Fluid Research Fields: Studying Excombatant Youth in the Aftermath of the Liberian Civil War

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The architecture of this work is rooted in the temporal. Every human must be considered from the standpoint of time.

(Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Masks)

Introduction

Methodology is a rather neglected topic in studies of under-age combatants. Research in this field generally employs a quantitative approach and is based on short-term fieldwork in which encounters with respondents are often limited to one, or at most a few, and interviews are generally carried out with a tape recorder. Moreover, research is often done from within aid organisations. These approaches normally yield responses in victim modes and tend to conceal many important aspects of lived experience (see, for example, Brett and McColl 1996; Fleischman and Whitman 1994; Goodwin-Gill and Cohn 1994). That is to say, respondents display what I term ‘victimcy’, expressing their individual agency by representing themselves as powerless victims (Utas forthcoming). This is a strategy that may also be employed by refugees and internally displaced people. ‘Victim’ responses often form the raw material for standardised and collectivised discourses of, for instance, survivors of war or repressive regimes (see, for example, Jackson 2002; Tijlander Dahlström 2001; Handelman 1997). Victimcy is a tactical manipulation, in part, aimed at presenting an image in line with cultural ideals. However, victimcy is also a political response to real security threats, as well as an economic strate-
There is an established tradition of social research in Liberia that has generally involved long-term periods of fieldwork and frequent revisits. High profile scholars such as Bellman (1975, 1984), Bledsoe (1980), Clapham (1976), d’Azevedo (1962, 1969–70, 1972, 1989, 1994), Liebenow (1969, 1980, 1984), Moran (1990) and Tonkin (1992) have considered many different aspects of Liberia. Regrettably, however, they have been quite silent in research about the Liberian Civil War; instead, it appears that along with emergency aid comes a set of emergency researchers. The war researchers copy the rapid response methods of medical teams like Médecins sans Frontières or Merlin, much to the detriment of the final product. To a large extent it is the staff or consultants of international non-government organisations (INGOs) or government agencies that carry out social research in conflict zones. In 1992 Hiram Ruiz, employed by the U.S. Committee for Refugees, wrote a report on the refugee situation in Liberia (Ruiz 1992). In eleven years (1988–1998) Ruiz covered at least eight other conflict zones, on three continents, and released reports very similar to the one on Liberia. What insights can we expect to find in such work? Research methods need to be modified when we study war-torn societies, but cannot be neglected altogether. Long-term approaches are difficult to carry out in times of conflict, but they are of no less importance. In order to understand individual and collective motives and perspectives underlying child and youth participation in civil wars, scholars need long-term personal contacts with the research subjects, as these particular issues are especially delicate. They are delicate for many reasons, some of which I point out in this text. Long-term fieldwork and participant observation are better suited than exclusively quantitative methodologies for documenting the lives of people who live on the margins of a society that is hostile to them. Only by establishing long-term relationships based on trust can one begin to ask provocative personal questions, and expect thoughtful answers’ (Bourdieu 1995: 121). Victimony becomes transparent during long-term ethnographic fieldwork. However, even long-term fieldwork conceals problems and shortcomings, some of which I will discuss using my own experiences from fieldwork among excombatant youth residing in urban Liberia.

Entering the field for the first time, getting access and becoming accepted is generally a painstaking business. Anthropologists tend to create an air of mystique around this topic. In ethnographic work the entry is often treated as a rite of passage (see, for example, Hannerz 1969; Jensen 2001; Whyte 1983) although it is often what is unexplained that suddenly opens the way. Clifford Geertz’s (1973) account, in Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight, captures the drama and the abrupt change: Geertz describes how he went to an illegal cockfight which was raided by the police, whereupon he ran into hiding together with the villagers. In the next sentence he realises that the moment of inclusion was in the com-
Participating in the civil war was in many of these young men and women an active move towards power and influence. Peace was thus often seen as an immediate loss. In fact one could argue that for many ex-combatants the peace that followed the civil war was experienced as a more challenging and dangerous situation than the war itself, due to a tremendous increase in hardship; in other words, 'war is peace', to paraphrase the slogan of George Orwell's 1984. From time to time Palace youth would say to me that they wished that war would break out again. As one of them put it, with war ‘the shelves of Stop and Shop [a supermarket situated nearby] are again filled to the brink’ and by taking up their guns once more they would regain respect, food and commodities and become masters of at least a part of Liberian society.

The Liberian Civil War

The Liberian Civil War started on Christmas Eve 1989, when a group of about 150 ill-equipped rebel soldiers, supported by Libya and Burkina Faso (Ellis 1999), crossed into Nimba County in Liberia from adjacent Ivory Coast. The group, who became known as the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), initially enjoyed massive popular support. Young men and women joined the NPFL, armed with single-barrel guns and at times sticks, and the government forces — Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) — were soon driven out of Nimba County. Following an internal struggle, the NPFL split into two: NPFL led by Charles Taylor, and Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL) under Prince Y. Johnson. Taking different routes, but at times fighting each other, both defeated the AFL and reached the Atlantic coast and Monrovia in July 1990. By that time a West African peacekeeping force, ECOMOG, had been created under the leadership of Nigeria and sent to take control of the situation in Monrovia. Prince Y. Johnson struck a deal with the peacekeepers and lured President Doe into a trap, caught him, tortured him in front of a video camera and eventually killed him. The struggle that at the outset was viewed as a popular rebellion by the Gio and Mano ethnic groups in Nimba County turned the whole of Liberia into a war zone. Young rebel fighters not only fought each other but terrorised, looted and committed gruesome atrocities against the entire civilian population.

