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Sobel Rumors and Tribal Truths: Narrative and Politics in Sierra Leone, 1994

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The stories about causative factors to the mammoth violence, which led to the death of people, have become many and varied. Nobody seems to know anymore who is speaking the truth and who is telling a lie, yet in this banter, people have died and relatives of the deceased seem to have no place to seek redress.

———(Makeni Demonstration Should be Investigated 1994)

In April 1994, the town of Makeni, the capital of the northern province of the West African nation of Sierra Leone, was transformed from a calm oasis in the midst of the country's brutal civil war with the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) into an explosively violent node of political discontent, by a rumor. The rumor asserted that the town was in imminent danger of attack by a mass internal uprising of *sobels*: soldiers who were colluding with rebels. Residents responded by initiating their own security checkpoints, which caused a clash with soldiers that resulted in a riot and shooting. Five months later the ruling military junta, the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC), replaced the regional secretary of state (SOS), who belonged to a non-local tribe, with a member of the local Temne tribe. After this move, the fears of *sobels* quickly subsided, even as their existence was legitimized in several confirmed attacks and the court-martialing of several soldiers.

In this article I examine how the rumors about *sobels* catalyzed the circulation of narratives that forced action on the politically taboo issue of tribe. The NPRC was tribally mixed—a departure from a national history of politicized

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tribal identities (Kandeh 1992)—and fought to maintain this image in order to promote the national unity that it felt was critical to defeating the RUF. The events provoked by the *sobel* rumor raised the question of whether Makeni was being discriminated against by its SOS, Major Fallah Sewa. Sewa could metaphorically be accused of being a *sobel* not because he colluded openly with the RUF, but rather because he did not work with the Temne townspeople to promote security and development. Because the SOS was the region's cabinet minister, accusations of his tribalism and refusal to work with local people posed a bigger threat to NPRC power than did the seemingly more threatening issue of *sobels*. In the wake of this tumult, the junta addressed the former quietly and the latter publicly. In light of this, I argue that the most important effect of rumor is that it exposes the interstices between overt and covert, spoken and unspoken, and thereby creates the discursive space in which suppressed, politically dangerous issues, ostensibly unrelated to the original rumors, can be addressed.

I argue this based on the fact that mass fears of *sobels* invading Makeni disappeared, even after the existence of *sobels* was confirmed, with the expedient switch of one military administrator for another. The junta was still in power, and was addressing the reality of mutinous, predatory, criminal soldiers, and yet Makeni, though surrounded by war, entered a period of unprecedented prosperity under the newly appointed officer's administration. The *sobel* rumor was factual, but its overt substance was politically insignificant compared to the covert issue it nurtured—the matter of tribalism. By causing a fracture in which a non-Temne could be singled out as an enemy, the *sobel* rumor enabled discourse and action concerning underlying divisions that were suppressed because of a local emphasis on maintaining the appearance of social harmony (Fermé 1999; Murphy 1998: 568). The administrator was removed, with a press release announcing a "surprise cabinet reshuffle." Other SOS officers were transferred to different posts, but "the press release remained mute in [Major Sewa's] case, suggesting that the major had dropped out of the NPRC government" (Fallah Sewa Dropped 1994).

Rumor can nurture otherwise disallowed discourses, particularly discourses that create openings for change, when it promotes actions that demand to be addressed, *whether or not they are articulated overtly.* This is especially salient with respect to rumors that enable narratives of political "truths," since, according to Hannah Arendt, "truth and politics are on rather bad terms with each other," rendering truth impotent and power deceitful (1968: 227). Arendt (ibid.: 228) asks rhetorically, "What kind of reality does truth possess if it is powerless in the public realm, which more than any other sphere in human life guarantees reality of existence to natal and mortal men?" *Sobels* were revealed as a frightening reality, a "truth," and yet in the end were not politically salient in that they did not threaten the survival of the NPRC.

On the other hand, now, almost two decades after the event, Makeni residents deny that Fallah Sewa was replaced due to a tribal issue, and argue that he was removed for his poor handling of the *sobel* crisis. In 2012 I asked two middle-aged gentlemen directly if it had been a tribal matter, and their response was shock. According to one, "No, if it had been tribal, it would have been much messier than it was. If it had been tribal, it would have been a big, big palaver! Huge issue! [He waved his arms around for emphasis.] And it is such a big problem here, this tribal problem. If you ask people, 'Who are you?' or 'What is your identity?' at the end of the day it will come down to their ethnicity. It's like they can't get away from it, and for many people, they don't want to. The tribe is everything."

Emphasizing *sobels* instead of tribalism—which they admit is a "big problem"—prevented the issue of Sewa's ouster becoming "messier than it was." Admitting the political salience of tribalism would have destroyed the appearance of social harmony, and so it was covertly political; so covert, in fact, that the connection escaped these educated gentlemen, who went on to describe the successes of Sewa's Temne successor in glowing terms. Thus did the imperative of harmony prevent the overt articulation of tribalism, while simultaneously making its redress a primary concern, redress that occurred only when rumor-enabled narratives prompted action. Harmony was the barrier that prevented the overt marriage of truth and politics, and rumor, which allowed *sobels* to substitute for tribalism, was the vehicle for their covert relationship. Therefore, in answer to Arendt, saying that truth and politics are on "bad terms" with each other and that truth has no public power obscures the codependence of truth and politics. Animosity *is* a relationship, and it is illuminated in the discursive space where rumor enables one truth to stand in for another, where the consistent denial of a truth amounts to an acknowledgement of its salience. Thus it behooves researchers to investigate the secondary narratives, scapegoating, and seemingly unrelated events that occur in rumor's wake. In this space, the relationship between truth and politics, in all its dysfunction, is revealed.

WAR, *SOBELS,* AND RUMORS

In 1994, the war was three years old. The RUF had initiated it ostensibly to throw out the "rotten system" of dictatorship begun under President Siaka Stevens in 1967, which continued under Stevens' successor Joseph Momoh, a native of a village three miles from Makeni. The National Provisional Ruling Council ended Momoh's reign with a coup in 1992. The NPRC was popular everywhere in the country save Makeni, since the town was the historic seat of the All People's Congress (APC), the party of Stevens and Momoh.[1]

[1] The discourse of ethnic politics has remained muted after the war, with region standing in for tribe, and the quest for power trumping simple party loyalty. The APC is known as the Temne and

Political tension surrounding the party's ignominious ousting remained unspoken, as the NPRC initially made great strides against the RUF, in contrast to the APC's failure. As the fighting was confined mainly to the south and east, residents of the north experienced the war through displaced people seeking refuge from the violence. However, as news of the war moved north, rumors causing repeated public panic surfaced continually around another issue that was problematic for the military government: *sobels*.

A *sobel* was a renegade soldier (Richards 1996: 14), a soldier/rebel who was as likely to be involved in "acts of criminal adventurism" as he was to be fighting the RUF (Kandeh 1999: 346). Fears of *sobels* began early in the war, as President Momoh's poorly trained and under-equipped army engaged in looting as often as they skirmished with the RUF, and many rebels donned the uniforms of soldiers they killed (Ashby 1999). Civilians in the war zone saw no substantive difference between various militants, who, whatever their dress, preyed on civilians. Villages defended themselves by erecting checkpoints, mounting patrols, and interrogating strangers, including soldiers (Hoffman 2011: 73). Fear-inducing rumors sparked elaborate local defenses against potential attack by armed, disheveled, uniformed figures of dubious provenance.

