



The Perpetration and Survival of Violence: With Examples from Sierra Leone

Ebrima Sall*

Abstract

This paper looks at both the nature of violence in Africa, and explanations of its perpetration and survival. Several attempts have been made to explain the perpetration of violence in Africa, some focusing on structural factors, others, of a more or less essentialist kind, invoking the cultural peculiarities of African societies. Others still relate the violence to the collapse of the very mechanisms or ideologies that constituted part of the cement that, until then, kept the nations and societies in conflict together. In some strands of the literature it is even argued that the perpetration of violence is a 'mode of development', a way of producing modernity. As the Sri Lankan scholar Uyangoda has argued, the violence in our societies refuses to accept to be relegated 'to the backyard of historical memory. It repeats itself in a number of theatres—in the war front, in election campaigns, in the universities, and in the minds and bodies of disappointed young lovers—at a terrifying pace'. The 'reproductive capacity of violence embedded in our society, its cultures and in the forms of our collective and individual existence', is therefore enormous. The paper argues that as a mode of social action, the recourse to, or excessive production of, violence, as seems to be the case with many societies, is, more often than not, the consequence of the weakening of social institutions and the erosion of their legitimacy, or of the failure of politics. The paper takes the civil war in Sierra Leone, during which the amputation of peoples' arms and legs was conducted on a large scale, as an example. It looks at the amputations as a particular form of violence, and how this form of violence was perceived and explained among certain sections of the intelligentsia in Sierra Leone. In the final section of the paper, the discussion focuses on the factors that lead to survival of violence, both in post-conflict societies and in the everyday lives of societies that are not necessarily experiencing violent conflict.

Résumé

Cette communication examine à la fois la nature de la violence en Afrique et les diverses raisons de sa perpétuation et de sa résurgence. Plusieurs tentatives ont été menées pour expliquer la perpétuation de la violence en Afrique ; certaines portent sur des facteurs structurels, tandis que d'autres, plus essentialistes,

* Department of Research, CODESRIA, BP 3304, Dakar, Senegal.

E-Mail: ebrima.sall@codesria.sn

invoquent les spécificités culturelles des sociétés africaines. D'autres attribuent la violence à la disparition des mécanismes et idéologies constituant, en partie, le ciment qui liait les nations et sociétés actuellement en conflit. Certains courants de la littérature avancent même que la perpétration de la violence est un «mode de développement», une manière de produire de la modernité. Selon le chercheur srilankais Uyangoda, la violence caractérisant nos sociétés refuse d'être reléguée «aux oubliettes. Elle se répète sous diverses formes : au front, lors des élections, au sein des universités, mais également dans l'esprit et le corps des jeunes amoureux éconduits, à un rythme effrayant». Ainsi, «la capacité de reproduction de la violence intrinsèque à nos sociétés, nos cultures, qui se manifeste dans notre vie collective et individuelle» serait énorme. Cette communication affirme qu'en tant que mode d'action sociale, le recours à la violence ou la production excessive de celle-ci, comme cela semble être le cas pour un grand nombre de sociétés, se trouve être la conséquence de l'affaiblissement des institutions sociales et le résultat de l'érosion de leur légitimité, ou encore la conséquence de l'échec des politiques. Cette présentation cite l'exemple de la guerre civile en Sierra Leone, au cours de laquelle l'amputation des bras et jambes de nombreux individus avait été pratiquée à grande échelle. Ce texte analyse cette vague d'amputations comme une forme particulière de violence, et s'intéresse à la manière dont celle-ci était perçue et justifiée par certains groupes de l'intelligentsia sierra léonaise. Enfin, le texte se penche sur les facteurs qui entretiennent la violence, aussi bien dans les sociétés post-conflit que dans les sociétés qui ne sont pas nécessairement embourbées dans un conflit violent.

This paper looks at the violence associated with the civil war that ravaged Sierra Leone from March 1991 to January 2002, when it was officially declared over. During this period, successive governments in Sierra Leone were confronted by what some observers considered to be one of the most nihilistic rebel movements in the world, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF: see Abdullah 2001). In addition to the kind of violence that is usually associated with civil wars—killings, destruction of whole villages, abduction and rape of women and youth, etc, this war was also associated with an unusually large number of deliberate amputations of the limbs of people. The perpetrators of the amputations included the rebel forces, as well as a host of other armed groups, such as troops of the official Sierra Leone armed forces and the pro-government Civil Defence Forces (CDF, also known as the Kamajors).

Thousands of people lost their lives or their limbs by stepping on landmines in Angola and elsewhere, as a result of injuries sustained in conditions of armed conflict, or civil strife. Anti-personal landmines are supposedly intended to serve as a deterrent, or a barrier protecting a demarcated territory and may, in the process, lead to the death or injury of those who tread on them. Death or injury from landmines still frequently occurs long after wars are declared over, in which case such casualties appear as if by 'accident'. Amputations, on the contrary, are more like a 'punishment' inflicted upon captives, mainly for their alleged or suspected political association with a rival force, or for their 'passivity'. Amputations are also a form of terror tactic.

Explaining forms of violence and terror

This paper looks at the phenomenon of amputations as a particular form of violence, and how this form of violence was perceived and explained among the intelligentsia in Sierra Leone.¹

I would argue that seeing the amputations mainly as an 'abnormality' that was partly due to the nature of the main rebel movement (the RUF) and the kind of people involved in it (especially the leadership), which seems to be the case with many of the people I have interviewed in Freetown, is not enough. Violence being a mode of social action, the explanation of the amputations and other kinds of violence that occurred during the civil war probably lies not only in the nature of the rebel movement itself, but also in the weakening of both state institutions and other social institutions, in the structural conditions (one of which is mass poverty) under which the war was waged, and in the spread of a culture of violence, particularly among the masses of unemployed urban youth.

