

REVIEW ESSAYS

REBELS AND INTELLECTUALS IN SIERRA LEONE'S CIVIL WAR

Ibrahim Abdullah, ed. *Between Democracy and Terror: The Sierra Leone Civil War*. Dakar: CODESRIA, 2004. Distributed by African Books Collective Ltd., Unit 13 Kings Meadow, Ferry Hinksey Rd., Oxford OX2 0DP, UK. x + 263 pp. Maps. Tables. Notes. Bibliography. \$25.00. Paper.

THE PUBLISHER CLAIMS that this is “the first serious study to engage with the Sierra Leone civil war.” It is indeed a serious study, mainly of the war’s political context and events in the capital. But information about the actual fighting is limited to a chapter on peacekeeping operations and four interviews in the last chapter by Abdullah and Ismail Rashid on the subject of child soldiers. One of these interviews is especially valuable in confirming that the government army was carrying out atrocities, including amputations, against rebel captives in 1993, well before the wave of amputations perpetrated by the Revolutionary United Front from 1996. The authors do not comment on this evidence, but it has long been my argument that army atrocities helped “enclave” the RUF and determine its mentality as an armed sect.

The first part of the book reprints three articles by Abdullah, Rashid, and Yusuf Bangura, originally published in *Africa Development* in 1997. The RUF claimed to have been inspired by radical student debates in the 1970s and 1980s. As former activists, they are anxious in these articles to distance themselves from that claim. Abdullah and Bangura, in particular, seek to confront my 1996 book on the war, *Fighting for the Rainforest* (James Currey), in which I argue that student radicalism was a factor in the rise of the RUF. My book, however, focuses on prospects for peace; the intention was not to blame former radicals but to find a basis for engagement with an increasingly unstable and dangerous movement. Bangura seeks to deflect my specific purpose by discrediting my work as a whole, twisting arguments out of context and holding them up to ridicule as self-evidently simple-minded, speculative, or just plain ludicrous. He claims, for example, that I proposed to use a local witchcraft discourse (on so-called cannibalism) as a tool for conflict resolution. What I actually argued was that it would be wrong to use these local beliefs as evidence of barbarism, as asserted by the politically influential American journalist Robert Kaplan, suggesting instead that they

be viewed as “weapons of the weak” speaking to youth vulnerability in a “big man” culture still influenced by the legacy of slavery and slave raiding. Thus my claim was that *a correct understanding* of “cannibalism” would assist in the search for peace. Bangura’s greatest disdain is reserved for my suggestion that a group of “Green Book” ideologues was still active in the RUF. I believed constructive engagement with this group would help end the fighting. History has now judged between us. A group of this kind *did* operate within the RUF, and its influence was high during the period covered by my book. The background of its membership, what they taught, and even their training materials are now known (see, in particular, the forthcoming Ph.D. thesis of Krijn Peters).

In reprinting outdated arguments, Bangura and Abdullah renew their personal attack. Bangura alleges in a new footnote that although my 1996 book has gone through several reprints, “I have refused to engage with or even acknowledge the works of Sierra Leonean scholars critical of [my] scholarship” (40). This is simply untrue. Bangura fails to specify any major recent relevant article in which I fail to cite his and/or Abdullah’s work. There have indeed been several reprints of my 1996 book, but Bangura appears to have missed the only one (in 1998) in which my publisher allowed me to add material and in which I address, *inter alia*, his criticism concerning RUF intellectuals. I did for a period (1998–99) agree to a request from Sierra Leone not to argue with Abdullah or Bangura, since any specific evidence I brought forth might jeopardize the people whose existence they sought to deny. The RUF by this stage was firmly in the hands of its wild bush fighters, and movement ideologues were largely hors de combat, albeit still a potential asset in the search for peace. In the vengeful climate following the restoration of the Kabbah government in 1998, even a whisper of association with the RUF might contribute to the risk of a lynching. I agreed to be silent for a time.

As tensions eased, I returned to the debating halls. My critics proved hard to pin down. Clearly they preferred a hit-and-run campaign via well-placed footnotes. When Bangura belatedly withdrew from the Oxford conference on Sierra Leone in May 2000 and asked a Nigerian colleague to read his paper in absentia, nothing was said about my work, so there was no scope to reply, but the electronic version distributed subsequently included a footnote claiming falsely that I had changed my stance. Bangura’s “evidence” was to obtain by some means one of my private e-mails to a third party and quote it, needless to say, without permission. In the present volume Abdullah plays a similar trick. In claiming that I have now “abandoned [my] discredited notion of excluded intellectuals in favour of... an anomic slave revolt” (n.9), he cites, again without permission, the rough draft of an article and blatantly misrepresents what it argues. The paper links the neo-Durkheimian categories “excluded intellectuals” and “anomic slave revolt,” and shows how the deinstitutionalization of an “enclaved” RUF in 1996, not least through the destruction of its bases as a

result of mercenary-led cease-fire breaches, led to a rather different and highly unstable movement, driven not by egalitarianism but by fatalism. These dubious scholarly machinations are perhaps best accounted for by the politics of competing peace processes. Abdullah was understandably keen to reject the RUF leadership's reported acknowledgment of his influence; by making me appear unreliable (in the minds of busy diplomats unlikely to read my book), Bangura's ad hominem approach helped undermine the case for local peacemaking and clear the way for the U.N. leviathan, the agency for which he now works.

