APC had offered ECOMOG Sierra Leone's International Airport to base Alpha-jets bombarding Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia in Liberia. One reason for Taylor to support the RUF was “to let them taste the bitterness of war” and punish Momoh for supporting ECOMOG.

restore the elected Kabbah government by force. Then things went into reverse. Koidu and Makeni were re-taken by AFRC/RUF forces towards the end of 1998, and the rebels marched on Freetown for the first time. After the January 6, 1999 battle for Freetown, the AFRC/RUF was repulsed, and retreated northwards; Makeni became the *de facto* rebel capital until the end of the conflict. Bo and Kenema – where the CDF was strong – remained under government control, while the RUF controlled a cigar-shaped piece of land in the middle of the country, stretching from Buedu, in the Kailahun “pan handle”, where Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone meet, to Gbendembu, a boli-land town in the far west, but including, importantly, Koidu town and the Kono diamond fields.

The RUF/AFRC allies were re-armed in 1998 by a Ukrainian-Israeli-South African business and military training consortium modelled along similar lines to the group involving Executive Outcomes²¹ that to a large extent decided the fate of the 1996 Abidjan peace process²². This determined that the international community and media – who woke up very late to the war in Sierra Leone - perceived the fighting largely or only as a struggle for diamonds. But young people in Sierra Leone fought the war more for jobs than diamonds, and labouring in diamond pits is not a career choice of preference but necessity.

Below, I will examine what happened to some of the more fortunate ex-combatants. One might expect, if indeed the combatant were after the diamonds, as the so-called

²¹ Executive Outcomes: a South-African mercenary group hired by the National Provision Ruling Council (NPRC) – a military government ruling Sierra Leone from 1992 up to early 1996 – and by President Kabbah of the Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP) – democratically elected and ruling Sierra Leone from 1996 up to present - to fight the RUF.

²² While the 1996 peace negotiations continued, key RUF bases were attacked by pro-government Kamajor militias, with the support of mercenaries of the South African-based security-cum-mining company Executive Outcomes. The government argued that it was not in control of the Kamajor movement and thus unable to stop it breaching the cease fire. In November 1996 the Abidjan Peace Accord was signed between the Sierra Leonean government and the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone. Officially the war was over but mutual suspicion between the former enemies resulted in neither of them disarming or demobilizing their fighters to any significant extent. Several RUF units continued to attack civilians in searching for food and ‘For their part, RUF fighters had been attacked by Kamajors, even after the Abidjan agreement’ (Keen, D. 2003. “Greedy Elites, Dwindling Resources, Alienated Youths. The Anatomy of Protracted Violence in Sierra Leone”, *Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft* 2/2003, p. 85.)

“greed-not-grievance” model suggests²³, that they would – given the chance – invest their demobilization gratuities and ill-gotten gains in diamond mining, but on more favourable terms (i.e. by acquiring licences to operate as tributors). But land-owners and government loyalists hold the whip hand in the diamond fields. Even if the ex-combatants want to return to diamonds, they cannot, except as labourers working on very unfavourable terms. In the end many ex-combatants returned to the rural areas to involve themselves in agriculture. But there was a fairly large group of more urbanised combatants from both CDF and RUF whom enthusiasm seems to be focused more on motorbikes than diamonds or farming.

An army of motorbikes

The local economies of Bo, Kenema, Makeni and Koidu are recovering. But the larger companies once active in these towns – e.g. the saw mill in Kenema - had not been renovated yet. In Kono large mining companies are still in the prospective phase and have not become large-scale employers as yet. This lack is partly substituted by smaller and informal economic activities that are more labour intensive. Urban schools are operating again, and in many cases (unlike their rural equivalents) operated throughout the war with surprisingly few interruptions, except for a brain drain of teaching staff - many qualified teachers went to The Gambia as refugees, for example - and buildings undergoing repair. The internally displaced population continues to return to the villages from the urban centres where they sought protection. Many ex-combatants, profiting from DDR support, prefer to remain in the more anonymous, larger towns. Some of those who have completed their training have returned to their place of origin, but many prefer to hang on in towns in search of jobs. The perspective of going back to a village and becoming involved in farming is