One consequence of the spread and intensification of violence in Africa over the last fifteen years or so is the heightening of scholarly interest in the phenomenon, and the redoubling of efforts to make sense of it. Africa shares with Asia the unenviable status of being the continent with the largest numbers of armed conflict in the world today, and each conflict seems to add new kinds of horrors to those that had been perpetrated in previous upheavals. There are several kinds of violence: physical, structural and symbolic. To the violence associated with wars, therefore, we also must add structural violence, the violence in and of everyday life, and symbolic violence. These different kinds of violence are often closely related, and may feed into each other. The question of whether there is a causal relation between the proliferation of civil wars and the consequent massive circulation of small arms,² with the spread of 'non-political' violence, and to what extent one has to blame global or local economic structures and relations, for instance, is often asked.

Several attempts have been made to explain the perpetration of violence in Africa, some focusing on structural factors, others, of a more or less essentialist kind, invoking the cultural peculiarities of African societies. Others still relate the violence to the collapse of the very mechanisms or ideologies that constituted part of the cement that, until then, kept the nations and societies in conflict together. In some strands of the literature it is even argued that the perpetration of violence is a mode of development, a way of producing modernity. However, outside of South Africa, there are still relatively few African scholars who have taken up the study of violence in a systematic manner. Often, as is the case elsewhere, 'violence is primarily dealt with at the level of morality and political mobilization. The moral encounter with violence [in Sri Lanka, for instance], paradoxically does not emanate from any significant religio-intellectual concerns; it comes from the perspective of human rights' (Uyangoda 1997). Yet, as Uyangoda argues, the violence in our societies refuses to accept to be relegated 'to the backyard of historical memory. It repeats itself in a number of theatres—in the war front, in election campaigns, in the universities, and in the minds and bodies of disappointed young lovers—at a terrifying pace'. The 'reproductive capacity of violence embedded in our society, its cultures and in the forms of our collective and individual existence', is therefore enormous.

This discussion therefore considers both the nature of violence in Africa, and explanations of its perpetration and survival. It does not discuss symbolic violence, 'an epithet employed to describe the process through which the causes of the suffering of the dispossessed are attributed to the agency of those who suffer' (Lofving 2002). Instead, the emphasis is on the

physical violence associated with the recent civil wars: killings, destruction of whole villages, amputations, rape, various kinds of terror tactics, massive displacement of populations... The list is long. However, the paper also examines forms of structural violence and their perpetuation. Poverty, for instance, is in many ways violence. As Lofving, for instance, argues, seen that way, the obvious implication of this way of looking at poverty is that the question of responsibility must be posed. This is actually implicit in some of the debates on the justiciability or otherwise of social and economic rights, poverty being one of the clearest expressions of the deprivation and non-enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights.

Following Lofving again, I take the definition of violence as responsibility for suffering, and here, I will be discussing mainly responsibility for human suffering. This enables me to connect with the debates on impunity, war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide, and etc. but also with debates on rights, particularly economic, and social and cultural rights.

There is hardly ever just one single explanation for the perpetration or survival of violence, in Africa or elsewhere. I will argue, however, that as a mode of social action, the recourse to, or 'excessive production' of, violence, as seems to be the case with African societies (Ouedraogo 1997:13) is, more often than not, the consequence of the weakening of social institutions and the erosion of their legitimacy, or of the failure of politics. Understanding the causes of armed conflict is a requirement for any serious discussion on the perpetuation of violence in Africa. I therefore begin by examining the changes in the nature of conflict and wars (Kaldor 1999,2001), wars being what most of the extreme and massive forms of violence in Africa are associated with. In the second section of the paper, I look at some of the explanations of the perpetration of violence that one finds in the literature. In the third section, I take the civil war in Sierra Leone, during which the amputation of peoples' arms and legs was conducted on a large scale, as an example. I look at the amputations as a particular form of violence, and how this form of violence was perceived and explained among certain sections of the intelligentsia in Sierra Leone.

Finally, I discuss the factors that lead to the survival of violence, both in post-conflict societies and in the everyday lives of societies that are not necessarily experiencing violent conflict. These factors, I argue, include poverty, inequality, injustice, particularly the absence or paucity of the remedial measures adopted to deal with violence (impunity), and the perpetuation of other structural conditions and undemocratic forms of governance.

Generations of Conflict

The increase in the number of African countries that are incapable of performing the quintessential task of maintaining law and order within their borders is currently one of the major challenges not only to the nation-state project but also the collective survival of some groups and cultures (Abdullah 2001). These conflicts have taken 'a terrible toll' (Mkandawire 2002) on communities, and left a lasting imprint on cultures, social institutions and on peoples' psyches. The 'scales of suffering' (Aina 2002) are beyond the imaginable and, beyond humanitarian concerns, ought to be an important subject of inquiry for researchers as well.

There was a time when many African heads of state shared the view that armed struggle, i.e. the recourse to violent means of struggle, was necessary for the whole of Africa to be liberated from colonialism. That was why the Liberation Bureau of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) was established. Of course, the OAU was far from officially and collectively espousing the views of a thinker such as Frantz Fanon. Fanon's bold arguments about the role and utility of violence as a way of addressing the problem of colonial domination and the alienation resulting from it are quite well known (Fanon 1963, Jinadu 1980). It was however very significant that African heads of state could agree to support liberation movements waging armed struggle in Southern Africa, for instance. What has changed since then? There certainly has been a great deal of disillusionment about the appropriateness of certain means of struggle to achieve freedom, democracy and development. We now know that some liberation movements used extreme forms of coercion, torture and so on to assert their authority over populations as well as over their own militants in cases of dissent. A lot of other things have also changed, particularly in terms of conceptions of freedom, development, rights and democracy.