The substance of the *sobel* phenomenon and the problems it caused in Makeni began in 1993, when the war was a distant phenomenon except that it flooded the area with refugees—strangers. Military activity increased in January 1994 as the rebels drew closer to the town, and the rise in the population of strangers increased general unease and suspicion. The RUF were known to engage in psychological warfare tactics ranging from sending threatening letters warning of attacks to leaving human body parts along the road, which nurtured a general sense of fear and mistrust. Displaced people from the south brought the first *sobel* rumors, telling tales of renegade soldiers having attacked their villages in collusion with the RUF. Makeni residents began agitating for the right to form their own Civil Defense Force (CDF), as many villages in the south and east had done, but Fallah Sewa repeatedly denied their requests. According to one man who knew Sewa at the time, "He was offended that residents did not trust the military's ability to defend the town. He was a very proud man, because he knew that he was a good officer."

northern party, and the SLPP, which took over from the NPRC, as the Mende and southern party. Each party has vied for predominance in the east, which is home to many "minority" tribes such as the Kissi, Fallah Sewa's tribe. Tejan Kabbah, the SLPP leader who became president after the NPRC, is a Mandingo from the east, and the SLPP received the east's vote in 1996 and 2002. In 2007 and 2012, APC candidate Ernest Koroma chose a Kono as his running mate, and the east voted for the APC in both elections. In 2012, Fallah Sewa ran for parliament as an APC candidate in the east and lost. His 1994 rival Abass Bundu, on the other hand, became the APC government's attorney general.

In early April, the rebels invaded the neighboring district of Tonkolili, and Sewa deployed with his soldiers to repel them. He returned with depleted numbers, and explained that he had left a company to clean up the operation. Local fears of *sobels* increased as residents spread rumors that Sewa was himself leading a contingent of *sobels*, who were waiting for his signal to attack the town. Two NPRC officials traveled from Freetown to hold a meeting in Makeni and assuage these fears, which resulted in a nine-point resolution in which a CDF was authorized, without Sewa in attendance. Local youth immediately sprang into action, erecting checkpoints at the major arteries into Makeni, and searching all suspicious vehicles and individuals.

One of the first vehicles they stopped was a civilian car, driven by soldiers and loaded with what appeared to be looted goods. The youth detained the soldiers, an argument ensued, a young man was shot in the hand, and the driver rammed the checkpoint. Soldiers immediately dismantled the remaining checkpoints, and the enraged youth marched to the paramount chief's house, demanding action. Residents converged on Sewa's office in Independence Square, throwing stones, calling him a rebel, and demanding redress; shots were fired and six people were killed. In the aftermath, although *sobel* rumors continually fueled fears and prompted frightened residents to jump at the first hint of trouble, a more troubling narrative developed: that Sewa, a non-Temne, was deliberately undermining local security. Newspaper reporters joined the verbal fracas and spread their own rumors about the violent events, who was to blame, whether Sewa's actions were motivated by tribalism, and their preferred consequences. Sewa and other NPRC administrators joined the war of words, accusing each other in the newspapers of jockeying for power by slandering each other, and warning residents—whom they had stripped of their power of self-defense—not to engage in "unpatriotic" acts such as rumormongering or reacting to *sobel* rumors by fleeing the town.

A few months after this began, *sobels* were confirmed as fact by multiple eyewitness reports of coordinated attacks on villages. This was followed by the commanding officer of the Makeni battalion being court-martialed. Simultaneously and without explanation, the president engaged in a "reshuffle" of his cabinet, replacing Sewa with a Temne administrator. Confirmation of the *sobel* rumors, contrary to what we might expect, did not galvanize Makeni residents against the NPRC or prompt their mass evacuation of the town. Rather, the town entered a period of development in the midst of war, with residents happily cooperating with their new Temne SOS, who encouraged civil society organizations, restored electricity and piped water, and oversaw the launch of the new radio station—the town's first local source of news and information. Sewa had accomplished none of these things during his tenure, and they occurred now despite increased RUF pressure on Makeni.

How was this confusing course of events enabled by rumor? Fine defines rumor as "unsecured information": "information that is suspect because of its

uncertain and unauthorized origins within a social system" (2005: 1), which in this case, meant residents remained safely anonymous as they spread information that potentially undermined the NPRC. Rumor does not hide its status as unauthorized (Neubauer 1999: 2), which can make it extremely powerful in places where there is a general mistrust of authority, as was the case in Makeni.[2] Circulation of rumors about *sobels* was part politics and part fear, commentary on the opportunism rampant among fighting factions and a way to spread information about the possibility of violent attack. Though the NPRC government was stable the war was creeping northward, and rumors followed because there was no dissemination of national news to alleviate people's fears (see Allport and Postman 1946: 503). It is impossible to quash rumor within a relative information vacuum, a factor common to war zones throughout history around the world (see Hasan-Rokem 2005; Neubauer 1999: 14).[3]

In Sierra Leone, a largely illiterate population relied on auditory transmission of news between towns and villages, a process known as "pavement radio" (Ellis 1989). This process became even more prevalent as people fleeing their villages transmitted news to others in the militias' paths. Since even the military lacked operational maps for remote jungle battlegrounds, very little reliable information about rebel movement ever emerged, blurring the lines between spreading relevant information about attacks and dubious information about who was responsible. Called *den say* in Krio, the lingua franca of Sierra Leone, rumor is deeply entwined with politics, since it is one of the few ways of managing social and political divisions within an ethos of maintaining surface social harmony.[4] Fermé asserts that the value

[2] More than being merely unofficial, rumor can serve as a conscious counter to official news, especially if the community in which the rumor is spreading is marginal to local or national politics. According to Scott, "Rumor flourishes where the state is incapable of disseminating, unconcerned with or deliberately withholding "truth," and in the re-telling, people bring it closer into line with their hopes, fears, and worldview" (1990: 145). It can serve as conscious political commentary and be an effective counter to state "truths" because it is "unofficial (important where regimes do not represent popular views), anonymous (providing protection), and ephemeral (can change with circumstances)" (Renne 1993).

[3] In the United States, rumors proliferated almost continually in the tumult of the Second World War. Even as events were reported in the news, "the individual never stops at a mere acceptance of the event … in his mind the emotional overtones of the event breed all sorts of fantasies. He seeks explanations and imagines remote consequences" (Allport and Postman 1946: 502).

[4] Sierra Leone also possesses a tradition of what Rosalind Shaw calls "embodied memories"—where individuals carry historical memories, including rumors, and act on them through religious and social ritual—reaching as far back as the eighteenth-century slave trade. Persistent rumors of cannibalism responded to English merchants who dominated the eighteenth-century slave trade, and these rumors survive today in the language used to describe white people and in parables warning children about leopards, a metaphor for predatory foreigners (Shaw 1997: 868; 2002). Rumors of unholy alliances between politicians and diviners and other ritual specialists saturate political discussions. Politicians are thought to gain their power through "malignant ritual" that often involves human sacrifice, a discourse commonly circulated in newspapers (Shaw 1996: 33).

placed on surface harmony diverts the "dirty work" of achieving consensus outside of the public purview, in the interstices of public and private, where contradictions and contentious politics can be diffused in order to create a united front (1998: 557; 1999: 265). Rumor initiates this "dirty work" by opening the space for otherwise disallowed narratives, bringing to light contentious issues extant below the surface without forcing the direct confrontation that results from assigning or assuming authorship, or even calling an issue by its name. During continual crises such as war, rumors such as those about *sobels* circulate both political commentary and potentially life-saving information, enmeshing the rumors simultaneously in realms of truth and politics, and demanding their rectification. Thus is the co-dependent, if antagonistic, relationship that Arendt posits between truth and politics revealed, addressed, and submerged once again.

TRACKING THE CREATION AND DISSEMINATION OF RUMORS

S*obel* rumors were so widespread that they found their way into the national newspapers in Freetown, far from the battlefront, as a series of articles printed between January and November of 1994. Public figures, beat reporters, and anonymous sources reinforced public perception that the war was raging in an information vacuum by seizing on rumors about *sobel* activity, and trading barbs and theories about the aftermath of violent confrontations initiated by fear of *sobels*. I analyzed the content of secondary reports of rumors and compared them to individual narratives of the violence in order to better understand the deployment and contestation of new narratives. Rumor, by being printed, loses neither its status as "unofficial" and "against the state," nor its pliability and responsiveness to local conditions (see Kirsch 2002: 57). Rather, as Rosnow and Fine argue, newspapers are the gatekeepers of rumor; what they print gains legitimacy and is therefore more likely to persist, even if the articles are "echoes": rumors about rumors (1976: 2–3, 6).[5] Indeed, that so many reports were published anonymously makes them an integral part of the rumor mill.