The INPFL was dissolved after killing President Doe, but soon several other rebel factions appeared. The United Liberation Movement of Liberia (ULIMO) was formed in Freetown, Sierra Leone, with assistance from the Sierra Leonean government. Soon ULIMO split into two: ULIMO-J (Johnson Branch) and ULIMO-K. AFL (Kromah Branch) continued fighting but was aided by another faction, the Liberian Peace Council (LPC) (CDF), came and went. The main incentive to continue the war was financial. Soldiers fought to obtain loot while the warlords aimed to gain control over areas rich in resources, especially those with gold and diamonds, but also timber and rubber, coffee and cocoa. Rebel movements kept some amount of popular support by feigning to protect the interests of particular regions and ethnic groupings, which were further politicised by the war itself (Atkinson 1999). In reality, their brutality towards the very people they claimed to serve kept civilians submissive. Dubious international businessmen, conglomerates of West African states and at times foreign departments of powerful Western states supported the warlords (Keen and International Institute for Strategic Studies 1998; Reno 1996).

After seven years, the war came to a halt, culminating in democratic elections in 1997. Ironically, in what Jimmy Carter, former president of the U.S.A., called the most just election in African history, Charles Taylor and his National Patriotic Party (NPP) — formed out of the NPFL — won a landslide victory and thus succeeded in what they were not able to accomplish through warfare (on Taylor’s political career see Harris 1999). The war had by then caused between 60,000 and 200,000 deaths. Without relying on uncertain statistics, it is true to say that during the course of the conflict most Liberians were displaced at one point or another. Areas across the borders, in Sierra Leone, Guinea and the Ivory Coast, were at times flooded with refugees (see Utas 1997). Internally displaced persons (IDPs) moved up and down between temporary safe havens in search of the protection of some form of authority. The coastal cities of Monrovia and Buchanan, zones guarded by the peacekeepers, received most IDPs and today Monrovia has twice the number of inhabitants it had before the war.

During 1998 and 1999 the security situation in Liberia remained uncertain. Parts of the country experienced moments of unrest verging on outright war, with heavy shooting and civilians fleeing at will. Even so most observers regarded the war as over. Yet in late 1999, upper Lofa County experienced the first of a series of armed incursions. By mid 2000 groups of subversive soldiers were entering from neighbouring Guinea on a regular basis. Liberians saw the birth and growth of a new rebel movement, ironically named Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD). LURD rebels have, since then, gradually worked their way down through Lofa County towards the coast. During the first half of 2002 LURD made a series of successful raids in Bong, Bomi and Montserrado Counties, temporarily taking control of major towns, Gbarnga, Tubmanburg and Klay Junction, before troops loyal to the government were able to recapture them. In mid-May an attack on President Taylor's native town of Arthington, less than 20 kilometres from Monrovia, caused widespread panic in the capital. With a core of soldiers recruited from
within Liberia. Similarly the AFL, the various governmental security forces and pro-governmental paramilitaries, have also succeeded in drawing fresh support by recruiting among young Liberians, mainly from Monrovia and surrounding counties. It is conceivable that many of the young men and women present in this text have taken part in these new proceedings of the civil war.

**Children and Youth in the Civil War**

The number of combatants from 1990 to 1997 is estimated at 40,000 to 70,000, peaking in 1991 (Brett and McCallin 1996; Fleischman and Whitman 1994: internal statistics from SCF-UK and UNOMIL). The estimated ratio of child soldiers varies considerably, from 10 to 40 percent, depending partly on whether a child soldier is defined as under fifteen or eighteen (Fleischman and Whitman 1994). During the demobilisation exercise, from November 1996 to February 1997, UNDHA (United Nations Humanitarian Assistance Coordination Office) found that child soldiers made up 24 percent of the total. The LPC had the highest number at 37 percent. The modal age of demobilisation was 20. If, for instance, a soldier had fought the entire war and was 20 years old at demobilisation, he or she had joined at 14, thus clearly falling within the category of child soldier. The value of these statistics is not entirely clear. According to my own observations during the April 6 fighting a majority of those who fought in Monrovia were boys and girls under 18. I estimate the average age of conscription to be around 14 to 16, but some rebel soldiers were as young as 9 (Brett and McCallin, 1996, have recorded fighters as young as 6). Commanders often state that soldiers of this age are more reliable, loyal and less fearful than older ones (Goodwin-Gill and Cohn 1994). In the type of war fought in Liberia and many other African countries, very young soldiers can be used because the weaponry is mainly light and simple enough for a young person to handle.

Even if forced conscription took place in Liberia most young combatants joined out of ‘free’ will. At the onset of war, as noted above, the people in Nimba County viewed it as a rebellion designed to free them from a repressive government seen as anti-Nimbadian. Parents sent their children off to fight in a righteous war. But young people also saw it as a youth revolution, a chance to get rid of an elitist urban leadership of autocrats that showed little concern for the young of Liberia (cf., for example, Clapham 1976, 1988; Liebenow 1987), as well as the local gerontocratic leadership (cf., for example, Bellman 1984; Murphy 1980). In this way war was fought by marginalised youth, who saw combat as the only opportunity to move from the margin into the centre of politics and economy. I argue parts of the contemporary young generation in West Africa are only dubbed West African youth ‘a lost generation’ and Richards (1995) has seen the origin of the wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia in a general ‘crisis of youth’. Young Liberians’ performance bears witness to and validates such a perspective.