²³ cf. Collier, P. & Hoeffler, A. 1999. *Loot-seeking and Justice-seeking in Civil War*. Washington, DC: World Bank, Development Research Group; Collier, P. & Hoeffler, A. 2001. *Greed and Grievance in Civil War*. Washington, DC: World Bank, Development Research Group; Collier, P. 2001. “Economic Causes of Civil Conflict and Their Implications for Policy”, in C. A. Crocker *et al.* (eds) *Turbulent Peace, the Challenge of Managing International Conflict*. United States Institute of Peace: Washington.

not very attractive, especially while the institutional obstacles²⁴ remain in place. In the village they are exposed to risk of revenge,²⁵ and it is questionable if ex-combatants can hide a violent past for long. In the towns on the other hand they move more anonymously, although ex-combatants are likely to know each other. So the towns, like the mining fields, offer the best social and economic niches for reintegration for those ex-combatants dubious about returning to home areas. But a job is needed, and employers, even if not scared of an ex-combatant's past, are unlikely to rate ex-combatants highly in a buyer's market. One approach to this dilemma is for the ex-combatant him or herself to create a new niche in the job market. One such niche is the phenomenon of the motorbike taxis, common in many Third World cities, but hitherto largely unknown in urban Sierra Leone. In Sierra Leone, it remains largely unknown in Freetown but has taken off as one of the most visible of post-war changes in the four main provincial towns²⁶. It is an activity largely in the hands of ex-combatants.

Before the war local transport inside the towns and between town and countryside was provided by mini-buses and four-wheel taxis (small four door saloons) shared by several passengers (5 at the back and 3 in the front might not be uncommon). They drove more or less fixed routes, or at least remained on the larger roads. As a passenger it was necessary to walk to the nearest main road where taxis passed, flag one down, and ask whether the driver was going your direction, and find a place inside (something apparently always possible, even if a taxi was already jammed to

²⁴ Richards has argued that the dislike of rural youth is not focused on agriculture as such, but on their vulnerability, in village conditions, to exploitation by local elites and gerontocrats, mainly to the control of these latter groups over customary courts (Richards, P. 2005. "To Fight or to Farm? Agrarian Dimensions of the Mano River Conflicts (Liberia and Sierra Leone)", *African Affairs*, 104/417, 1-20, 2005).

²⁵ Poisoning is said to be a commonplace of the village revenger's art (cf. Bellman, B. 1975. *Village of Curers and Assassins: on the Production of Fala-Kpelle Cosmological Categories*. Mouton & Co.)

²⁶ This reflects the situation as it was up to mid-2003. A recent visit to Sierra Leone, in December 2006, showed that motorbike taxis have now become a countrywide phenomenon, not limiting itself to the four provincial towns anymore. As a result of this wide coverage, besides the thousands of young people who have found a job as a taxi rider, it created jobs for young people in the villages along the roads. Motorbike repair shops and fuel stations have become part of the rural landscape in Sierra Leone. In addition, the services of the bikes riders are increasingly hired by farmers in deep rural areas to transport their harvest to the regional centres. Remarkable, Freetown is still more or less motorbike free.

the ceiling). Then, depending on your destination, you might have to change halfway to another taxi and walk the last few hundred metres or so. It was inconvenient and uncomfortable, but costs were low since the taxis were shared.