This process occurs and is reinforced in Sierra Leone by the politically partial and sensationalist nature of the country's newspapers. The *Daily Mail* was the mouthpiece of the NPRC government, and printed statements and opinions that supported the government. Another daily, the *New Citizen*, was founded and edited by a "native son" of Makeni, I. B. Kargbo, a former student activist and later head of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists.

[5] For example, in response to Indira Gandhi's crackdown on the press in the wake of her ethics conviction in 1975, the *New York Times* printed rumors that anti-Gandhi protestors had been slain, and stated that rumors claimed persons were being arrested in New Delhi for rumormongering. Rumors in this case gained credibility by being printed alongside hard news (Rosnow and Fine 1976: 97), and created the conditions for reporters to speculate about rumors of other rumors.

Kargbo was an energetic defender of Makeni's interests, while still maintaining a rigorous anti-APC stance. His student newspaper the *Tablet* had been a continual embarrassment to Siaka Stevens' government, and was forcibly shut down in the 1970s, which lent him credibility as a politically neutral source.

By 1994, the APC's mouthpiece, *We Yone* [Krio for "our own"], was out of publication. The news industry was moving away rapidly from the censorship of the APC era, and new newspapers of varying political leanings emerged regularly. Though various reporters from other papers weighed in on the issue, two papers—the *Daily Mail* and the *New Citizen*—were the primary vehicles of the divergent narratives that emerged in the aftermath of the crisis spawned by people reacting to fears of *sobels*. As rumors inspired actions requiring political responses, accusations flew within the newspapers about reporters themselves spreading rumors by printing them. Most citizens read newspapers as the personal opinion pages of their publishers, and as many people have said, "In order to find truth, you must read all the papers. The truth is somewhere in between them." Newsprint became a tool of rumormongering, rumor theorizing, and starting rumors about rumors as people read editorials and so-called news items and then circulated the information. Newspapers, in this case, provide an archive of the life cycle of rumors as well as of the secondary rumors and narratives they spawn.

In Makeni, the government first began addressing the rumor mill by occasionally publishing failed rumors about imminent RUF attacks in the newspaper that Makeni residents trusted the most, the *New Citizen*. Sewa only spoke to newspapers in the context of replacing unsecured information with secured information, in this case by correcting a rumor about a Christmas day attack by publishing a letter threatening a 6 January attack, which did not occur, and could be confidently ignored ten days later:

> Residents of Makeni have been plunged into confusion when rumors circulated that a letter had been sent to SOS North by rebels, promising to strike at Makeni on or after Christmas day. The *New Citizen* has learnt from the SOS North, Major Fallah Sewa, that a group calling itself "the black mirrors" has sent him a letter, which he wanted to be published to allay the fears of the general public. The letter was dated 6th January, 1994 [i.e., not Christmas day] and was addressed to him with 5 Sierra Leone stamps and was posted in Makeni and marked "urgent!" [and warned of an attack the same afternoon]. The secretary explained that he did not see the possibility of anybody mounting a successful attack on Makeni when one considers the strategic position of the town, the vigilance of the security forces, and above all the cooperation of the general citizenry.… Major Sewa has ordered the security forces to step up security and has admonished the general public to be more vigilant and desist from spreading false rumors as this would be counter-productive and would create a state of panic. He, however, said he would not treat the matter lightly as such threats had had bad effect in the past. Major Sewa agreed to suggestions that the letter was meant to distract the security forces so as to carry out other acts of sabotage against the NPRC regime (Lewis 1994a).

Thus did Major Sewa use the newspapers to validate a rumor—in this case an actual letter that was photocopied and printed in the paper—and replace a rumor with a fact that he could control, by stating confidently that no 6 January attack had occurred. Sewa's care in asserting that acts of sabotage were being planned against the NPRC speaks to his management of this rumor; essentially he is intimating that the rumor of an attack was planted to discredit the NPRC government and cause it to lose face in the town. In spite of this, residents were still prevented from augmenting the official security provided by the army.

One month later, an RUF attack in the east prompted Major Sewa to initiate a dawn-to-dusk curfew, requiring all vehicles to be parked by 7:00 p.m. Newly displaced people were to report to the authorities immediately upon their arrival for "screening," and a strategic roadblock on the highway to the east was erected nightly. Sewa told a reporter, Josef Lewis, "All residents automatically become defenders of their respective locality … barkeepers, hotel, club, and cinema management have been advised to report the movements of any suspicious persons to the nearest authorities" (Lewis 1994b). Sewa's attempt to control people served this time to fuel fears about "the Other," laying the groundwork for people to produce and circulate their own rumors about imminent threats to Makeni.

As if implicitly recognizing the government's inability to perfectly control fear, Sewa quickly amended his statement, reeling in the powers granted to residents while simultaneously implicating them in the destabilization of the town: "The statement strongly warned security personnel at checkpoints to desist from harassing, molesting, or intimidating passengers and extorting money from them on the flimsy excuse that they had failed to produce their ID cards" (ibid.). Official information dealt in fear of the Other, but residents were not authorized to alleviate their fear; Sewa repeatedly dismissed requests that Makeni's residents be allowed to form their own militias. Instead they were subject to similar regulations as the displaced, such as a curfew, intimating that they were also undermining security. Though the statement highlighted that an easily demarcated external threat to the town could be controlled through military movements, it also suggested that the public could not be trusted to carry out their own protection measures. This was one instance where the newspapers revealed that, unlike the towns in the south and east that were encouraged to form their own civil militias, Sewa prevented Makeni residents from doing so.

This article was printed in the wake of *sobel* rumors that emerged from the southern warfront, as the government scrambled to prove that the military was still in control of civilian security. As the poorly trained and badly paid army fought the RUF, the lines between soldier and rebel blurred: individuals dressed as soldiers began attacking villages using similar tactics to the RUF. Civilian mantras emerged: "Rebel attack, soldier clear," and "soldier by day, rebel by night" (Zack-Williams 1999: 152). The extent of actual *sobel*

attacks was debated well after the war; soldiers I spoke with in 2005 claimed rebels habitually attacked military convoys in search of supplies, stripping soldiers of their uniforms to supplement the RUF's "ragtag" civilian clothes. Debates aside, the phenomenon arrived in Makeni in a locally salient rumor: that Sewa's soldiers who had fought the rebel incursion into a neighboring district had defected en masse, were in the bush with the RUF, and were plotting to invade Makeni. It was intimated that Sewa had returned to Makeni in order to coordinate the invasion.

The ability of wedge-driving rumors—those that exploit previously nonsalient differences between two groups—to exacerbate crises by exploiting a perceived threat one group poses to another is widely documented (see Kakar 2005; Knapp 1944: 23; Musambachime 1988; Nkpa 1977; Neubauer 1999; and Spencer 2000). Neubauer argues that scapegoating is not a product of the wedge-driving rumor, but rather the rumor merely takes advantage of existing prejudices, and justifies the space for acting on them (1999: 4), which is critical for understanding how this breach between overt harmony and covert discord occurred. Sewa had nurtured a prejudice against the army by preventing residents securing the town, and the rumor reflected that fact. Makeni residents, whatever their ethnic provenance, could mistrust an army they believed refused to allow them to protect themselves. However, even in an atmosphere of unified fear, rumor outcomes are impossible to predict, because they are susceptible to outside actors exploiting them for their own purposes.[6] It was in precisely this atmosphere that several NPRC politicians decided to address the *sobel* issue directly with Makeni residents.