The war changed its form and, as rebel groups increased terror against civilians and looting missions increasingly became the raison d’être war, the reasons for enlisting also changed. Many young excombatants state that it was the benefits that drew them to join up, both the direct gains and also escaping the disadvantages of being a civilian. Direct advantages include loot from raids; bribes during security assignments; and payoffs from protecting locals and the acquisition of power in local communities. The leap from being a powerless young boy, under the authority of parents and elders, to being a commander with a gun is momentous. Being a soldier would also imply having girlfriends, often many at a time, and taking a girlfriend for the night as often as one would like (Utas forthcoming). On the other hand, escaping the disadvantages of being a civilian would primarily involve preventing other rebel soldiers from harassing oneself and one’s family. During the war it was crucial for every family to have someone—a son, an uncle or another close relative—in the rebel army in control of the area; otherwise, family members would constantly be harassed and farms and property looted. Finally, young Liberians would at times join the rebel forces in order to avenge family members killed by other rebel factions. At an early stage my informants stated that vengeance was a main motive for joining the war, but as our relationship gained in depth, vengeance motives often disappeared behind other objectives. Most Liberians lost close relatives in the war but very few of them took up arms for that reason.

In early 1998 excombatants moved around uneasily. Peace was still fragile and many excombatants had no clear vision of their lives in post-war Liberia. Some of them returned to their home towns and villages. However, large numbers of demobilised fighters remained behind in cities and towns. The relative anonymity and distance from kin gave them breathing space and time to think about their future. In towns all over Liberia, groups of excombatant youth would be found squatting in deserted buildings, or occasionally, living in rented accommodation. For greater security, living in collective houses along with other excombatants, girlfriends and children seemed to be the norm for the immediate post-war period. The Palace is but one such setting.

**Entering the Palace**

For a researcher, the general procedure for establishing contact with...
offered by a plethora of national and international aid organisations found on the ground in Liberia. Initially, when I arrived in Liberia, I explored this peth. Visiting a few of the NGO/INGO projects brought me close to possible informants, yet placed me in a problematic category. Inevitably, my association with aid agencies predetermined my relations with those I wanted to understand. Every single person I talked to saw me as a donor, and responses to my questions were tailored to that imagined identity. It became a straightjacket I could not escape. They made the most of presenting themselves as victims: victims of war, devoid of any other agency than asking the donor community for aid. Far from satisfied with these victim-idealised responses, I went looking for something else.

During my search for another entry I came across a local social-field-worker employed by one of the INGOs, who was also active in the field outside the specific projects. He took me to some of the spots in town where ex-combatants were squatting. Our second visit was to ‘the Palace’. In contrast to the first place we visited, I was well received, undoubtedly because they took me for a donor, even if I did what I could to deny it. The paradox occurred to me that my donor status was an advantage to be let in, in the first place, but a clear disadvantage if I wanted to do non-victim biased research. I needed to do away with the donor status, but only at a pace slow enough to be able to establish personal trust. As I was living nearby, I scheduled another visit the next day without the social worker. I was now on my own and I had found a place I could visit on a daily basis, spending all the time I wanted with my research subjects. Better still: at least half the group remained idle and readily available for chats during daytime. Entering the Palace I discovered a clandestine world of ex-combatants; a realm of combatants unified, but also one with broad chasms due to separate experiences and liaisons in the Liberian Civil War. Intertwined clandestine networks shared the same marginal space, yet beneath the surface they competed fiercely over limited resources in the extreme margin of post-war economics.

The Palace was a place feared in the neighbourhood. People dared not enter the premises and rumours were rife that the inhabitants were cannibals. Even a European aid worker living in a neighbouring building told me that she had seen people in the Palace bringing in a big basket with human flesh – presumably for consumption.15 People entering the Palace included army soldiers escaping from the nearby barracks to buy marijuana, or just to smoke a joint, or arrange some deal with the Palace dwellers. Civilians also bought marijuana from dealers in the Palace, but not just any person would enter the premises. In fact, at the beginning of my research, traders who wanted to sell their goods halted at an invisible line and waited for the people inside to come out. The gate to the building had disappeared a long time ago and the entire building was physi-

Under these circumstances it was quite a delicate matter to get under the skin of the Palace youth – a skin considerably encrusted by all perceived betrayals from early on in life, through the war years, to the current outcast mode. At a time when everybody else seemed to ignore their very existence, I believe that initially it was their curiosity about why I was interested in their lives that made them accept me. During the war years they had all experienced international journalists and had been let down by their promises. I came with no promises. But visiting them day after day slowly convinced them of my earnest interest in their lives. That they were shunned by the larger society made my endeavour the more important. In that vein my presence was also a status symbol for Palace youth. I had imagined that my ethnographic knowledge of Liberian society and good orientation in contemporary Liberian war history, with specific reference to issues of youth, would give us a common ground for discussions. Yet what turned out to be my premium asset was that I had been in Monrovia during the April 6 battle in 1996. Back then I was caught for a few days in a downtown flat before I managed to get across to the U.S. embassy where I was eventually airlifted out of the country. I had not fought, but I had experienced wild bullets whistling around and grenades detonating. I had experienced the grip of panic, abysmal fear and indeed witnessed young people, like those I later met at the Palace, acting out the very war. I had experienced a little piece of ‘their war’ and it was enough, my rite of passage, which made my transition from stranger to peer possible. I was constantly reminded of this fact when they introduced me to friends in their social networks with an opening line such as: this is our friend; he was here during ‘April 6’. I shared the experience of their war and thereby they let me into their lives.