This taxi system almost completely disappeared after the war in the provincial towns. Many vehicles were ambushed and burnt during the war. Owners - typically business men or women, or civil servants and other professionals - fled to Freetown or neighbouring countries, taking any surviving vehicles with them. Drivers lost their jobs, often reverting to whiling away their hours hoping for a casual contract, e.g. sitting in the marijuana-smoking *pote* behind the Kenema transport park in Bo. Only a few yellow cabs continue to ply the streets of Makeni, Kenema, Bo and Koidu. They have been replaced by motor bike taxis, mainly 125 cc Honda road and trail bikes and a number of cheaper Chinese brands, of which the Victor is preferred by passengers for the comfortable shape of the pillion. The advantages are that these motor bike taxis literally criss-cross the towns in search of passengers and even on the back streets it is only a few minutes before a taxi arrives. It then takes you straight to the preferred destination, without detours to hunt or deliver other passengers, or losing time in traffic jams. The disadvantages are that costs are two to three times higher than a car taxi, you get wet when it is raining (although many passengers somehow manage to keep an umbrella above their head during their journey) and it is less safe, since no helmets are (yet) provided for the passengers. Taxi riders unions battle to get the riders to wear helmets, but with little success, riders fearing the heat and catching TB from a multi-owner second-hand helmet²⁷. Nevertheless the motor taxis have become an institution in Kenema, Bo, Koidu and Makeni. What makes this new phenomenon worth mentioning in a discussion about the reintegration of ex-combatants is the fact that ex-combatants are disproportionately well represented among the taxi-riders. In Makeni, of the three hundred young people who are active as

²⁷ Richards, pers. comm. based on unpublished interview with the Bo union executive in 2003

(taxi) bike riders, about three quarters were combatants during the war, according to the estimates of the Makeni Bike Riders Association²⁸.

The post-war bike (taxi) phenomenon was first researched in Sierra Leone by Richards and colleagues in 2002-3, with results briefly described in Fithen & Richards²⁹ and Richards *et al.*³⁰. Their data refer mainly to Bo and Kenema. The work of Hoek and De Jong is based on the situation in Makeni. I concentrate here on the Makeni study, with which I was associated³¹.

An 18-year old rider in Makeni, Abdul, told Hoek & de Jong (2004:21)

The war was exiting, but bad. To be a bike rider is exciting and good. (...) In the past nobody dared to jump on the back seat, because we were ex-combatants, since they were afraid to be undressed, raped and robbed. They were afraid that we still had this rebel blood in our body. But such a thing never happened after the war [author translation].

Why are so many ex-combatants now riding motorbikes and ferrying passengers, rather than robbing and killing them? Clearly, being a bike rider is a preferred job for young but uneducated Sierra Leoneans, filling the role performed by the four wheeled taxi driver in the past. But as becomes clear from Abdul's statement, excitement is an important part of what drew fighters to the war, and the excitement of riding a bike is an acceptable substitute in times of peace. Perhaps - and rather worryingly for passengers! - if speed is high enough the amount of adrenaline released comes close to fighting. Ex-combatants who ride bike taxis are almost certainly the commanders, and others, who did well out of war. Most riders are owners, or have the bike on hire-

²⁸ Hoek, J. & de Jong, R. 2004. RAP4RIGHTS *Raymzter Rapt met ex-Kindsoldaten in Sierra Leone*. Plan Nederland & Spunk. www.rap4rights.nl

²⁹ Fithen & Richards, *Maing War, Crafting Peace*.

³⁰ Richards, P., Bah, K. & Vincent, J. 2004. *Social Capital and Survival: Prospects for Community-Driven Development in Post-conflict Sierra Leone*. *Social Development Papers: Community Driven Development/Conflict Prevention and Reconstruction*, 12. The World Bank, Washington DC.

³¹ Hoek and de Jong gathered information on the bike riders in Makeni as part of a research and advocacy mission (2004) for Plan Netherlands and Rap4Rights. I accompanied this mission as an interpreter and guide, and was thus able to check their sources and findings.

purchase terms, and aspire to become owners, sometimes as part of a consortium keeping the machine on the road 24 hours a day. But ex-combatants who did well out of fighting might also have decided to invest in a conventional taxi. Drivers – of necessity - had to develop good ties with the various factions, simply in order to get a taxi, bus or truck from one place to another through numerous checkpoints manned by different factions. If we presume the nexus between transport owners and faction commanders to have been reasonably good during the war, we might have expected a goodly number of these commanders to call, post war, on owners they had helped, and apply for a driving job³².