ACTING ON RUMOR

In the wake of the RUF incursion into Tonkolili District, two civilian members of the NPRC government, Foreign Minister Dr. Abass Bundu and Attorney General Frank Kargbo, traveled to Makeni and held a series of public meetings. The reporters who wrote about the meeting emphasized the civilian-military divide between Sewa and the others, but none mentioned that Sewa and his civilian counterparts were of different tribes, or that Bundu and Kargbo were

[6] Because rumor is essentially public property with no surety of origin, it can, once released into the world, work against its rumor community. In West Papua, for example, Kirsch found that the government exploited local rumors of predatory female sexuality to legitimate its own violence against women and obscure the violence of its development practices (2002: 67). When this marginal community lost control of their own rumor, they experienced the amplification of the very terror they were describing, instead of enhanced group solidarity or security (ibid.: 57). In Sri Lanka, rumors of Tamil Tiger attacks on symbolically important Sinhalese targets justified a wave of mass killings of Tamil civilians in 1983. Spencer argues that these rumors, more than just exposing Tamils to genocidal violence, unmasked a Sinhalese moral order in which all Tamils were aggressive terrorists and acceptable targets for violence. This thereby created a space for further violence and undermined the very moral certitude that undergirded it (2000: 123), a process Spencer labeled "misrecognition."

northerners and would be considered "local" to Makeni. The *New Citizen* reported that the meetings resulted in the assembling of local youth into a civil defense force designed to complement the activities of the army.

> Speaking before their departure to Makeni, Dr. Abass Bundu said that their position is to mobilize the resources of the north, both material and human, to complement the efforts of government to combat this war. "In this context," he said, "we aim at popularizing the war to make every citizen, town dweller, as well as villagers accept that it is their responsibility and obligation to defend themselves and not to give succor and support to any foreign elements bent on causing havoc in their communities. The belief is that a guerilla war waged by 'strangers' on a foreign terrain is highly unlikely to advance if the local populace is unwilling to offer assistance and collaboration (Kposowa 1994).

Bundu stated overtly that if the RUF gained a toehold in the district, it could be attributed directly to the local populace "offer[ing] assistance and collaboration." Thus a CDF became the greatest act of patriotism Makeni residents could undertake in support of the NPRC, also ensuring they deflected the potential accusation of passive collaboration through non-action. According to an anonymous reporter from the *New Citizen,* "The meeting itself had no hitches as it was conceived, but the non-participation at the meeting of the regional secretary, Major Fallah Sewa, who was supposed to have delivered the welcome address, made some people a little uneasy" (People's Defense Force Formed 1994). Sewa later claimed that the meeting was held without his knowledge, a key aspect of his narrative that Bundu and Kargbo were undermining his authority. Participants created a nine-point resolution supporting the NPRC's efforts, with the fifth point creating a "people's defense force" to complement the armed forces. Makeni youth responded to this resolution by immediately organizing neighborhood task forces, each of which erected a checkpoint on their major travel artery within a few hours of the end of the meeting. All entering vehicles were searched at a checkpoint to ensure that rebels, however they were disguised, were barred from entering.

"MAKENI EXPLODED IN VIOLENCE AND DEATH"

The resolution empowering youth to become the defenders of their town initiated a series of events that revealed the deep-seated animosities between Temnes and strangers, soldiers and civilians, residents and the government, all potential catalysts for violence. According to the first report of the violence, the youth acted on their belief that soldiers were *sobels*. Fueled by persistent rumors, youth took the upper hand in defending "their town" against all threats, including that of the country's government. They suspected soldiers driving an old Toyota that was "loaded down with property" were *sobels* smuggling weapons into the town, and insisted on unloading and searching the vehicle. The driver of the detained vehicle rammed the checkpoint and was chased down by several youth. This prompted a heated argument with one soldier—a bodyguard of Fallah Sewa—who insisted they be allowed to drive

the vehicle into Makeni. In the scuffle that followed, a youth was shot in the hand (How Makeni Exploded 1994). This was when, according to the reporter, "Makeni exploded in violence and death."

Reporters from the *New Globe* interviewed an unnamed NPRC spokesman, who defended soldiers' reaction to being searched: "Soldiers who naturally found their mobility handicapped by the numerous barricades and checkpoints finally dismantled all of them that same day," citing the fact that the resolution had created a people's defense force to support the army, not hinder it. The next day the youth led a delegation to the paramount chief's house to protest. The chief, a Temne and the traditional leader of Makeni, called a meeting at the NPRC headquarters in Independence Square, where Fallah Sewa and his troops were waiting. According to reporters, "The youths again allegedly misbehaved, saying '*Fallah Sewa nar rebel'* [Fallah Sewa is a rebel] continuously. Following repeated unheeded warnings from the army officers and the Paramount Chief, it is reported that the soldiers were eventually forced to open fire. When the fire died down six people were picked up dead and several others wounded" (Conteh and Beecher 1994).

The rumor, checkpoints, riot, and shooting revealed a previously latent enmity between the military and youth, a clear case of "popular action" emerging from rumor (Shibutani 1966: vi). However, rather than being a catalyst for further discussions of *sobels* and security, entirely different narratives emerged and dominated the conversation. These referenced the *sobel* rumor obliquely, but emphasized a different overarching grievance: that Sewa's refusal to allow civil defense mechanisms in Makeni was motivated not by military arrogance, but rather by tribalism, and the arrogance of a non-Temne man towards his charges. The breach caused by the *sobel* rumor was filled by narratives revealing and exacerbating latent social tensions surrounding tribalism, and Major Sewa's poor handling of the rumor and the *sobels* themselves initiated action on an issue that would otherwise remain continually suppressed.

In 2006 I interviewed the paramount chief about this event, and he emphasized the arrogance of an army officer who cared more about protecting his authority than he did about protecting the town. The *sobel* rumor did not figure in this narrative:

> The youth went out in force and erected checkpoints all over the town and searched every vehicle coming in for signs of rebels. And they did not exclude army vehicles from these searches. When the army guys returned from Masingbi [the battleground in Tonkolili district], their vehicles were heavy with properties they had looted. The youths insisted on searching them as they came into town. The soldiers objected and they fought with the youth. Major Sewa arrived in town that day. I tried to discuss the matter with him, I asked him to please let me deal with the youths because they are my people. Sewa said no, he said that no one was above the SOS North and it was his jurisdiction. He sent his guys out in the night to destroy every checkpoint, and they seriously flogged all the youths who were manning the checkpoints. The people were very unhappy that the youth were flogged for protecting the town, and

they all started moving together to Independence Square, where the NPRC tent was and Sewa was sitting, to protest. I tried to call to people to let everyone come to the stadium so we could talk seriously, but they were angry and were not listening. Then all the soldiers moved in front of them and they had their guns out. The women threw stones at them, and they opened fire. They killed three people right there, and so many others were shot and had to go to hospital. That day was horrible.

Every account features the power of rumor to incite "behavioral contagion," which Shibutani defines as, "the rapid dissemination of a mood or form of conduct, most often through interpersonal contact … a type of transaction in which collective excitement is extreme" (1966: 95), which in this case led to mass violence. This explosion of public emotion was quieted immediately in spite of the deep divisions it revealed between soldiers and civilians, which highlights how the need to restore at least the appearance of social harmony was paramount. Newspapers reported a return to a state of calm, and that government peace envoys—comprised of various top brass in the junta willing to appease residents—were successful in engaging soldiers and civilians in cooperative defensive endeavors. This included joint manning of the town's checkpoints, which had been "reduced in number" (Government Sends Peace 1994; Makeni Now Calm 1994). It appeared that the traditional forces of unity—and of politics reasserting itself over truth in the public domain—were unfolding without any resolution of underlying issues.

However, rumors that find traction through popular action become subject to political and popular narratives as "a natural part of the process of conforming to the laws of plausibility" (White 2000: 56), and this is where they gain relevance in politics. It is the narratives that emerged in the aftermath that, I argue, revealed, however briefly, the co-dependence of truth and politics, and this began when politicians weighed in on who was responsible for the riot and shooting. Suggesting a political motive for a rumor is common among officials who find themselves attacked by it, because a targeted politician can reestablish his authority and frame himself as a protector of the public good by intimating that a rumor is politically motivated (Kroeger 2003: 252), and even that he is protecting a public against their own base impulses. In this case, different NPRC politicians partnered with reporters to print their own interpretations of events. This medium allowed them to denounce slander, and to promote their own narrative of the events, the responsible parties, and their motives. These articles sparked months of printed exchanges between political and ethnic rivals, in which rumors about imminent *sobel* attacks intensified in frequency and precision. The persistence of these rumors among civilians at the same time as politicians were accusing each other of planting them to undermine rivals reveals how the salience of military and political goals of residents and the NPRC were intertwined. By instigating raw fear in the public domain and demanding a response, the *sobel* rumor perpetuated the very crisis from which it was purported to emerge. As people reacted to

the reactions of others, the social practices emerging from the rumor were precipitated by but connected only loosely to its original content, creating the possibility of political truth telling.