Moreover, I gained trust by keeping my house open to them. My closest friends from the Palace would drop in for a chat, some food or a game of cards. Together we started to plan other activities. First we proposed a small project to an INGO. We got some money for a basketball court and cleared the yard inside the Palace. This had a tremendous effect on the neighbourhood. Within days youth started to come from all around to play basketball on ‘our’ ball ground. Flowers grew out of the concrete. Sammy, one of the leaders in the Palace, even got himself a girlfriend from the neighbourhood. We later went on with another small-scale project to put up a small carpentry workshop; this time, however, it grew out of our hands and eventually collapsed.

Even with the tremendous effort I put into gaining their trust and cooperation it was a delicate matter to succeed in, and certainly I failed in some areas. My main focus on their activities during the war years turned out to be the most sensitive area. On these issues I could get one answer and a mauve one. Centrally, until the day I left.
sion. However, after some time I had a pretty clear picture of who had done what. But who had they fought for? This appeared to be a pretty straightforward question and I was initially satisfied with the answer that most had fought for the NPFL. However, near neighbours told me otherwise. They said that most Palace youth had been part of the ULIMO-J in the 1996 fighting. Many had indeed fought for NPFL or INFPL at some point - change of faction was very common in the civil war and many excombatants had experiences from more than one faction - but they omitted that they had any relationship with ULIMO-J.¹³

During 1998 ex-ULIMO-J fighters were still a source of unrest in Monrovia. High tensions remained around their leader’s house and several skirmishes took place between ULIMO fighters and government security forces. On 18 September these tensions brought Liberia back to the brink of civil war. Large parts of downtown Monrovia were again turned into a battlefield when fighting broke out between security forces and irregulars loyal to the ULIMO-J leader. When government forces got back in control, changes also occurred in the Palace. One of the younger boys in the Palace turned out to be in the ULIMO-J leader’s bodyguard. He fled with the leader to the US embassy and was later airdropped, together with the ULIMO-J elite, to Nigeria. Thus it became obvious why he had refused to participate in our ‘lecturing’ and why he always kept a low profile in my presence. Further, Scarface, one of the seniors in the Palace, a corporal in the army and a ULIMO-J soldier during the war, was picked up by security forces and taken to the military barracks where he was first interrogated and eventually executed.¹⁴ By then it was pretty clear to me that most of the Palace youth had fought for ULIMO-J during the April 6 war, and the tragic death of Scarface made it extremely clear why war issues were not discussed with an outsider and possible infiltrator like me.

**Palace Geography**

Like a fortress overlooking the ocean, the Palace is the concrete remnants of a factory situated right on the beach, at the far end of one of the main streets in downtown Monrovia. Immediate neighbours are two rather superior apartment buildings, inhabited by expatriate NGO staff and naturalised Lebanese businessmen. A deserted car park with an old garage is situated in between these complexes, occupied by another band of homeless youth. Behind the Palace is a dusty football field, full of activity in the late afternoons when the sun is going down. And then there is the beach nicknamed the ‘Puh-puh-cana’, because people living nearby use it as their toilet – ocean waves flushing away the human excrement. On the beach there are two Polish summer houses, both red in colour and built in 1996, with one still occupied by its owner. Inside the Palace fence one enters the building via the old loading bridge. The main door is closed by a pile of concrete blocks, probably a remnant from the war, when it was used as headquarters for militias and only one entrance was preferred for security reasons. Old concrete blocks and other debris litter the rooms on the ground floor except one inhabited by three of the most junior residents. A big open space between the L-shaped building and the outer walls was initially also covered with debris but in a joint effort we cleared the area to turn it into a basketball court. Upstairs there are six rooms, inhabited by the rest of the Palace youth. The most senior boys occupy the small rooms with no or very small window apertures. They prefer these for security reasons. Old cloth or plastic covers the doorways. The ‘beds’ are mainly made up of a few pieces of cloth spread out on the concrete floor. The rooms are furnished with items from the rubbish dump – primitively repaired chairs and tables, a refrigerator door functioning as a shelf. Surprisingly, much is done to make the place tidy: some tables have a tablecloth and in one of the rooms a plastic flower is stuck in an old beer bottle. Palace youth dream of a decent life and feed their dreams with magazine pictures of consumer goods plastered on their walls. Palace youth do not have many possessions; they need to keep things in close proximity or they will be stolen and sold by other residents. Theft is punished, but it is hard to determine the culprit, and residents are often so hungry that an extra meal is worth the punishment.