The key factor seems to be that combat provided fighters with a dense nexus of new connections, and ideas about social solidarity, that serve as a counter-balance to the pull of patrimonialism³³. To become a bike-rider an ex-combatant might aspire to buy the bike outright, though this is unlikely, since few left the war with much, and the costs are high (2 to 3 million Leones [1 to 1.5 thousand US\$]), though not so astronomical as acquiring a cab, where a patron would definitely be necessary. The more general pattern - in Bo at least, according to Richards *et al.*³⁴ - is to take a bike on hire purchase from the Guinean businessmen who bring (smuggle?) Chinese bikes from Conakry. Bikes are quickly confiscated when there is any default, after which the businessman can sell the bike to another potential rider, or revert to the old system, and hire a rider as he might once have found a driver. One way to ensure there is no default is to join together with one or two former comrades and ride the bike night and day, seven days a week. The ex-combatants with a hire-purchase contract can find trusty comrades from among those who were bonded by life-and-death struggles in the bush. Bonds created in war have not lost their value, especially

³² In Liberia many ex-combatants were selling gasoline and petrol on a small scale. During the war their commanders were in charge of these fuel reserves and remained in this position in between (i.e. in 1997-2000) and after the war, employing some of their most loyal fighters.

³³ Reno describes in detail the rise of a post-independence socio-political system in Sierra Leone, based on patrimonial principles (Reno, W. 1995. *Corruption and State Politics in Sierra Leone*. University Press Cambridge). According to Richards: 'patrimonialism is a systematic scaling up, at the national level, of local ideas about patron-client linkages, shaped (in Sierra Leone) in the days of direct extraction of forest resources, about the duty of the rich and successful to protect, support and promote their followers and friends' (Richards, *Fighting for the Rainforest*, p. 34).

³⁴ Richards, P., Bah, K. & Vincent, J. *Social Capital and Survival*

in an activity that recapitulates some of the excitement and danger of handling a weapon, and where the group interest is protected by the application of equal amounts of riding skill among all partners on a daily basis.

Some important regional differences must be noted here, however. In Bo and Kenema the more usual practice is that a businessman provides the bike and the rider leases it, but after a time becomes the owner (i.e. it is a hire purchase contract)³⁵. For this reason the union is known as the bike renters association. But in Makeni, the riders only rent the bikes from the owners, and do not own the machine eventually. This may reflect the fact that although RUF ex-combatants are quite numerous in the Bo and Kenema association ex-CDF fighters are in the majority, whereas in Makeni the background of most riders is RUF. Businessmen may have more confidence in ex-CDF types. Whatever the reason, it suggests fighters of CDF background have an advantage in extracting better terms.

A final factor worth discussing is the nature of the niche. The activity is new. If ex-combatants had trained in traditional skills as part of the disarmament and reintegration support, such as carpentry or tailoring, they would have to compete with carpenters or tailors already active before the war. Confidence or bravery as ex-combatants might count for little with potential customers. But there were no bike taxis in Sierra Leone before the war, and the modality seems a great step forward to busy women traders, among the major customers, in a spread-out town like Bo or Makeni. Ex-combatant riders may even be perceived as particularly useful pilots in out-of-town or after-dark trips where there is risk of robbery. Bike-jacking is indeed a problem in Bo, but somewhat mitigated by mobile phones and growing cooperation between police and riders' union³⁶.

³⁵ In 2003 this was Le 20,000/day. A ride cost Le 1000. So it is only after 20 rides (plus fuel costs) that the rider starts to make a profit on the day's work

³⁶ Richards, pers. comm.