Development, like the fight against poverty, was in some cases conceptualised in more or less 'militaristic terms': '... while Nyerere remained a believer in civilian supremacy, he was... also becoming a convert to the concept of a *developmental militia*—people trained not merely in the use of guns but also for participation in certain sectors of nation-building at large' (Mazrui 1969, 2002:33). According to Mazrui, Nyerere also 'wanted a politically committed army'. In the 1980s, Thomas Sankara was quoted as saying that a soldier without political commitment to justice is nothing less than an armed bandit. Social change (and development) was thus conceived of as a process that necessarily entails some amount of coercion and violence. In many instances, militarisation became widespread. Decades of military rule in Nigeria and elsewhere led to the militarisation of whole aspects of social life. The transition to democracy should lead to more 'civilian' modes of political action and, hopefully, to gradual changes in the political culture.

These days we tend to talk more about the need for democratic developmental states (Mkandawire). We however still live with a great deal of violence, and in our patriarchal societies, violence is gendered.

For Africa, the nineties have been years of both political liberalisation and conflict, of renewed confidence and hopes in the future, expressed in terms of a 'second independence', and a 'second liberation', but also of trauma, bewilderment and so-called 'Afro-pessimism' at the international level following the Rwandan genocide, the violence and humanitarian crises associated with the conflicts, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and so forth. Peace and reconstruction processes are also continuing in several countries. Consequently, while conflict is spreading and deepening in some parts of the continent, a number of others are in post-conflict transition (i.e. a simultaneous process of reconciliation and reconstruction). This is also true of the situation within several countries, such as Uganda and Senegal where certain regions are still in conflict.

The nature of conflicts and how they are viewed determine to a large extent the types of solutions proposed. Several authors have classified conflicts and wars into three, four or five

categories, corresponding more or less to different generations of conflict and war (Clapham, Cilliers). For instance, Wallenstein has identified three types of international conflict: inter-state, internal and what he calls 'state formation conflicts'. In Africa, after the experience of the international trade in slaves, one can easily identify several 'generations' of conflict, each of which is associated with violence that, from the point of view of the African populations, may or may not be seen as legitimate. First were the pre-colonial wars, followed by the wars of colonial conquest and resistance to the conquest; then came the liberation struggles, a number of which were armed struggles. The conflicts of the first few decades of independent statehood could be called 'state-formation conflicts' that opposed the state to certain groups or regions, or to other states; many of these conflicts in Africa have been diagnosed as 'ethnic', regional, or religious conflicts; the post-conflict political formulae and institutional arrangements proposed therefore tended to be some form of power-sharing involving elites claiming to represent various ethnic groups. Finally came the more recent, 'post-nation state' conflicts. Most of these conflicts are internal, rather than inter-state; the few recent exceptions include the Ethiopia-Eritrea war (1998). This view is however challenged by some scholars who feel that because neighbouring states intervened in at least 13 of the 20 or so civil wars of Africa of the last 20 years, to call these wars internal or intra-state would be inappropriate (Cilliers & Cornwell 1999).

Wars have changed in nature: 'new wars' target civilians and incur mainly civilian victims. The end result is an increase in the degree and spread of violence. Most of the recent civil wars are said to be primarily driven by economic agendas (see the works of Collier). Access to rents, particularly mineral resources, is often cited as an important factor in what sustains these conflicts. 'Resource wars' have become an important post-Cold War and post-nation state phenomenon linked to globalisation. However, Christian Scherrer, in a document titled peace research for the 21st Century, argues that although in the Western hemisphere the Cold War system has collapsed over a decade ago, its ideological heritage somehow survived in the thoughts and concepts of most peace and conflict researchers. He further argues that much of the essentials of contemporary violent conflict actually began to change long ago, probably in the 1950s; that the virulence of the ethnic factor and the crisis of the nation state were overlooked, except by a few scholars such as Galtung, who, as early as 1964, called for greater attention to be paid to intra-state group conflicts.

Both the diagnosis and the proposed solutions are the subject of intense scholarly debates. Ethnicity is a social construct and ethnic boundaries are quite fluid. Moreover, ethnic diversity has not always been synonymous with conflict. On the contrary, armed conflicts tend to signal the breakdown of politics, those very mechanisms that make, and probably made it possible even in the societies and countries now in conflict, to live in peace, regardless of the diversity of identities. Rational choice explanations aside, most civil wars are also a result of the way power is organised and exercised, of a breakdown of political systems, or of what Ohlson & Soderberg call 'normal politics gone bad' (Ohlson & Soderberg 2002). Finally, there have also been several attempts to see whether there are correlations between factors such as ethnic diversity, poverty and the nature of African economies with the spread of violent conflict.³

The conflicts have had devastating impacts on the economies, the institutions of the state and of civil society, social relations, cultures, and representations. Although most of the conflicts are called intra-state (internal), almost all have regional and global dimensions. Not only because of the movement of refugees, but also because neighbours are involved, arms and other goods and ideas circulate widely, networks are established, and so on, and NGOs and other international actors intervene. The media also play important roles; what has been called the 'CNN factor' is one manifestation of this phenomenon. In addition, diasporas intervene to support and sometimes sustain the activities of certain factions. Even mercenaries have become part of an international business activity. New economies have emerged, and new modes of social and political regulation. This makes the challenges of peace making and peace building even more formidable.

Violence

From explanations of the conflicts and civil wars that are going on or have occurred in up to one third of African countries in the last twenty years or so, we now have a number of scholars attempting to explain the 'terrible toll' of the conflicts and wars (Mkandawire 2002), the nature and particular forms of the violence (Mamdani 2000), and the uneven 'distribution of suffering and distress' (Aina 2003). Some of these more recent explanations are aimed at going beyond the culturalist or rational choice explanations of the conflicts and the violence associated with them.