** Palace Youth**

Palace youth are a constantly changing population. Some stay only for a few weeks, others for longer. At the onset of my fieldwork in the Palace there were twenty-one residents, only five of them female, with an age range from 15 to 36. On average they left school in the fifth or sixth grade, but some have no education and one says he has finished tenth grade. Although the onset of war may have cut studies short, leaving school in the fifth or sixth grade was also rather average in urban Liberia before the war.¹⁵ About half the Palace youth were born or grew up in Monrovia. The rest grew up in mining and plantation communities up-country (a typical recruiting area for rebel armies, see Muona 1997; Richards 1996). In the pre-war setting their parents worked mostly in the wage labour sector. Most Palace youth have stable family backgrounds and most probably would not be living rough if the war had not disrupted their life realms. In the post-war era they have little contact with parents and siblings even if they are alive. Those who have relatives in Monrovia rarely, if ever, make visits and little effort is spent maintaining contact. None of the Palace
thirteen of them have relatives abroad (mainly in the U.S. but also elsewhere in Africa). 

Half of the males have experience or training as skilled workers (mainly carpentry), but nurture little hope of finding employment as skilled labour (see below). Most of them, and two or three of the females, fought during the war. One girl proudly told me how she used to slit the throats of the enemies with her hunting knife. As mentioned above, I have not been able to verify in which faction every individual fought during which part of the war, although I have good evidence of their participation in ULIMO-J during the 1996 battles. Their ranks and the units they fought in were also classified information, even if it was a topic often debated in informal discussions. Palace youth fought over large areas of Liberia. Those who fought with the NPFL, AFL and ULIMO-J have often been everywhere in Liberia as well as in Sierra Leone. They were generally armed with AK47s (Kalashnikovs) but a wide range of guns were used – light machine guns, belt guns and RPGs. Twelve out of twenty-one in my survey had bullet or grenade wounds from combat.

On Returning Home

All the individuals in the Palace have personal reasons for not returning to their families and place of origin. Circumstances in the original opportunity structure, for instance inheritance, access to land and resources, marital status, play a crucial role in choosing whether or not to return home. Relationship with parents, as well as associations with other people in the local setting, determine whether the ex-fighters go home or stay in the cities. In some cases Palace youth do not know where to start looking for their parents or they have found out that they lost them during the war years. Others are aware of the fact that they have grown too old to depend on the parental generation and/or that their parents or other close relatives themselves have no or limited means of subsistence. In ‘post-war Liberia you have to fight for yourself’, Palace youth often say. Many have committed crimes and atrocities in their communities and thus fear the way they would be received. Another important reason for staying away is a prevalent sense that to go back you need some proof that the years away have not been wasted. To prove success on return is of immediate importance and can be done by returning in nice clothes, with money in the pocket, a car or a complete education.

Earning One’s Livelihood in the Street: the Nuku Hunt

Nuku is street slang for money and the daily hunt for nuku preoccupies Palace youth. In the city, Palace youth will go to the streets to look for nuku. In contrast to the Palace youth, the former women fighters, although they have been in camps for a long period of time, have a relatively easy time finding employment in Liberia. They are not only educated but also trained in all sorts of skills. The women are able to find work in camps and in the city. However, the former palace youth have a less favorable employment pattern. Many continue to live in the Palace after the war ended. In their everyday activities, Palace youth can be found in markets, shops, and other urban areas, where they engage in leisure activities and sell goods.

Certeau’s (1984) terms, Palace youth rely on short-term ‘tactics’ rather than long-term ‘strategies’. If someone is successful in obtaining some nuku, then they will often buy food and cook for everybody. A big pleasure for all, it simultaneously functions as the glue keeping Palace youth together. Except for food, Palace youths’ needs are limited. Soap for laundry and personal hygiene is one of the few necessities and generally laundry soap is used for both purposes. A one-pound bag of laundry soap costs 10 Liberian dollars (US$10). In addition, cigarettes (at US$5 for four), marijuana (an affordable US$5 – harder drugs are more costly), and occasionally some home-brewed spirits (cane juice) for the night cover the rest of their basic needs. Youth in the street can live on US$15–20 (U.S. $0.35–0.50) a day. Even so, many of the young dwellers in the Palace find it troublesome enough to get that amount of money. People often call attention to the lack of even the smallest funds as characteristic of the post-war era, and talk with nostalgia of the ‘sweet’ life of ‘normal day’ (pre-war). To excombatants, however, ‘sweet’ life was rather located in the war years.

Generally the nuku hunt is a combination of both day and night shifts. Among the legal (daytime) activities, one of the most lucrative is hauling sand from the beach, which is used for construction everywhere in town. The rubbish dump, on the beach, is another main source of income, yielding among other things copper, found inside old engines and cables, and rubber from tyres or slippers (made from tyres). The proximity to the INGO living quarters also means that furniture and other items only slightly damaged appear on the rubbish dump. These are repaired and resold, for instance at the Go-by-shop market (for a definition of Go-by-shop see below) in Johnson Street. Less valuable than copper but still useful is scrap metal, mainly from freezers and refrigerators, which is used to make coal pots (cooking stoves fuelled with charcoal used by a majority of the urban population). Making coal pots is one of the main income-generating activities for Palace youth. Scrap metal is at times also bought in bulk. Palace youth are occasionally employed as day labourers, on construction sites, offloading trucks or as night watchmen. Since they have a reputation for being unreliable, they will only be employed for short periods and under keen supervision.