Institutional modernisation; the law of contract

A general point becomes clear. Skills training for demobilization might work better if it equips ex-combatants to supply *new* socially-necessary services. The urban areas, as the bike case suggests, might be left to the hidden hand of the market. But rural areas might benefit from hitherto scarce skills, of a kind generally provided by Non Governmental Organisations, such as well digging, latrine construction, plantation rehabilitation or swamp development. It is possible to envisage training (including business skills) that equips ex-combatants for these tasks, organising trainees into small construction gangs, and then establishes a system in which rural communities use vouchers to purchase the service of choice from competing gangs.

The message of this article is that there is the need for institutional modernization, suitable to the needs and aspirations of youth. What makes the bike riders development interesting on the institutional level is that it is an example of post-war organisation around shared labour interests rather than ethnicity. The Bo union told Richards *et al.*³⁷ that they had members from both CDF and RUF, and stressed that this was a decisive break with war-time organization; the CDF was – despite some attempts to make it appear otherwise – a strongly ethnicized organization, and the RUF was widely perceived as being a kind of sect – a “secret society” [sodality] of rarrays³⁸ or lumpens³⁹. This perpetuated some of the pre-modern mentalities associated with intra-youth egalitarian organization, such as rural labour gangs, diamond digging crews, in which big men and patrons were always hovering in the background to confiscate the output, and ensure a snug fit with the hierarchical world

³⁷ Richards, P., Bah, K. & Vincent, J. *Social Capital and Survival*

³⁸ The Krio Dictionary claims rare derives from the mispronunciation of the English word “rare” (i.e. unusual) by 18th century Savoyard entertainers advertising their shows on the streets of London, though in local usage in Sierra Leone it tends to assimilate more to the notion of “run-away” (i.e. vagrant, street youth). According to Abdullah “rarray culture” is: ‘... a male-specific oppositional sub-culture which easily lends itself to violence’ (Abdullah, I. 1997, p. 50. “Bush Path to Destruction: The Origin and Character of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF/SL)”, *Africa Development*, 22, (3/4): 45-76. Special Issue: “Lumpen Culture and Political Violence: The Sierra Leone Civil War”.)

³⁹ According to Ishmail Rashid, “lumpen”: ‘...represent that strata of the society that cannot fully employ or sell its labour because of capitalist transformation, restructuring or retrenchment. [Marx, K. & Engels, F. 1955, p. 20-21. *The Communist Manifesta*, New York] (Rashid, I. 1997. p. 22-23 “Subaltern Reactions: Lumpens, Students and the Left”, *African Development* 22 (3/4): 19-44.)

over which elders and chiefs presided⁴⁰. The bike riders associations are different. In all towns a rider's association has been created specifically to protect the stake of the riders against the business men providing the bikes, and the police and road transport authority applying traffic laws, often in quite problematic and corrupt ways. The unions not only look after the interests of sick or injured riders, resolve disputes between riders and customers, and generally interest themselves in health, safety and innovation, but they are also explicit about the need to take on and challenge the pre-war patrimonial order. The Bo union told Richards *et al.*⁴¹ that they no longer trust "big men" patrons, who they view as having caused the war by fooling youth into fighting without any real reward. They prefer now to follow a commercial route, and have hired a commercial lawyer in Freetown to fight "class action" cases, e.g. against the police, who had been harassing riders over registration papers for which they had paid but which were deliberately held back – they alleged – by the authorities. The role and strength of the association becomes clear from the following example; police harassment of riders for bribes and fines resulted in 'confrontation between riders and the police in both Kenema and Bo, the arrest of 32 riders and imposition of high fines (averaging Le 100,000 approximately 50 US\$). The association went on strike, supported by women traders, who are among the major clients of the two-wheeled taxis. According to the executive [of the Bo Bike Riders Association], the confrontation required the intervention of the [British-seconded] Inspector-General of police, and court action by the association's lawyer, who succeeded in having fines reduced by an average of 40 per cent.'⁴². Explicitly, the Bo association is fighting a "war" for its young members, but not any more through force of arms, but through the classic instruments of trade unionism⁴³. Job interests, strikes and the law of contract have become the weapons of choice, not forced recruitment and summary executions.