The 'culturalist' explanations tend to see the violence as having its roots in the violence inherent in some African cultures, such as the practice of human sacrifice and other rituals that include cutting off parts of the human body, as is the case with female circumcision that, incidentally, many women's rights activists prefer to call 'female genital mutilation', or the inflicting of other forms of bodily pain in the course of initiation ceremonies. The structuralists challenge these explanations. For instance, in an article in *Track Two* titled 'The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse', Nathan argues that violence is a central concern of humanitarian agencies, but it is actually only a symptom of the crisis. Therefore it is necessary to focus on the structural causes of violence which, he argues, is a manifestation of intra-state crises that arise from four structural conditions (the 'four horsemen of the apocalypse'): authoritarian rule, the marginalisation of minorities, relative socio-economic deprivation, and weak states (Nathan 1999). Of course, one could push this further and ask: but what explains the intra-state crises; what explains authoritarian rule, the marginalisation of minorities, socio-economic deprivation and the weakness of states? Also important for our purpose here is to understand how from the structural conditions we get to particular forms of violence, and under what circumstances these structural conditions give rise to particular forms of violence.

Mamdani has argued that one of the single most important differences between the violence of today with the violence of the Cold War and pre-Cold War era is the fact that post-Cold War violence in Africa lacks the 'revolutionary character' of the Cold War and pre-Cold War violence. Unlike the violence of the Cold and pre-Cold War era, much of the violence of the recent civil wars does not seem to be part of a strategy to realise any clear societal project,

neither in terms of liberation from external oppression such as colonialism, nor in terms of liberation from internal oppression. The recent literature on the conflicts in Africa is replete with epithets whose use tends to confirm that proposition, e.g. the use of the concept 'warlordism' or 'warlord politics' to describe what is going on in Liberia and Sierra Leone (Reno). The phraseology or even the names of the movements are, in that sense, often misleading. For instance, seemingly lacking a clear political programme about what they want to do with power, despite the fact that it is called a 'revolutionary front', the rebel movement of Sierra Leone, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), that started the civil war in 1991 and extended its control over large expanses of the territory of the country, relied mainly on violence and terror tactics to hold on to whatever territory it controlled (Abdullah 2001, 2004, Abdullah & Bangura 1997).

The risk of the violence escalating as these civil wars spread and sometimes degenerate into warlordism is heightened by the existence of a multitude of armed factions, as was the case in Liberia and elsewhere. Some of these factions survive not so much from the material support they get from one of the big powers of old, or from the support of a neighbouring state (as is the case with some of the warring factions in the Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC), but from looting villages and indulging in various forms of illicit trade. In Senegal's southern region, Casamance, some of armed groups which grew out of factions of the secessionist movement, the Mouvement des forces democratiques de la Casamance, MFDC, that were based in neighbouring Guinea Bissau but were forced to leave these rear bases when their main allies were marginalised in Guinea Bissau, are now little more than armed bandits attacking and looting villages to support themselves and their families. In addition to this, the tendency towards an increased 'privatisation of security' operations by contracting local (for the private protection of homes and business premises) and international private security companies (by governments and multinational companies) has increased the risks of escalation of violence (Cilliers 1999).

Mkandawire (2002) taking a cue from the distinction between 'stationary' and 'roving' bandits, has tried to establish a correlation between the nature of the rebel movements and the amount of violence associated with the civil wars. 'Stationary' rebel movements, he argues, are likely to be more dependent on the local communities where they are based for protection and survival than 'roving rebels'. 'Stationary rebels', such as liberation movements that fought for independence in Guinea Bissau and Mozambique, followed a Chinese-like 'long march' strategy ultimately aimed at conquering state power and governing whole countries. In the process, therefore they administer the territories they liberate' as they go along, pretty much like they would do when/if they ever came to power. The problem with many of the rebel movements that one finds in Africa is that they have both urban origins and urban agendas (they are interested in seizing state power), and therefore are strangers to the peasants, who have virtually no problems of access to land. This means that the scale of violence that these movements inflict on the rural communities is probably due, at least in part, to the 'roving' nature of the rebels movements that had their origins in the urban areas, and therefore had very limited ties to the local communities (Abdullah & Bangura 1997). In a recent rejoinder to Mkandawire's article, Stephen Ellis points out the difficulty in finding rebel movements that are exclusively of the 'roving' type, or of the 'stationary' type. There is a little bit of both

characteristics in each rebel movement: some may be 'roving' at period of their history but later 'stationary', at least in certain parts of the country. Yet few are the rebel movements that are not guilty of gross violations of human rights.⁴ Instead, Ellis insists on the importance of the role of culture in understanding the violence unleashed by rebel movements on local populations (Ellis 1999).

Achille Mbembe and a number of scholars in postcolonial studies have tended to link the violence associated with civil wars with the devaluation of human life in the post-colony (Mbembe 2001). The arguments of these scholars are quite similar to those of the scholars who tend to see some connections and continuity between different kinds of violence.⁵ In his work on youth and the civil war in Liberia, Mats Utas sees a link between the violent upbringing of children and their enrolment in rebel movements. He gives examples of child beating as a manifestation of violence in everyday life, a good illustration of which was the President of the Republic of Liberia himself, Charles Taylor, beating his daughter in public, for having had poor results at school. That act, he argues, is similar to the countless numbers of parents who beat their children, or men who beat their wives. It is therefore not surprising that children who grew up under those conditions take the first opportunity they can to enrol in one of the warring factions as a child soldier, especially as that gives them power, access to riches, and access to girls. The violence is also the spread of armed robbery, and gangsterism, rape, the violence of mob justice—necklacing petty thieves, etc, or witches (Comaroff & Comaroff 1998)—that one finds in Nairobi, Dakar, Lagos, Johannesburg and other African cities, or the violence of campus cults. Under conditions of authoritarianism, for example under Mobutu and Abacha, university professors could easily be beaten and humiliated (CODESRIA 1996).

I would however argue that certain distinctions are still very important to make, particularly the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence; the monopoly of the use of legitimate violence being, according to Weber, one of the defining characteristics of the state. In a context of democratic politics, such a distinction is extremely crucial. One could even further argue that every society has its own notions of legitimate authority, recognised and acceptable (and accepted) forms of sanction that may be violent and seen as 'cruel' in other contexts. One of the problems encountered by African societies these days is the multiplicity of actors that can inflict physical violence on other people. According to Mbembe, the loss of state monopoly over the activity of government to a wider range of actors has led to an extraordinary scarcity of material resources and the constitution of new forms of power, the proliferation of frontiers, and the proliferation of small wars whose objectives include the destruction of livelihoods (Mbembe 2001). Violence, in that context, constitutes a banal means of managing territories and peoples, i.e. of government. The proliferation of armed factions and the widespread violence meted out to countless numbers of people in the course of the Sierra Leone civil war, is a good illustration of this tendency.