Being a young excombatant has few advantages in post-war Liberia. However, one is that there are a lot of NGOs and INGOs catering for excombatants. During the civil war, projects for reintegration and reconciliation mushroomed in cities all over Liberia. Most of these projects are found in Monrovia. Palace youth are well acquainted with these and most have been through at least one such programme during or after the civil war. The projects catering for excombatants offer skilled training programmes in carpentry, construction, mechanical craft etc. Some offer
Illegitimate Livelihoods

Selling cigarettes is one of the legal activities that the Palace youth are involved in. However, they generally sell drugs, principally marijuana, as well. The Palace is called a Bob Marley house, 'Bob Marley' being a nickname for marijuana, where outsiders go both to buy their supplies and to 'chill out' with a joint. Other drugs distributed are 'Mr. White' or Brown-Brown, low quality crack cocaine; and sleeping pills, Valium 5 and 10, nicknamed 'bubbles', or 'blue boat'. Pharmaceutical drugs, in high doses, are taken in combination with alcohol to make the user utterly fearless in criminal activities such as night-time robberies. Drug abuse was often built up during the war years, when drugs were readily available to most combatants.

The Palace functions as an illegal petrol market where night watchmen and others sell petrol stolen from the generators in nearby expatriate housing and offices. Homeless youth also form the lower echelon of patron-client networks, carrying out illegal activities on behalf of patrons (see Momoh 1999 on Nigeria). Many of these activities are carried out in collaboration with army personnel, where Palace dwellers have retained links from their background in ULIMO-J and AFL.

Other homeless groups in Monrovia have similar arrangements with, among others, the National Police Special Operations Division (SOD), the Special Security Service (SSS), the President’s own Special Security Unit (SSU) and Anti-Terrorist Unit (ATU). These groups generally consist of ex-NPFL fighters, who have kept close ties with their ex-commanders who in the post-war setting have been employed in the reconstructed police and security forces. Go-by-shop robberies are the most notorious type of criminal activity. Even if not directly sanctioned by the government, fully uniformed and armed police or security units will enter any store and empty it for commodities – keeping their war mentality intact they will literally 'go by and shop', picking up anything they want but neglecting to pay. At times go-by-shopping will occur in broad daylight. Homeless youth play important roles in these robberies, often doing the most dangerous parts of the work, but due to their inferior position they will only get a small portion of the earnings. Being in opposition to the government, Palace youth will seldom participate in go-by-shops, but in all other forms of

Girls in the Palace

Girls in the Palace make their own contributions. Regularly or intermittently they will work as prostitutes (Uts 1999). If successful, they are often able to make much more money than their male partners do. How much they earn depends on the clientele; generally Palace girls are active in West Point, the poorest area downtown, and are paid accordingly. Rates are from approximately U.S.$1 upwards.29 When Rose returns to the Palace after a night having earned U.S.$16, everybody is overjoyed as she arranges a great meal for all Palace dwellers. It is, however, rare that anyone brings home that amount of money. The Palace girls generally take the same kind of drugs as the boys so as to be brave and daring in their work.

Episodes of Peace and War

In this section I relate specific episodes which occurred during my time in the Palace, and which show why Palace youth are so careful about how they present themselves, to whom they expose their real lives, and how they deal with issues relating to their time as combatants. The constant threat of violent reprisals is one reason why Palace youth do not talk openly. Violence is a risk both inside and outside the Palace walls. As the story of Washington will show, evidence of past injury can also jeopardise the future. Evident in Sammy’s story, is the fact that truth comes in many layers. In the precarious position of many of the Palace youth, being able to present themselves and their lives in different ways to different people is a necessary tactic.

Stealing

There is a clear moral code maintaining order within the Palace. Stealing outside the Palace is acceptable as long as no tracks are left leading to the Palace or to Palace residents. However, it is taboo to steal within the walls of the Palace. (There is also an informal code of sharing, mainly of food.) The police and other security forces often raid the Palace. They will generally loot everything they stumble over and pocket the little money they find. Thus it is easy to understand that Palace youth react forcefully to anyone leaving tracks leading to the Palace. If a suspect is caught, the seniors in the Palace decide on a punishment, which may then be carried out by anyone. Commonplace offenders are beaten. During my time in the Palace they avoided punishing people in my presence. On one occasion, however, I found an outsider tied up and stripped to his underwear.
before asking to be lodged for the night. The police came looking for him early the next morning and raided the Palace, but he managed to escape. Now furious, the Palace dwellers tracked him down, brought him back to the Palace and tied him up. When I arrived he was lying on the concrete floor begging for forgiveness, while they continued beating him mercilessly with a cane. After being punished according to ‘the Palace law’ he was handed over to the Military Police (MPs), as the Palace has connections with the military and not the ordinary police.

Things go missing in the Palace. The two leaders of the Palace, Sammy and Noah, investigate every incident. Rumours are rampant and if the stolen items cannot be found and nobody has seen anything suspicious, the youngest boys and Hawa, an outcast girl, will generally be blamed. But at times the suspect will react violently. When Noah accused Small Kamara of theft, Small Kamara really got upset and started a fight, despite being half Noah’s size. Noah shoved Small Kamara into a corner, temporarily ending the fight. Within minutes, however, Small Kamara returned with a knife and with an earlier unperceived rage. His friends explained his hyperaggressive behaviour. He had gone up to his room to inhale crack cocaine and gain the illusion of being an immortal fighter, just as he had repeatedly done during the war prior to a battle. Everybody jumped on Small Kamara, preventing him from doing any harm, and he eventually got his punishment.