⁴⁰ The solidarity of combatants generated in "fighting" has survived the war but applied to a different "job", riding a motorbike taxi. The union is a key difference, however, since this is the means to link (through peaceful conflict management) with the wider society. In *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals* Durkheim lays stress on the emergence of medieval European guilds as a basis for organic solidarity (Durkheim, E. 1957 [c. 1890-1900] *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals*. London: Routledge (trans. Cornelia Brookfield).

⁴¹ Richards, P., Bah, K. & Vincent, J. *Social Capital and Survival*

⁴² Richards, P., Bah, K. & Vincent, J. *Social Capital and Survival*, p. 36

⁴³ Fithen & Richards, Maing War, Crafting Peace.

The role of the union is also important in Makeni. According to the executive of the Makeni Bike Rider Association:

Our members were quite wild before. When they were still carrying guns they could intimidate everybody, but now they have to stick to the rules. No violence, no drugs and of course the traffic rules. If for instance someone rides too fast, we confiscate the bike for a few day⁴⁴.

The various bike rider associations are telling examples of the levels of reconciliation and reintegration possible for even the most battle-hardened ex-combatants. According to the Makeni executive:

Boys who have fought against each other, now work together. People try to live after the war as brothers, but if you do not have any job, you are likely to see each other much faster as enemies again⁴⁵.

Conclusion

In a way the conflict in Sierra Leone has come full circle. It began with young fighters roaring the diamond towns in eastern Sierra Leone, in the early days of an insurgency that mopped up unemployed young people and inducted them into a dangerous world of armed combat. Eleven years of war attacked traditional if problematic rural solidarities, and questioned many social values. The young combatants are once again roaring about the main towns of provincial Sierra Leone. But this time the tool is not the AK-47 but the Honda trail bike taxi. Former fighters are laying the foundations for a new, post-war modality of solidarity based on craft unionism. More generally, ex-combatants in the provincial towns are in a different position to those who remain in the diamond fields as diggers, or who have returned to the countryside to farm. The urban bike taxi riders now fight with the law of contract, not guns. This is consistent

⁴⁴ Hoek & de Jong 2004 (my translation) *Raymzter Rapt*, p. 21

⁴⁵ Hoek & de Jong 2004 (my translation) *Raymzter Rapt*, p.21

with Durkheim's argument that the basis of modern (organic) solidarity lies in recognition of the general applicability of the law of contract to social life⁴⁶. It suggests that whatever the roots of the war in Sierra Leone – rural oppression, ghetto life, greed-not-grievance – the way forward lies through building not only employment opportunities for young people but also the institutional capital to protect and advance those opportunities. Arguably, craft organization and trade-unionism have more to offer post-war Sierra Leone than Special Courts and Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. But we might also reflect that the worst of the war was felt both in the deeply disconnected countryside *and* in Koidu and the capital, Freetown – all too readily connected to the global economy, via diamonds, and perhaps in future through off-shore oil. The least damaged places – in retrospect – proved to be the three main provincial towns. These towns are more economically diverse, enjoying both global connectivity and local links - more so than Freetown - to the diversity of the countryside. It may be no accident that it is in these three provincial towns that we glimpse the beginnings of a reintegration process not only connecting ex-combatants to employment but also providing opportunities for former fighters actively to contribute to the growth of organic social solidarity.

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⁴⁶ Durkheim, E. 1964 [1893]. *The Division of Labor in Society*. New York: Free Press; Durkheim 1957 [c. 1890-1900]) *Professional Ethics*

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