The Sierra Leone Civil War: The Case of the Amputations

The civil war began in Sierra Leone in March 1991. As has been already noted, it was a war associated with some of the most spectacular forms of violence such as the chopping off of

the hands and limbs of suspected, if passive, allies of the RUF's rival forces, i.e. those of the government or the Kamajors (who were civil defence forces that grew out of what was initially a movement of hunters; see Muana 1997). However, it is now established that the amputation of people's arms and legs was not the exclusive practice of the RUF. The official army and other armed movements (the total of which, according to one account, added up to about half a dozen at one time; see Abraham 1997), also took part in the murdering, raping, and amputations. The confused and the messy character of the war was increased by the shifting alliances between warring factions, and the frequent changes in the roles played by some of the actors—for example the infamous 'sobels' were the soldiers by day who became rebels by night. In addition to all that, private mercenary companies were brought in by the government to help them fight the RUF. What Tade Aina refers to in a recent paper as the 'distribution of suffering' (Aina 2003), did not however affect all communities, although this was one of the very few civil wars of Sub-Saharan Africa in which inter-ethnic feuds did not seem to have played a major role.

However, 'successive attempts at rapprochement ended in a stalemate, feigned acceptance and deception, until an Accord was signed in Lome, and UN troops deployed in 1999. Yet, the cost of holding the RUF at bay has been colossal: a democratically elected government was violently overthrown, democratic institutions stretched to their limits, over 40,000 dead, complete breakdown of law and order in parts of the country, the involvement of, first regional forces, then the UN, and a disintegration of the national army' (Abdullah 2001). This, for a number of Sierra Leone scholars such as Abdullah, 'is not a case of classical state collapse, to borrow a now tired formulation. Rather, it is one of state constriction and partial anarchy' (Abdullah 2001).

So, Why the Amputations?

In the above citation, Abdullah seems to suggest that 'the complete breakdown of law and order in parts of the country' and the 'disintegration of the national army' could be explanatory factors. Most of the people I interviewed in Freetown in August 2001 and in October 2002 also tended to see the reasons for the amputations as having to do with the personalities involved in the civil war, especially those who led the rebel movement RUF. For one science professor, the fact that diamonds were an important factor in what kept the fighting going must be remembered. In addition, many of the fighters were under the influence of drugs, although, assuming that some of the atrocities were committed under such conditions, the fighters and their leaders were presumably sober at certain moments. Yet there has been no expression of collective remorse. Individual expressions of regret in the post-war period are often followed by statements such as: 'well, war breeds violence anyway', and there are no real manifestations of regret in the form of concrete gestures, for instance.

The first officially known amputation took place in Kono in 1993.⁶ The victim was an ex-soldier called Tamba Comba. The RUF fighters, who carried out the amputation, left him with a message hanging round his neck saying: 'We are going to enter Kono'.

From the case of this man, the number and range of victims increased to include even infants, six-month old babies which, for one foreign observer I interviewed was a way of 'psychologically killing people'. Some lost one or both arms, cut close to the shoulder (and were thus left 'short sleeved'), others lost just their hands and were left with their arms (this was called the 'long sleeve'), and others still lost one or both legs. Besides the amputations, there were also other forms of brutality. Pregnant women were disemboweled. Babies were pulled off the backs of their mothers and thrown into wells. Terrified mothers who had witnessed the killing of their children and other people around were made afterwards to clap, or play football, or be killed. Some victims were made to dig their own graves before being killed. This was done to some soldiers of the ceasefire-monitoring group of Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS/ECOMOG) captured by the rebels. Those who carried out the killings and amputations were actually very creative in their approach. This was what made Jose Kagabo say about the Rwandan genocide of 1994 that the orders for the killings were given by persons in positions of responsibility, but in carrying out the orders to exterminate the Tutsis during the Rwandan genocide, people used the fertility of their imagination and their creativity to diversify the ways of inflicting pain and the methods of killing.

The violence in Sierra Leone was also in some cases much more clearly politically motivated. For instance, before being overthrown in 1996 by a faction of the army, led by Mada Bio, the military government of Valentine Strasser who were in power since 1992, had, under great pressure, agreed to hold the elections in 1996. The RUF decided to boycott the elections organised by the government. In Kono, for instance, those who ignored the boycott and went to vote were examined by the RUF combatants, who then at the slightest sign of indelible ink chopped off the fingers. This action then extended to chopping off the thumbs as well. One of the ways of showing support for the military junta that ruled from 1992 to 1996, the NPRC, was for supporters to make 'one love' signs by raising their thumbs when they saw the junta government's soldiers. The RUF, to identify the supporters of the NPRC that they (RUF) were combating, would come to a village and make the 'one love' sign, as if they belonged to the NPRC, then all those who responded thinking that these were indeed NPRC soldiers had their thumbs chopped off.

This kind of explanation of the amputations as being the result of a gradual drift away from what was originally intended to be a limited symbolic act, i.e. erasing the evidence of voting, onto something much more horrendous, is also quite widely taken to be one of the most plausible ones. These explanations tend to link the amputations to the political process, specifically to the RUF's non-involvement in the electoral process. A former professor who has now left the university saw the drift beginning with attempts to scrape off the indelible ink from the fingers of those who disregarded the RUF's call for a boycott of the 1996 elections. The ink being almost impossible to scrape off, the RUF then decided that it was easier to cut off the fingers, which later led to the hands also being cut off. This, of course, does not explain the amputations that took place before 1996, or those that took place much later. In the Congo, in Central Africa, under the Belgian colonial administration, amputations were a way of sending a message to would be dissidents. The practice also exists in a number of the contemporary civil wars in Africa.