**Risking Jail**

Disclosing matters of everyday life in the clandestine world is hazardous for many reasons. For instance, information in the wrong hands might entail prison. Palace youth talk about prison as a ‘cool’ thing, but this covers a sense of fear. Ending up in prison lacking the right connections is potentially fatal. Still they all spend time in jail now and then. Getting caught for some minor crime might lead to prison without any hope of a trial whatsoever. To get out of jail cash is needed to bribe officials, and Palace youth seldom have the amount of money they demand. Noah is jailed at Central Police Headquarters. Succeeding in getting out after just forty-eight hours he states that ‘inside there is a completely different kind of government’. Some inmates have been in jail for more than three months and, inevitably, crude hierarchies are in place. Prisoners beat each other up and new arrivals are robbed of all valuables and at times stripped to the skin. As Noah is caught just outside the Palace he enters jail bare-chested, wearing only a pair of old trousers, and the small bag in which he always carries his cigarettes and drugs for sale is soon confiscated by his cellmates. Those in jail do not get any food unless relatives or friends bring it in, and what they do bring will end up eaten by the convicts; those interned are so weak that they must be propped up when they walk. He does not believe that they will stay alive for long. Sammy visits Noah and describes how he has to pay a bribe at every desk he passes until he reaches Noah’s cell. After negotiations Sammy manages to get Noah out of the jail after two days by promising a police officer ‘beer money’ and borrowing the L$75 required (approximately U.S.$2).  

**Washington’s Story**

Although Washington was born in Margibi County (in central Liberia) and grew up in Monrovia, the war still put him in a precarious situation as his parents were from the Krahn ethnic group, Krahn being portrayed as the main enemies of the NPFL and INPFL. When these two factions advanced into Monrovia he saw no other hope than to join forces with them. Keeping a low profile he succeeded in getting employed in the kitchen for some senior NPFL commanders and ended up in the port of Buchanan. However, after some time the commanders were informed that Washington was a Krahn and he was taken to the beach one night to be shot. He was shot in the left hip and left to bleed to death. After three days he got to a doctor, with a badly infected wound. He recovered fully and today he walks with only a slight sway, but enough to be suspected of participation in the war and to remain without stable employment.

At 36, Washington is the oldest inhabitant of the Palace. From a chronological perspective he would hardly be labelled youth, but from a perspective of social age he is well within the youth category. Having no official house, no official wife and no substantial income restrains him from entering adulthood. Washington’s life is an ongoing struggle to become an adult, to get out of the youth category. Trying to leave the criminal sector behind, he has to start from the very bottom of society. He is employed by the MCC (Monrovia City Council) as caretaker of two rubbish containers on a side street a few blocks away from the Palace. Civil servants in Liberia are paid ridiculously little and on an irregular basis, if at all. But to Washington it is a window of opportunity to enter the accepted world. Washington has a fiancée, whom he plans to marry. Because of the security situation in the Palace, Washington keeps her away from there as much as possible. In line with his aim of leaving the youth category, Washington and his fiancée are expecting a baby. He takes every opportunity to get a better job, which will enable him to rent a small place for them both. But although he is a trained carpenter, every potential employer he contacts asks him to strip to check if he has war related scars – a common practice. Being wounded in the war he will generally be dismissed instantly. Washington, as the story of the powerless often goes, fails to get a better life and remains MCC (City Council).
Sammy’s Story

Sammy could speak rather openly about his life, because of his position as a senior in the Palace. Moreover, he was the person I built up the closest relationship with. Matters concerning the war, however, were more delicate and he remained reluctant to go into detail throughout our time together. Sammy was born in Monrovia to a Sierra Leonean father and a Liberian mother. He was one of nine siblings living with his divorced mother. I pick up the story from a day in 1985, when Sammy was fifteen years old. He says he was going to school in central Monrovia. One day after school he was walking through Waterside market with a friend of his, when they stumbled on a U.S.$50 bill on the ground. This was a large sum and they instantly decided to keep it. However, they felt anxious going home to their parents, because they knew that sooner or later they would find the money and suspect them of having stolen it. That afternoon, says Sammy, they tried to spend as much money as possible, but this only increased the difficulty of hiding their catch. Then in bravado his friend proposed that they should leave the country. Since Sammy had previously attended school in Freetown, Sierra Leone, this was where they went. Needless to say they soon ran out of money. For several years Sammy worked as a pada-pada (minibus) apprentice in Freetown. Through his father’s efforts he was reunited with his family after three years. The war had not yet begun and during his absence his mother had progressed from being a small-scale baker to a big business woman running the most popular nightclub in Gardnersville (a suburb of Monrovia). From living a marginal and difficult life in Freetown he returned to wealth in Monrovia. When the war started his mother’s property and club were looted, and for revenge and to regain what the family had lost he joined the INPFL.

I am doubtful about parts of Sammy’s account. Sammy’s mother was poor before the war and according to Sammy his father did not aid his former wife in any substantial way (Sammy’s father is upper-middleclass – as I could observe during a visit to his house). Probably Sammy did not go to school, and most likely he stayed with other boys in the market area looking for opportunities. The U.S.$50 – a huge sum for a poor 15-year-old – was that opportunity. In his story he emphasises that the money was found but it is likely that they saw an opportunity to snatch the money. Someone probably observed them or could link them to the stolen money, hence they felt constrained to leave town for some time. Freetown became a natural choice for someone with Sammy’s background. According to Sammy he returned to his mother in Monrovia after three years. In that time she had gone from baking bread at home in the morning (and sending the children to school) to directing the day’s work into being a big business circumstance. But if, instead, it occurred during the first phase of the war, if she became close to a high-ranking commander of the Liberian army or any of the rebel forces, it turns into a rather commonplace story of upward social mobility in war times, which happened to many women. I believe that Sammy returned to his nouveau riche mother during the war.