The accusations that the youths leveled against Fallah Sewa—as confirmed in my interview with the paramount chief—unearthed deep-seated tribal issues, and peeled away what LeBon refers to as the "thin veneer of civilization," the ethos of harmony (quoted in Shibutani 1966: 96). Sewa, a member of the southeastern Kissi tribe, and Abass Bundu, a Temne from the north, felt compelled to address this irruption of disallowed discourse by accusing each other of sowing rumors to gain the political upper hand. In successive news articles, each argued that the other was manipulating interpretations of events to undermine him, and each also charged the other with tribalism but flatly denied any tribal motivations for his own actions (Meeting in the North 1994; Bangura 1994). The riot alone had little power to force rectification of the tribal imbalance; Sewa was only outwardly accused of being a *sobel*. Rather, it was the war of words between officials and residents that were fueled by persistent, authorless rumors that forced rectification, lest overt harmony be irrevocably undermined.

DIVERGENT AND EVOLVING NARRATIVES

Though rumor may catalyze explosive violence, what I argue here is that violence is not necessarily change, especially when it occurs in an ethos that demands immediate restoration of the appearance of harmony. Rather, the public emergence, debate, and framing of subversive narratives that only occur once a rumor begins are a possible impetus for long-term change. Who has the ability to define the origin of rumor? Who can state authoritatively that its source possessed a strategic political aim? Who is the intended audience for discourses about rumor, and how do they react? Authoritative narrative about rumor can initiate or exacerbate existing social trends by revealing and nurturing latent fissures of mistrust within communities, a process that rumor initiates that is not itself rumor.

When I asked Makeni residents to explain this episode, they first elaborated on the will of most NPRC cabinet ministers to seek revenge on the town for supporting the APC party by refusing to allow a civil defense force, as already existed everywhere else in the country (see Zack-Williams 1997; Hoffman 2011). According to one youth, "The real collaborators were the army officers who refused to arm the north against its enemies." In this narrative, though the NPRC touted itself as ethnically neutral, it contained a heavy majority of politicians and officers whose non-northern tribal affiliations prevented them thriving under the APC, hence the new government sought to punish the town for supporting the old government by leaving it vulnerable to potential enemies. The power of this narrative, where the NPRC is the true villain, buttressed the credence of all *sobel* rumors that spread through

town, and illuminates the reception that Fallah Sewa experienced in Independence Square. In calling Sewa a rebel, the angry crowd reminded him of the NPRC's own discourse that townspeople who failed to report suspicious persons were abetting the RUF. One narrative enabled by the *sobel* rumor was the long-standing refusal of the NPRC, by continually adhering to the decisions of its SOS for the north, to allow Makeni residents to protect themselves, making Sewa and his men no better than the rebels who threatened them.

In the narrative released to the press through official NPRC representatives, any actions on the part of Makeni people that discredited the army aided the RUF cause, with the searching of army vehicles at checkpoints the most obvious violation. The rumors circulating Makeni during the tense early years of the war reflected residents' fear that they had been cast out of the body politic because of their APC leanings, a form of existential truth-telling (Kroeger, 2003: 255; Scheper-Hughes, 1996: 9) validated by the government's repeated denials of their requests to form a civil militia. This truth, however, was disallowed in the political discourse of national unity, a necessary condition to prosecuting the war emphasized in official transmissions. In the NPRC interpretation, residents embracing *sobel* rumors precipitated the event. Even if there was credence to the rumors, the willingness of Makeni residents to believe and transmit them reflected their embrace of anything that discredited the army. In this narrative, the event was the culmination of the town refusing to stand with the government to prosecute the war. This made residents unpatriotic, which was ideologically identical to being a member of the RUF.

Newspapers in Freetown were divided between those who sided with the NPRC and lambasted Makeni residents for creating rumors of army-RUF collaboration and inciting a riot, and those who defended the people against an administration that provoked public outcry by destroying their understandable response, checkpoints, to plausible rumors of attack. The *New Citizen* sided with Makeni, embellishing the previously published accounts of the shooting with editorial detail:

> The incident started when young men manning security checkpoints after the violent rebel invasion of Tonkolili were forced out of the checkpoints. It would appear that the insistence of the young men to search a military vehicle caused the SOS north to instruct that the checkpoints be demolished. The youths, who argued that they had a right to secure Makeni as the rebel scare was becoming more and more alarming, had an argument with the soldiers, which led to a minor fracas and the wounding of one youth. The following morning, a crowd converged on PC Bai Shebora Kasanga's house, complaining that with the demolition of the strategic security checkpoints the township was left naked and the people felt unsafe, since some of the rebels already arrested in parts of Tonkolili district were clad in military uniform. The chief advised the people to move to Wusum grounds where he and other people in authority would address them. By the time the crowd got to the Independence Square, it had grown into a huge concentration of humanity. Some of the people climbed up the NP building

and wiped off the portrait of Major Fallah Sewa, the regional secretary. Some carried placards which read, "Fallah Sewa is a rebel," "Fallah Sewa must go." Major Sewa and a few soldiers arrived on the scene. The crowd became even more restive and threw stones. In his efforts to quell what he thought was becoming an uncontrollable situation, it is alleged that Major Sewa gave orders to the soldiers to open fire. At first the soldiers opened fire in the air and then came the fatal moment when the soldiers fired into the dense crowd (How Makeni Exploded 1994).

Though the article did not blame the soldiers for firing into the crowd, the reporter provided a sympathetic portrait of a town fearful of the rebel threat and prevented from defending itself, calling out their chief administrator for effectively opening the town to invasion.

Other reporters shifted the narrative by including the meeting that preceded the confrontation, painting Bundu in a harsh light and lauding Sewa. According to an anonymous reporter at the *Vision*, "Dr. Bundu called the meeting in Makeni to calm people down after the rumors of rebel spies leaving Masingbi [the town in which Major Sewa had allegedly left a company to clean up after an RUF attack] to come to Makeni. He did not want the people trying to flee, running around like sheep, helter-skelter and backing into each other when they are threatened" (Makeni Tragedy 1994). Bundu thus likened residents to mindless animals that had to be periodically placated, lest they stampede. The same reporter hailed Sewa's restraint and honesty as a military man with the best interests of an ungrateful public at heart:

Demonstrations began against Major Sewa. Some called him the chief rebel, and some called for his immediate removal from Makeni. Major Sewa had returned from the war front at the height of the demonstration and proceeded straight to the scene of the action. He met a very hostile reception. There were jeers, curses, some unprintable, against him and his mother. Stones were thrown at him and his men from the crowd. According to eyewitness accounts, Major Sewa remained remarkably calm and pleaded with the crowd to disperse. In response to the jeering, cursing and stone throwing, according to the military, soldiers started shooting into the air to intimidate the crowd to disperse. Then, continued this version by the military, shots rang out from the crowd hitting a soldier. The soldier died later. Another soldier was severely wounded. Asked about the one dead among the civilians and those wounded, soldiers admitted that these may have been caused by stray bullets. Said a soldier, "look, if we had deliberately fired at civilians, dozens would have been killed and scores wounded not just one dead." Indeed, some soldiers were provoked enough to do just that, but all were firmly restrained by the SOS. A civilian re-echoed the view, "whatever one may say about Major Sewa, it was his comportment in the midst of the enormous provocation that saved the day."