One consequence of the civil war is the heightened interest in conflict and peace studies at the University of Sierra Leone and elsewhere in Africa. For instance, one lecturer in the Political Science Department at Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone, who is writing his PhD dissertation on conflict and security in West Africa, supervised up to thirteen BA dissertations during the academic year 2001-2002, most of which were on different aspects of the civil war. In one of these political science BA dissertations recently defended at Fourah Bay College, one can read on page 52:

The country was sunk too deeply in chaos... The climate of violence was such that critics called Foday Sankoh [the leader of the RUF] and his followers as: 'flat-headed, insipid, nauseating, illiterate charlatans' who reached the maximum of audacity in dishing up the craziest mystifying brute against their kith and kin. Indeed, it can be argued that Sierra Leone today is the most outstanding example of the ponderous paradox: the backwardness still existing in African politics: the one still decade civil conflict brought about massive destruction of lives and property, health related problems...With the complete collapse of the economy, people had to contend with the confines of poverty. Across the continent, separatist agitation has intensified and eventually imposed civil wars and ethnic cleansing. But in the case of the war [that] devastated Sierra Leone, the blood, fighting and inhuman atrocities have subsided. (Kumba L.S. Ngongoo, 'The Role of the UN as a Major Stakeholder in the Ongoing Peace Process in Sierra Leone with UNICEF as a Case Study'; BA, Political Science dissertation, May 2002.).

This citation is quite illustrative of the views that one finds in both the press, and among intellectuals and students, who tend to establish a direct link between the violence of the civil war with the mental state of the leaders of the RUF, or with the low levels of education of some of them.

The exact number of amputees is not known. There was a census of amputees going on when I visited Sierra Leone in October 2002. The highest estimates I learned about from UNAMSIL officials, the UN Peacekeeping force in Sierra Leone, put the figures at about 6000 amputees. The amputees camp in Freetown had 230 people in it before the recent repatriations began; the camp in Bo had 248 and the camp at Kenema had 150 amputees. Many amputees never got to the camps and remained in their communities or joined the huge population of internally displaced people and refugees.

Apart from those who, like the current chairperson of the Amputees Camp in Freetown, suffered amputation in the cities such as Freetown itself when the rebels entered it in 1999 (and many people were amputated in Freetown), many of the other amputees were farmers. According to Lamin Jusu Jaka, the Chairperson of the Freetown Amputees Camp, 'some of the amputees didn't even know where Freetown was' (interviewed in Freetown in October 2002). Victims also included business people and students.

The civil war was officially declared over in January 2002, when the demobilisation of ex-combatants was said to have been completed. The question now is how the violence of the civil war is being dealt with in the post-war period, and what kinds of violence still occur.

Violence in Post-Conflict Societies

From the genocide in Rwanda to the informal partition in the Democratic Republic of Congo State, and now that of Côte d'Ivoire, African states that have experienced deadly intra-state conflict and eventual collapse are now confronting the monumental tasks of making and sustaining peace and rebuilding the architecture of governance (Abdullah 2001). Long-term prospects for stability, economic development and democracy in the affected countries largely depend on the success of post-conflict strategies and policies. How the violence is dealt with in this context is therefore very important.

Among the main issues in the discussions related to the violence of the civil war, two seem to be topmost on the agenda: the issue of accountability for the human rights abuses, and the issue of reconciliation. A third concern is with the humanitarian issues, and here too mainly with the assistance to victims of human rights violations, and with the repatriation of the amputees to their home villages, through the provision of land, farming implements and a small amount of emergency food aid—of the wrong kind, claims the amputees. The amputees I interviewed considered the humanitarian assistance provided for them too little and not of the right kind. For instance, they received a bag of food grain, together with a wheelbarrow and a few other farming implements. The grain supplied to them was not the staple food that they were accustomed to, but the 'emergency food' that they lived on during the five years that they spent at the camp. Yet as amputees, they realised that they were seriously handicapped and could never be the farmers they used to be before being amputated. They also feared that, now that the war had been declared over, they would soon be forgotten in their villages. Yet they felt that they are the evidence of the grave human rights violations committed during the war, and therefore they deserve better treatment, especially as a Special Court and a Truth and Reconciliation Commission were being established. Instead, although they have been getting assistance from NGOs and other humanitarian agencies, the amputees felt that they have been used, by being kept in a zoo and showcased in order to attract donor assistance for projects of various kinds and for the personal enrichment of some people.

Regarding the human rights violations, these have become a major international issue. At the end of World War One, human rights were not so relevant to international law or the international community. The way a government treated, or mistreated, its own citizens was an internal affair. Changes came about as a result of the Nazi Holocaust, as governments came to accept that the way individuals were treated—even within 'sovereign' states—was the business of all humankind. The Nuremberg Trials were a turning point. In 1945, the indictment of 24 Nazi leaders brought a new word into the language—genocide (Sall & King 2002). The United Nations defined its jurisdiction at The Hague on the basis of the 1949 Geneva conventions and the 1948 Genocide Convention, giving The Hague an independence and credibility that even the Nuremberg Trials may have lacked. The International Criminal Court (ICC), to prosecute war crimes and crimes against humanity, came into existence as a concept two years ago, when UN member states signed a treaty in Rome (Sall & King 2002). In the words of Richard Goldstone, 'War Crimes Are the Concern of All Humanity', (*Independent*, 3 August 2001, section 2, p. 4 cited in Sall & King 2002). According to Judge Goldstone, who chairs the

International Commission on Kosovo, the invention of a second international crime, 'crimes against humanity', was a new concept, 'founded on the recognition that some crimes are so serious and egregious that they constitute crimes against not only the direct victims; against not only the people or the laws of the country in which they were committed; but against all humankind... This concept of crimes against humanity has changed the face of international human rights and of international criminal jurisprudence', (Ibid.).