It is ironic, therefore, that one of the best things about the remainder of this book is the light shed on the battle between the U.N. and other parties to control the peace process in Sierra Leone. Arthur Abraham offers a particularly fascinating account of the chaotic period between the Abidjan and Lomé peace negotiations, bringing out the extent to which the RUF became obsessed by the argument—seemingly first outlined by a Ghanaian working on the International Alert peace initiative with the RUF—that the entire peace process was a “trick” to institute United Nations control over Sierra Leone (204–5). Kofi Annan had just become secretary general, and the Clinton presidency was apparently keen to use the U.N. as a vehicle for its preferred “African Solutions to African Problems,” even if the Africans are currently of the diaspora. RUF suspicion of the U.N. was intensified when a former U.N. under-secretary general, James Jonah, was appointed electoral commissioner, and the 1996 presidential election, despite the doubts about voting in the runoff, resulted in the presidency of another senior former U.N. official, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah. Jonah later joined the government as its minister of finance, an issue about which RUF ideologues never ceased to grumble. Jimmy Kandeh's chapter on the 1996 election provides invaluable background.

The RUF refused to take part in the 1996 election on the grounds that they did not trust it, not only because they had become paranoid about the U.N. role in the peace process, but also because, in practical terms, they were not ready, being harried by South African mercenary forces in the bush. What both Kandeh and Abraham neglect to say in their comments on this aspect of the war, however, is that Executive Outcomes operations against RUF bases in September–October 1996 were cease-fire breaches, and they destabilized the RUF by driving a wedge between its ideologues negotiating peace in Abidjan and the fighting forces, who then took over the movement in the field, with horrendous results. Abraham believes the British interpretation—that E.O. pre-emptive strikes during the cease-fire period forced the RUF leader, Foday Sankoh, to sign the Abidjan agreement, and therefore contributed to a fragile, short-lived peace. This military solution was not unconnected with the huge kimberlite mining concession an Anglo-South African business consortium (managed in Sierra Leone by a former British military intelligence agent) had negotiated with the National Provisional Ruling Council and renegotiated with the incom-

ing elected government. Had Abidjan succeeded, the RUF would have entered into some kind of power-sharing agreement and queried the kimberlite concession. U.K. diplomats tried to persuade others that the RUF was only a minor aspect of the problem in Sierra Leone, confident that the former South African Defence Force operatives of E.O. would wipe out the rebellion in the field. The demobilization assessment report that Ibrahim Abdullah and I wrote with Patrick Muana and others in October 1996 showed RUF forces to be much larger than the five hundred claimed by E.O., and indeed, as we predicted, the destabilized RUF cadres lived to fight another day, with horrifying consequences. Pressured by the IMF and the U.S. Embassy, E.O. was then forced to withdraw. There was no contingency plan, other than the mercenary replacement scheme involving British contractors which eventuated in the Arms-to-Africa scandal in 1998. A coup in 1997 and Nigerian intervention the following year were followed by RUF counterattack. Chaos continued unabated into 2000, when British regular forces finally helped a U.N. peacekeeping operation, the largest on the planet, to deploy.

Abraham also deals (in an equally insightful second chapter) with an earlier period, revealing how the NPRC regime, in which he briefly held a ministerial post, developed a symbiotic relationship with the RUF to maintain conditions of chaos useful to the prolongation of military rule in 1995. This information, from the horse's mouth, shows very clearly how civil war is not about sides, but a kind of resource over which interested parties struggle. It is a pity the book does not have a similar chapter on the ways in which external players, including the kimberlite concession hunters, the U.N., and elements in the British government, also struggled to control the war for their own purposes. A partial exception is 'Funmi Olonisakin's chapter on the activities of the Nigerian-led West African peacekeeping force, but unfortunately, this pays more attention to internal organizational matters than to the operational environment. Surely a missed opportunity, since it was widely alleged at the time that officers in the peacekeeping forces were so busy mining diamonds in late 1998 that they neglected to pay their rank-and-file, and that this was a factor in the resurgence of the RUF, leading to the damaging January 1999 attack on Freetown. It would have been good to have these claims critically assessed.

Two journalists, Olu Gordon and Lansana Gberie, offer fascinating views of events associated with the junta period, 1997–98. Gordon provides an account of the Freetown press's bold and ingenious confrontation with an illegal regime. Lansana Gberie gives a very useful detailed analysis of the May 25, 1997, coup. A second chapter from Jimmy Kandeh assesses the institutions of democracy, including civil society, under the Second Republic (from 1996). Shrewd insights sit side by side with a surprisingly uncritical acceptance of the part played by Executive Outcomes. I wonder what Kandeh makes of the recent description of the Sierra Leone operation by a company apologist as an application of the most successful counterinsur-

gency doctrine in modern African history—that is, of the doctrine that protected apartheid against the ANC. One other contribution should be mentioned: Sahr Kpundeh's brief but well-focused analysis of the corruption underpinning the violence, angled to accommodate the "greed-not-grievance" interpretation of his World Bank colleagues.

All in all, *Between Democracy and Terror* contributes material of wide interest to conflict specialists working on West Africa. But it is also clear that Sierra Leone diaspora intellectuals need to pursue fieldwork in the battlegrounds of the war, not least on the Liberian border, to test their arguments further. Perhaps, too, they should think more critically about British involvement, especially in the period 1995–99—were they not once countercolonial scholars? The most disappointing aspect of the book, its clear merits notwithstanding, is that information based on access to former members of the RUF is so sparse. This suggests that there is far to go before diaspora radicals are reconciled with those who hijacked their political dreams. My worry was always what the RUF would become if left to the control of its unstable bush cadres. Better a half-baked intellectual than none at all?

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