In this narrative, Bundu is a vindictive civilian bent on discrediting a disciplined army officer, and there is no mention of public accusations of Sewa's status as a *sobel*. The reporter presents the military as a well-trained and obedient force that was threatened and exercised magnificent restraint. Soldiers here are heroes, saving a hostile and atavistic crowd from themselves, with their gallant, calm, collected major "saving the day." More than just pitting

soldiers against residents, this particular detail allowed Fallah Sewa himself to initiate a new narrative: the most divisive issue was not Makeni versus the NPRC, but civilians versus the military within the government itself. This article made the battle personal, but at the start avoided any mention of the tribal differences between Sewa and Bundu. That this veiled accusation was printed in a so-called independent paper meant that the battle had also moved away from "official" accounts offered by the *Daily Mail* or countered by the *New Citizen*. As the debate became base, it descended to the realm of the personal, removing itself from the realm of the overtly political.

ACCUSATIONS, BLAME, AND THE SHIFTING FOCUS OF NARRATIVE

From the moment an unnamed military source was quoted in the news stating definitively that residents had attacked soldiers first, Fallah Sewa went on the offensive, promoting his own narrative in newspapers. In Sewa's first account—in which he attempted to kindle support among residents—the violence was not their fault. Rather, it was subversive northern civilians within the NPRC who were trying to topple him. Sewa himself introduced tribalism into the discussion, but rather than accuse residents of tribalism, he blamed Bundu and Kargbo, who had called the meeting in which the civil militia was approved. This was now personal, not political, and Sewa chose a third-rate gossip rag, which was happy to air slanderous accusations, as his platform. He reported to the *Weekend Spark*:

> As efforts to soothe the frayed nerves of Makeni citizens following a recent incident that left some deaths in its trail continues, the SOS Major Fallah Sewa has revealed that the root cause of the tragic incident cannot be unconnected with a series of closed doors meetings convened by certain old ambitious northern politicians without his approval…. Major Sewa explained that he was informed of a group in Makeni called Concerned Citizens of the North, headed by Dr. Abass Bundu, which also included the SOS Judicial Affairs Mr. Frank Kargbo and other old top politicians. Commenting on their activities, he said he was amazed to learn that the group had convened a meeting without his knowledge. Dr. Bundu had told the people of Makeni to set up a special "people's militia" and to take up arms and defend their northern land. This statement, Major Sewa went on, inflamed youths who wasted no time in arming themselves with sticks, guns and other weapons and the subsequent erection of blockades along roads, leading to the molestation of peaceful citizens. Major Sewa also said the worst thing that the executive members of the meeting did was not to allow special branch police officers and military representatives to attend. Major Sewa maintained that he failed to understand why civilians could pass orders for a battle when soldiers were present (Bangura 1994).

Sewa blamed Bundu, "an old APC politician," for using the meeting to undermine his authority in Makeni, sowing discord by encouraging civilians to form their own army, thereby discrediting Sewa and supporting rumors that he was colluding with the RUF to keep the town vulnerable to attack. In Sewa's narrative theory, the *sobel* rumor may have been an issue, but it was not nearly as important as the will of northern civilians to undermine their military

counterparts. Sewa blamed Bundu for initiating discord, but aside from a single comment about "northern politicians," was careful to only plant the seed of an idea that Bundu was motivated by tribal hatred. This narrative had no room for Bundu's offhand comments about the behavior of Makeni residents resembling livestock, which would undermine its credibility as a cohesive account of a politician and his people.

This narrative apparently failed to gain traction in Makeni, because a week later Sewa withdrew his attempt to muster support among residents and instead accused them of falling victim to a tribalist discourse planted by APC politicians. Using an official press release, he crafted a narrative where Bundu was motivated by base instincts of tribal hatred to create an open challenge to Sewa's authority. Sewa stated that his relationship with Makeni residents had been cordial before Bundu's meeting, and that Bundu and other northern politicians, "are preaching tribalism in a desperate bid to either undermine the efforts of the present regime or establish a political base from where they could carry out their objectives." He noted that the success of Bundu's intrigue was proven by Sewa's hostile reception from residents upon returning from the battlefront, where he and his soldiers were harassed at a civilian checkpoint, and then greeted at the square with tribal signs stating, "Fallah Sewa was not born here, let him go back home" (Tribalism Alive 1994). The existence of this sign was not confirmed in any other report, newsprint, or interview about the day of the shooting.

The violence had so politically disabled Sewa that he introduced the dangerous discourse of tribalism into the mix of narratives to defend himself, and did so in an official press release. However, he was still careful to ensure that Bundu was the real tribalist who was manipulating residents. The tribalism was not political, it was merely Bundu's personal vendetta, and only Bundu was threatening social harmony by trying to make it political. Sewa was merely warning residents against colluding with tribalism. If not an open act of collaboration with the RUF or equally treasonable tribalism, it was still a threat to social harmony. At its base level, Sewa's scapegoating of Bundu was a desperate appeal for a return to harmony. But having unleashed a narrative of tribalism into the public sphere, he created the space for its circulation and debate, and no one else needed to assume responsibility for authoring this disallowed discourse. Sewa himself, having unleashed the "truth," was now the greatest threat to the NPRC and the appearance of unity.

Rumors and narratives require receptive audiences to gain traction, since they must make sense to people in order to circulate (Feldman-Savelsberg, Ndonko, and Yang 2005: 141). Two different sets of receptive audiences—two rumor communities—existed in the revelation of the truth of tribalism. For Makeni residents, the argument about checkpoints, though a reaction to rumors of *sobels*, revealed a narrative that the NPRC was punishing the town for residents' loyalty to the APC by preventing civil defense and

stymieing development projects. Within the NPRC government, the event sparked a different narrative: military cabinet members from the east and south blaming their civilian counterparts from the north for precipitating the shooting to force their rivals to "lose face." The narratives had converged on a covert grievance unrelated to *sobels*: tribal rivalries, politically manifest.

SCAPEGOATING, SOCIAL HARMONY, OR TRUTH?

Once Sewa's statement was released, the episode was fodder for public and journalistic discussion, and for further rumors about motive and intent, Rosnow and Fine's journalistic "echoes" (1976: 96). In the first days after the violence, reporters focused on how it happened, pushing different details that would lend credence to one or another interpretation of the cause of violence, choosing sides between residents and the NPRC. After Sewa took a public position blaming northerners, reporters played with this second layer, the ultimate rather than proximate "truth" precipitating the violence, and battled among themselves whether to put the issue to rest or pursue rumors, even secondary rumors about other rumors, to their end in the name of justice. This occurred exclusively in the officially non-aligned papers, whose reporters debated each other regarding whether a rumor or a narrative about rumor had factual basis, and how to interpret it.

The best way to remove tribalism from public discussion was to immediately scapegoat the few parties overtly implicated in it. In the *Concord Times* article titled "Makeni and the Major," Kingsley Linton printed an apology offered to Fallah Sewa by Makeni youth for humiliating him, claiming that the whole episode was "the work of Satan." The reporter blamed Bundu, making him, essentially, Satan: "I want to believe that the people who thronged the streets were manipulated. That's the theory that's out now. And it might have merit, judging from the reported shuttles and closed-door meetings allegedly held in Makeni. This is a very dangerous trend. What happened in Makeni is a well-crafted plot to tribalize the war" (Linton 1994). Though youth did not shoulder blame for the event, by scapegoating a former APC politician, Linton attempted to engineer social harmony under the NPRC and salvage the NPRC's stated goal of unified action against the RUF.

A reporter at the *Vision* took issue with this article, refusing to allow social harmony to interfere with a more pressing issue: *sobels*, and Sewa's leadership of them. Dan Joe Hadji cited his disagreement with Linton by stating that the "trouble" stemmed from a rumor about mass soldier desertion to the RUF during the battle in the neighboring district. This was the first time this articulation of the rumor—which had caused the initial panic in Makeni—was printed. According to Hadji, when Sewa returned to Makeni after the battle, five hundred of his soldiers were missing. Hadji asserted that Sewa himself was the *sobel* insider, whose job was to orchestrate the attack on Makeni. He then inserts his own rumor: *den say* there was a picture of Sewa ordering his

soldiers to fire into the crowd, but the reporter who published this rumor (without showing the picture) refused to sign his article (Hadji 1994). This is a comprehensive theory that ends on an unsubstantiated rumor about a rumor, planting the seed in readers' minds that Sewa's tribal affiliation was inconsequential compared to his overt acts of treason.