Equally important is the ending of the 'culture of impunity'. This is one of the key concerns in Rwanda since the 1994 genocide, for impunity is seen as one of the factors that eventually led to the genocide of that year, as crimes went unpunished and therefore tended to be bigger and more horrendous as perpetrators became bolder (Sall & King 2002). Partly following the example of the International Criminal Tribunals of former Yugoslavia and that of Rwanda (the ICTR), a Special Court has been established in Sierra Leone to try the perpetrators of the grave human rights abuses committed during the civil war.

There is a huge body of literature on Truth Commissions and a rapidly growing body on the ICTY, the ICTR and the Special Courts. One major criticism of truth commissions, however, is the manner in which they tend to individualise responsibility for human rights violations and leave out the whole issue of systemic injustice, and therefore that of structural violence as well (Hendricks 2002). Yet the context of poverty, youth unemployment and marginalisation has a direct impact on the processes of demobilisation, reconstruction and reconciliation.

Poverty

Sierra Leone has, for many years now, had the poorest human development indicators in the world. Poverty, no matter how we define it, is very widespread in the country (Republic of Sierra Leone 2001). This has had an impact on the demobilisation process, as demobilisation is taken to mean different things to different people. For some, it is an opportunity to deal with youth unemployment. There have been cases of young people leaving Freetown for Bo and Kenema, to declare themselves 'demobilised combatants'; in one case, one of the two who left Freetown to go and be 'demobilised' was a cousin of a government minister. The young man was demobilised as a Civil Defence Force (CDF) commander. It was suggested to one of my informants, who is a human rights activist, to do the same thing but he refused.

Initially, an incentive of \$300 was paid to demobilised soldiers. This payment turned out to be unsustainable, and the practice was stopped. However, small as they may be, incentives of this kind given to demobilised youth fighters are the source of frustration on the side of those of the youth who never took up arms, especially as those getting the incentives were, in many cases responsible for human rights violations in the same communities to which they now return.

There was no registry of combatants, so the RUF, for instance, could claim to have 3000 ex-fighters to be demobilised in a given locality, demand vehicles and ask to be given one week to present them to UNAMSIL, then went round farms and villages and talked to people and tried to persuade them to 'join the demobilisation'. For RUF, this was a way of inflating its numbers, making it appear more powerful than it really were. Demobilisation was therefore, in

some respects, a numbers game. The Kamajors, one of the armed groups that fought on the side of the government, like all the lowly educated rank and file fighters of the various factions, were faced with a major dilemma. They were lowly educated and if integrated into the regular army, they would be of low rank and earning a very low salary (25000 Leones, which is less than fifteen US dollars a month), much less than what could be earned fighting.

As evidence of having been a combatant, weapons or ammunition could be presented. Some came with ammunition and said that they shared a gun with others. The emphasis was on child, boy and girl soldiers. Ex-child combatants used to provide for their families, supplying them with food as well as with luxury items such as TV sets, while they were enrolled in the armed movements. As demobilised ex-combatants, they cannot possibly provide for their families as they could during the war years. This poses serious challenges for long-term peace building.

Finally, the intelligentsia itself, among who I conducted interviews, are confronted with serious problems. Under 'normal' times, they earn salaries that are too low to sustain them and their families, which forces them to spend a good part of their time trying to earn additional incomes from consultancies and so on. At certain moments during the war, even that became difficult. The campus of Njala University, some 140 km away from Freetown, was destroyed in 1995 during the war. When the rebels marched into Freetown in 1997, they occupied the university campus, Fourah College, located on top of a hill overlooking the city, and many teachers and students were forced to flee the country. The University of Sierra Leone is still severely understaffed, and poorly equipped, although student numbers never really ceased to grow. How to cope with heavier teaching loads and basic survival problems, and still do research and publish is a major challenge. Yet the local intelligentsia is expected to do just that: research, challenge orthodoxies, and help the country in thinking through its current difficulties.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have argued that there are various kinds of violence, and that the factors leading to one kind of violence or another are extremely complex. I have further argued that there is a tendency for certain kinds of violence to be linked and to feed into each other: structural violence may be a contributory factor to the outbreak of civil wars, which lead to extreme forms of physical violence, and to the worsening of poverty, and the spread of gender and other kinds of violence. In most cases, the breakdown of mechanisms of social and political regulation, particularly the crisis of the state, is responsible for the multiplicity of actors who award themselves the right to inflict violence on others.

The problems of the misuse of power and resources, the unequal distribution of wealth, corruption, and youth marginalisation that were among the root causes of many civil wars such as the one that went on in Sierra Leone for ten years, are still unresolved. The amputations and other forms of violence perpetrated during the civil wars ought to be seen in that context. They seem to have been much more than a mere pathological phenomenon, or the result of the acts of people of questionable sanity. The role of specific individuals in the civil war is

certainly not to be discounted or downplayed. However, it seems to me that the violence of the civil wars of Africa is part of the much larger and more perverse kind of violence that, in some cases, has led to what Mbembe calls a real devaluation of human life. It is however important to remember that violence is gendered, even in civil wars. One of the greatest challenges facing Sierra Leone, and most of the countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, for that matter, therefore, is to reverse those trends so that, as the sounds of gunfire fade away, the violence in everyday life will also be minimised, and peoples' rights, and lives, become more meaningful.

Notes

1. This research was carried out under the auspices of the Nordic Africa Institute programme on 'Post-Conflict Transition, the State and Civil Society in Africa' which I was coordinating. The data for the paper were collected in a series of field trips to Sierra Leone in 2001 and 2002, in which I have been looking more generally at the intelligentsia as strategic actors in the conflict and post-conflict transition, and at the public roles of the University of Sierra Leone. Understanding the representations of violence and poverty among the intelligentsia of Sierra Leone has been a central concern in this research, and I am trying to get a sense of how the violence was perceived by conducting interviews with, and reading the works of Sierra Leone intellectuals. An earlier version of the paper was presented at the American Anthropological Association Centenary Conference (panel on 'Perpetual Violence in Transforming Societies'), held in New Orleans in November 2002. I am grateful to Philip Bourgeois, the discussant on the AAA panel, Staffan Löfving and Satish Deshpande.
2. One estimate puts the number of small arms in circulation in West Africa alone at 8,000,000.
3. Paul Collier of The World Bank is one of those who, through the examination of statistics on wars over a lengthy period of time, have come to the conclusion that ethnic diversity is much less a cause of conflict than the lack of diversity of African economies, many of which are based on the production of one primary commodity.
4. S. Ellis, 'Violence and History. A Response to Thandika Mkandawire', forthcoming.
5. See the works of Philip Bourgeois, for instance; and Staffan Löfving, 2002, 'Guatemala and the Violence, Creative and Destructive, Of Singular Violence'; Paper for AAA annual meeting, New Orleans, November 20-24, 2002.
6. According to one account, the first amputation took place in 1991.

References

- Abdullah, I., 2004, ed., *Between Democracy and Terror*, Dakar: CODESRIA.
- Abdullah, I., 2001, 'Understanding the Civil War in Sierra Leone', Paper presented at the Nordic Africa Institute Workshop on Post-Conflict Transition in Sierra Leone; Freetown, December.

- Abdullah, I. & Bangura (eds.), 1997, 'Lumpen Culture and Political Violence: The Sierra Leone Civil War', *Special Issue of Africa Development*, vol.XXII, Numbers 3/4.
- Abraham, A., 1997, 'War and Transition to Peace: A Study of State Conspiracy in Perpetuating Armed Conflict', in Abdullah, I. & Bangura (eds.), *Lumpen Culture and Political Violence: The Sierra Leone Civil War*, *Special Issue of Africa Development*, vol. XXII, Nos. 3/4.
- Aina, T., 2003, 'Scales of Suffering, Orders of Emancipation: Critical Issues in Democratic Development in Africa', Revised version of an Address to the Nordic Africa Institute's 40th Anniversary Conference on Knowledge, Development and Freedom, Uppsala, September, in *African Sociological Review*, 7, (1) pp. 73-116.
- Cilliers, J. & Cornwell, R., 1999, 'Mercenaries and the Privatisation of Security in Africa', *African Security Review*, vol.8 No.2.
- CODESRIA, 1996, *The State of Academic Freedom in Africa 1995*, Dakar, CODESRIA.
- Comaroff, J. & Comaroff, J., 1998, 'Visceral Economies and the Violence of Abstraction', Paper presented in the Agrarian Studies Program Colloquium Series, Yale University.
- Ellis, S., (Forthcoming), 'Violence and History. A Response to Thandika Mkandawire', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*.
- Ellis, S., 1999, *The Mask of Anarchy: the Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of African Civil War*, London, Hurst.
- Fanon, F., 1963, *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York, Grove Press.
- Jinadu, A.L., 1980, *Fanon: In Search of the African Revolution*, Enugu, Fourth Dimension Publishers.
- Kaldor, M., 1999, *New and Old Wars. Organized Violence in a Global Era*, Cambridge, Polity Press.
- Kandeh, J., 2002, 'Silencing the Guns in Sierra Leone', News from the Nordic Africa Institute, Issue No. 2.
- Lofving, S., 2002, 'Guatemala and the Violence, Creative and Destructive of "Singular Violence"', Paper for annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, panel on Violence in Transforming Societies, New Orleans, 20-24 November.
- Mamdani, M., 2000, 'Keynote Address to the International Conference on Challenges to the Social Sciences in the 21st Century'; Kampala, October.
- Mbembe, A., 2001, *On the Postcolony*, Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Mkandawire, T., 2002, 'The Terrible Toll of Post-Colonial 'Rebel Movements' in Africa: Towards an Explanation of Violence Against the Peasantry', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 2.
- Mazrui, A., 1969, *Violence and Thought. Essays on Social Tension in Africa*, London, Longman.

- Muana, P.K., 1997, 'The Kamajoi Militia: Civil War, Internal Displacement and the Politics of Counter-Insurgency', in Abdullah, I. & Bangura (eds.) 1997, 'Lumpen Culture and Political Violence: The Sierra Leone Civil War', *Special Issue of Africa Development*, vol. XXII, Nos. 3/4.
- Nathan, L., 1999, 'The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse', *Track Two*, vol.10, No.2.
- Ohlson, T. & Soderberg, M., 2002, 'From Weak States to Democratic Peace', Paper for Nordic Africa Conference on Africa: A Future Beyond Crises and Conflicts—The Challenge of (Re)Building Democratic Governance Systems, Helsinki, 19-20 April.
- Osaghae, E., 1996, 'Conflict and Violence in Africa', Paper presented at a Conference of African Intellectuals on the Future of Africa, Organised by Senegalese Minister of State Abdoulaye Wade, Dakar, May.
- Ouedraogo, J-B., 1997, *Violences et communautés en Afrique noire*, Paris, L'Harmattan.
- Republic of Sierra Leone, 2001, *Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy*, Paper, Freetown, June.
- Richards, P., *Fighting for the Rainforest: War, Youth and Resources in Sierra Leone*, London, Heineman.
- Sall, E. & King, M., 2002, 'Key Concepts and Issues in Peace Studies', Background, Paper for University for Peace of the United Nations (UPEACE) Africa Programme Advisory Meeting; Maputo, 23-25 October.
- Scherrer, C.P., 2001, *Peace Research for the 21st Century. A Call for Reorientation and New Priorities*, Tegelen (The Netherlands), ECOR 25 (IRECOR).
- Semelin, J., 1998, 'Violences extremes et sciences sociales', (Website of the Centre d'études des mouvements sociaux, EHESS/CNRS, Paris).
- Utas, M., 2003, *Sweet Battlefields, Youth and the Liberian Civil War*, PhD Dissertation, Uppsala, Department of Cultural Anthropology, Uppsala University.