Of the two narrative offerings, the NPRC reacted to tribalism rather than *sobels*, pushing for unity and an end to political confrontation rather than addressing military indiscipline and possible mutiny, in spite of the fact that the latter would directly hinder the government's ability to fight the war. Military cabinet members held a meeting in Makeni in which they distanced themselves from the "politicians," scapegoating Dr. Bundu and rallying around Sewa. In a series of articles in the NPRC's paper the *Daily Mail*, other cabinet members defended Sewa, who had left on a foreign vacation: "Chief of Staff Colonel [Kellie] Conteh described the war as devoid of tribalism, ethnic loyalty and regional sentiment, adding that ill-motivated and power-conscious politicians have been penetrating as rebel collaborators. [Conteh] therefore called on those ill-motivated politicians to bury their political ambitions and resolved to promote patriotic activities that will help both the government and the nation…" (Kamara 1994a). In calling Bundu a "rebel collaborator," Conteh insinuated that the events resulting from his meeting with Makeni youth were effectively engineered by the RUF to undermine the NPRC. A call for unity among top politicians was pressed as a solution to the deep divides ubiquitous in society, which was predicated on the pursuit of unity being *more* critical than addressing army indiscipline. Still, the NPRC politicians emphasized that this was a personal vendetta rather than overt tribalism; Conteh went so far as to call Bundu a "rebel collaborator" who had penetrated the government and was spreading lies about tribalism. This is the best evidence of how truth continually leaks into politics through its denial, illuminating their antagonistic co-dependence: every NPRC commentary asserted that the evil ambitions of a few politicians led those politicians to spread lies that the event *was* tribal.

Sewa himself returned to Makeni at the end of July and initiated a new narrative by admonishing residents that rumormongering was itself the primary threat to security. Hamid Collier reported to the *Daily Mail* that upon his return to Makeni Sewa spoke to an assembled crowd at the stadium: "Sewa attributed the April incident to a breakdown in communication motivated by ill-intentioned people. Major Sewa cautioned against all rumormongering, as dangerous rumors will only succeed in undermining the security of the region in particular and the state in general" (Collier 1994). By denouncing rumormongering, Sewa was undermining the primary means of popular communication, disparaging future iterations of the *sobel* rumor that attacked the government directly, and accusing frightened residents of being their own worst enemies. The only information that could legally circulate after

this declaration was that which was sanctioned and distributed by the government.

In a display of unity with the government, the paramount chief echoed this new concern with rumormongering, though he retracted the government's own statement that spreading rumors was equal to being a rebel collaborator.[7] He made a public declaration that spreading rumors or fleeing one's village was "unpatriotic" and aided the rebels (Kamara 1994b; Provincial Diary 1994), however clarified that, "those who create panic are destabilizers, not rebels" (Malayka 1994). Though not openly branded "rebels," it was reinforced to residents that they undermined their moral status and credibility if they so much as reacted to a rumor. Simultaneously, residents were castigated for a reaction to fear—flight—that was the only viable option for self-protection once they were barred from forming a CDF. This declaration pitted residents against each other, as anyone reacting to a rumor was as culpable as someone who spread it, and anyone could be reported to the government as a destabilizer for communicating unofficial information about the war, or for attempting to flee. The government criminalized rumor without replacing it with a credible source of news, and also criminalized residents' last resort for self-protection. The battle over rumor itself had created an impasse between residents and the government.

SOBEL TRUTHS SUBSTITUTE FOR TRIBAL TRUTHS

Condemning rumors could not prevent, as White states, "rumor eventually conforming with the laws of plausibility" (1997: 326). Rumormongering persisted because rumors contained potentially life-saving information. Less than one week after Sewa and the paramount chief admonished against *den say*, "strong rumors" of an attack on the nearby town of Matotoka caused "panic-stricken residents [to run] helter-skelter for dear life. In no time, the bad news spread like wildfire in the Harmattan which resulted in the people abandoning their homes for safe havens … reliable sources intimated that the 'rebels' ambushed a convoy near Matotoka.… Survivors were being treated at Makeni hospital, and reported that the 'rebels' were dressed in full military uniforms with new raincoats and the red caps of military police." Sewa left Makeni immediately "to take charge of the situation at Matotoka to ensure the safety and security of his people" (Kamara 1994c). This was the proof that transformed rumor into the real, undermining Sewa's narrative that their existence was a story planted in receptive ears by vicious individuals bent on discrediting the army. It thus undermined Sewa's accusations about his

[7] It is customary for paramount chiefs to support the government in power, even if their people have voted against that government. It would have been an extreme breach of protocol for the paramount chief to openly disagree with the NPRC, even after the shooting, and this article shows that the chief was toeing the political line with the national government. It emerged with the APC's victory in the 2007 elections that this paramount chief is an avid APC supporter.

civilian counterparts, subsuming talking-about-tribalism-by-not-talking-about-tribalism to the frightening reality of *sobels*, implicating the military and thereby Sewa in their existence.

Major Sewa was silent on the nature of the attack, and instead remained on the offensive against its victims, whom, to all intents and purposes, he accused of lying about the ambush. There was still the seed of plausibility that the *sobel* was an RUF rebel dressed in looted military gear who was enhancing the RUF's power by sowing doubt about the army (see Ashby 1999; Bolten 2012). However, the space for change was created first in the fact that he did not publish a press release. He instead chose to report on an unfounded rumor that the RUF had attacked the nearby town of Magburaka. A reporter at the *Standard Times*, a paper that at the time had strong pro-NPRC leanings, stated,

> According to the SOS north, the greatest problem affecting Makeni was rumormongering. The SOS noted that people are in the habit of spreading rumors that are unfounded. One such rumor, Maj. Sewa explained, was the attack on Magburaka. This rumor, the SOS observed, was baseless and could go a long way in trampling on the freedom of the people. He therefore warned rumormongers to refrain from spreading false rumors and warned that he will not hesitate to punish anyone found guilty. Already, Major Sewa revealed, the rebels are desperately in need of collaborators and those who carry false news are always possible collaborators. Adding, "they can aid rebels somehow by showing them roads leading to innocent people in towns and villages." Meanwhile, the road from Matotoka to Kono has been cleared and is once again safe for movement (Development '94 Inside Makeni Town 1994).

By making rumormongering a crime in the wake of *sobel* legitimation, Sewa rendered plausible much of Makeni residents' narrative: whether or not he was himself a rebel, he was indeed a stranger with ill intentions toward the town, punishing them for their support of the APC, and blocking their every attempt to protect themselves, whether through civil militias, checkpoints, or even the last resort of *den say*.

One week later, another motorist confirmed being attacked by *sobels* on the same road (Bayraytay 1994a), and the NPRC leadership sprung into action. On 6 September, President Valentine Strasser conducted what was reported as a "mini-shuffling" of the cabinet, replacing Fallah Sewa as SOS for the north with Lieutenant Colonel ABY Kamara, a Temne and native of the north (Big Change 1994). The same day, the *New Shaft* reported a scandalous military trial in Freetown in which Colonel Chernor Deen, the commanding officer in the Makeni barracks during the initial battle at Masingbi which spurred the rumor, was court-martialed for collaborating with the RUF to plan and execute the attacks (Sesay 1994). More than even eyewitness accounts of *sobels* attacking motorists on the highway near Makeni, here was the rumor confirmed. Two days later, Sewa was dropped from the government and he disappeared from the public eye (Fellah Sewa Dropped 1994).

What is important to understand about the validation of this rumor was how *unimportant* it was, especially in relation to its secondary narratives of

tribalism and politics, in determining the course of events in Makeni. The article published about the instatement of the new SOS revealed that the official discourse promulgated by Colonel Kamara did not differ significantly from that of his predecessor:

> Thousands of people in Makeni Town, including school children and traditional dancers turned out in jubilation to welcome the newly appointed SOS North, Lt. Col. Alimamy Brima Yamba Kamara, alias Avivavo, at a colorful ceremony held at Wusum Stadium. Amidst thunderous applause and cheers the SOS drove in a motorcade along the main streets of Makeni to a jam-packed stadium where he addressed the people. Lt. Col. Kamara in his maiden speech expressed thanks and appreciation to the people for their turnout, which he said demonstrated support to work as a team for the development of the northern region and the country as a whole. He condemned tribalism, rumor mongering and backbiting, adding that they are factors hazardous to national development. He noted that as Sierra Leoneans we must work together as one people with unity of purpose to achieve our most needed aspiration by ending the rebel war and making a better Sierra Leone. Lt. Col. Kamara appealed to the people to support him so that his duties for national reconstruction and the prosecution of the war would be successfully carried out. Presenting the new SOS to the people, the provincial secretary north Mr. Kai M. Kpakiwa described him as a loyal and dedicated military man who believed in serving his country to the best of his abilities for national development (Lama 1994).

Kamara used Sewa's language, including condemnation of rumor and tribalism, and received adulation rather than criticism from Makeni residents. This occurred despite the fact that he represented the same military government as his predecessor, the same government that struggled with the reality of the *sobel* issue. Had the issue actually been about *sobels* and mistrust of military governments, this should have made it impossible for any military man to find a positive reception. Colonel Kamara, however, was popular. Stated an anonymous reporter in the *New Citizen,* "The appointment of Lt. Col. Kamara has been widely acclaimed in the entire northern province not only because they see in the new SOS a good mixer who respects people, but also because his bravery will serve a lot in taking bold decisions to counter rebel advances in the northern province" (New SOS 1994). Though it was not made explicit in the story—tribalism was a foul accusation—the only substantial difference between the two officers was that Major Sewa was Kissi, and Colonel Kamara was Temne.

In the following month, all of the news emerging from Makeni focused on the infrastructure development and rehabilitation agenda set forth by the new SOS (Lewis 1994c), driven by donations and the participation of grateful residents (Hadji and Rogers 1994). Colonel Kamara's instatement was followed rapidly by the rehabilitation of the power plant, resulting in electricity for the first time in ten years (Makeni Goes Gay 1994; Makeni Gets Electricity 1994; Kamara; 1994d), the establishment of committees to oversee the development of roads, water, and electricity (Kamara 1994e), the revival of grassroots development organizations (Grass Roots Association 1994), and the

opening of a new radio station, the first ever to broadcast in the northern region (Bayraytay 1994b). Though news articles about these developments were soon replaced by the increasingly dire reports of rebel advances elsewhere in the northern region, and documented RUF threats against the town itself, no new articles about purported *sobel* attacks on Makeni appeared again under Kamara's tenure. Though this is not definitive proof of my argument that *sobel* rumors stood in for the underlying but unarticulated issue of tribalism, the implications are clear.

CONCLUSIONS

The evidence from Makeni in 1994 illustrates how examining the connection between rumor, mass action, and long-term change can lead in unexpected directions, where seemingly unrelated narratives result in actions made possible because of the discursive space that rumor exploits, rather than being originary to rumor content or its community. Extant literature about rumors can be mined for similar leads, and creates the space for historical rumor studies to be revisited. In analyzing the vampire rumors that circulated in Zambia from 1930 to 1964, Musambachime argued that social breakdown occurred with the removal of high-level chiefs during these scares. This happened not because they were accused of being *banyama* (vampires), but because they were accused of colluding with vampires by accepting bribes (1988: 210)—a clear-cut case of political narrative leaking into the space provided by rumor. This narrative was not the rumor itself, but the political and social consequences of creating a discursive space for grievances to be aired.

In Nigeria, initial rumors about the 1966 coup there stated that it was an Igbo conspiracy to remove the northern government and install an Igbo prime minister, which led to mass retaliation killings of Igbo in the north (Nkpa 1977: 333). The University of Biafra experienced rumors that the student cafeteria food had been poisoned, which caused students to refuse their breakfast and refuse any explanations of how the cooks did not want to poison their own tribe members. According to Nkpa, "When a rumor is circulating among a public that is charged with intense tension, the participants would resist or explain away any efforts to make them realize the absurdity of their beliefs" (ibid.: 338). When the University officials summoned the students, claiming the food had been tested and no poison was found, one student claimed that the administration suppressed the test results to maintain unity so as not to damage the Biafran war effort. These explanations, narratives, and rumors about a rumor now pitted not just Biafrans against each other, but staff and students at the same university, a case of social breakdown resulting from the deep-seated mistrust running through superficially unified communities.

Rumors may reveal local perceptions of the wrongs in society, but exploring how people talk about rumors, argue about who is responsible

for them, narrate the events surrounding these rumors, and condemn each others' interpretations of the events in question can provide insight into deep-seated political and social divisions that may ultimately influence unexpected outcomes. In Makeni, though the superficial discourse was one of renegade soldiers and imminent attack, this rumor's traction was taken away not by addressing indiscipline in the army, but rather by addressing an unarticulated grievance of poor development and security lapses motivated by tribalism. Tribalism was introduced only as a personal issue, as a seed planted by ambitious persons who wanted to sow discord; it never became overt except when it was said that certain individuals were trying to make it overt. Tribalism became increasingly political the more people spoke of the fact that they were not talking about it and that others were trying to make it salient, and in the end *sobels* became a convenient substitute issue.

What is important about the relationship between the *sobel* rumor and the deep-seated tribal animosity in Makeni is that *sobels* served as metaphors for tribalists: both threatened social harmony because they worked against the public interest and put their own selfish motives first. However, what my analysis of Arendt's comment reveals is that an explication of the relationship between truth and politics is only relevant with truths that are politically salient because they possess the potential to disrupt social relations. In essence, a truth only matters to politics when politics has to deny it. *Sobels* did not need to be denied for the NPRC to survive, and indeed the public court-martialing of *sobel* leaders was exactly what the junta and the people demanded in order to allay fears and galvanize national support. Tribalism, however, could not be so easily managed, and so was dealt with in a manner that restored harmony and reinforced the antagonistic relationship between salient truths and politics: let *sobels* stand in publicly, execute them publicly, banish Fallah Sewa, and truth will follow him to the shadows.

The proof of Major Sewa's "tribalism" and lack of care for the town was revealed not merely in the warm reception given his successor, but in Lieutenant Colonel Kamara's ability to push large-scale development projects in the first month of his tenure, and the death of the concerns surrounding *sobels*. Though the *sobel* rumor itself had been validated in multiple ways, residents' embrace of another NPRC officer proved that they were more concerned about self-determination than imminent attack by erstwhile soldiers. The violent confrontation of civilians and the military on 18 April was not "about" the will of soldiers to protect or invade the town, but rather the will of one particular soldier to allow it to occur for reasons other than criminal adventurism. Tribalism, much more socially divisive than violence for economic gain, was the unarticulated rift buried within the rumor. A simple analysis of the *sobel* rumor by itself, without an examination of its elaborate, subsequent social life, would not reveal this reality.

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Abstract: This article examines a case study from war-torn Sierra Leone in 1994, in which a rumor galvanized violent public action and only dissipated when a seemingly unrelated issue was resolved. I argue that the circulation of rumors can foment the emergence of political narratives focused on topics that are otherwise taboo, and creates the space to act on them without overtly disturbing the status quo. I analyze the content of interview material with residents of the town of Makeni and eight months of articles printed in national newspapers to illustrate the subtle emergence of tribal accusations in the context of military mutiny. The rumor itself concerned an imminent attack by mutinous, criminal soldiers (called *sobels*) on the town they were meant to defend. This instigated a mass demonstration, shooting into a crowd, political mudslinging, and accusations that some politicians were trying to "tribalize the war." Responding to the distress, the government removed the offending "tribalist" administrator from Makeni, and all talk of *sobel* fears dissipated, even as the reality of *sobels* was borne out in confirmed attacks and a high profile court-martialing. That tribal favoritism was the real issue was illustrated by residents' embrace of their new military administrator and the town's unprecedented move towards development in the midst of renewed security threats.