Sammy was 19 when the war started and most probably he joined the rebel force ULIMO in Freetown, Sierra Leone, at the time it was formed in 1991. At this time many Liberian boys and girls in Sierra Leone were recruited by ULIMO and trained in camps there.23 According to him he fought for INPFL during 1990 and 1991, but this seems doubtful. At the time of my fieldwork, 1998, Sammy is 27. Well behaved and articulate, he makes his living as a con-artist (picaro) (Austen 1986) in the post-war setting. Sammy developed these skills during the course of the war. For instance, he described how during 1992, he used a bogus identification card distinguishing him as a captain in the police force to arrest people who had just arrived in Monrovia and squeeze money out of them. In the Palace, Sammy maintains a leading position next to Noah. He is active in keeping law and order inside the Palace, something of a contradiction to his other activities. My friendship with Sammy ends abruptly as he shows his picaro character. As the right opportunity occurs, the first time he gets his hand on some of the money in our development project for the Palace (see above), he runs away with it. He keeps hidden from the other Palace inhabitants for quite some time, being aware of the vengeance they will take if they catch him. It takes several months until the others in the Palace give me reports of his whereabouts, at which time he has apparently already abused the trust of another group in one of the Monrovian suburbs, and is again a fugitive.

Doing Research among Petty Criminal Excombatant Youth

Entering the field and the Palace I stumbled into many methodological problems ranging from ethical issues, issues of acceptance and personal security, to how to classify stories in relation to their truth. Expecting that my fieldwork would be quite different from most fieldwork carried out in West Africa, during a stopover in Abidjan I read Philippe Bourgois’ Harlem study on young Puerto Rican drug dealers (1995). Methodologically, the field of my study showed greater similarities with Bourgois’ work, or Rodgers’ (2000) and Jensen’s (2001) dissertations on gangs in urban Nicaragua and South Africa respectively, than, say, Zetterström’s ethnographic account of the Yamein Mano in Nimba County, to take a Liberian example (1990). The fieldwork associated with special relief...
Personal Security

Initially I experienced my own personal security as a problem. People told me time and again that Palace youth were dangerous. I took some precautions: for instance I did not stay in the Palace overnight. However, after some time in the Palace I felt that I could trust most of the Palace youth and in some cases they even protected me: instead of viewing Palace youth as potential risks I came to view them as assets. Accompanied by my friends in the Palace I could venture to places where ordinary Monrovians dared not go. For instance, we went to bars in West Point, the poorest downtown area, at night. I genuinely enjoyed myself and due to the presence of my companions did not think of myself as being in danger. At one time the entire expatriate community was advised to move near the U.S. embassy for security. There were problems around the ULIMO-J leader’s house with nightly armed skirmishes in the vicinity (one night they were shooting just behind my house). I asked the Palace youth for advice and was assured that there was no real danger and they would inform me if there was. I took their advice and as time went by I started trusting them more than the U.S. intelligence that the INGO community relied on.

Informants’ Security

Even if Palace youth avoided bold accounts from the war years or their contemporary lives, I had to be careful with my own material. At the outset of my research, government security staff took a keen interest in me. I was arrested and intimidated. It was mainly a way to extort money from me, but I had to take precautions. In my notebooks I used aliases for all informants and every week I went to an NGO office to enter my notes on a computer. I burnt the notes and kept the disk in their safe. To avoid the risk of security personnel confiscating my material when I left, I sent it home in portions by e-mail. This text also uses aliases for my informants.

An ethical matter that I have not resolved is a few eyewitness accounts that I have taped. In one, a young boy gives details about the murder of five American nuns in which he participated. It is not clear to me whether he told me this because he wanted to share the information or in order to make a personal confession as a means of coming to terms with what he had done. I also have accounts of women who have been raped by people currently in high positions within the government and civil service. To protect my informants I have not been able to use these accounts.

Getting in

As explained above, gaining acceptance was a delicate task. In this case my rite of passage was that I had experienced the Liberian Civil War myself. Even so, some topics were exceptionally difficult to discuss. My informants intentionally blurred everything related to participation in the civil war. Illegal activities carried out in daily life remained difficult to pinpoint. Initially, I learned about these issues from Palace youth who liked to gossip about others while maintaining a moral façade. In time, however, some began to relax this attitude and started telling me more. How openly they related issues to me depended on several factors.

Age and Social Network

One factor was age. During my stay in the Palace I found it much harder to get detailed information out of the younger ones. Their tacit would generally be to change their accounts time after time, leaving me with little substance in the end. Part of the passage to maturity is being able to judge what is personally dangerous to talk about and what is not. The younger informants were the more likely to present themselves as victims and passive nonagents in their accounts. This became especially evident when I took on the task of making semi-structured taped interviews with a group of excombatants aged ten to fifteen within a reintegration project in Ganta.

The older Palace youth often abandoned the extreme victim mode as we deepened our relationship. Indeed their position in the social network in and around the Palace also played its part. The leaders established a much more confident tone in our discussions, while the subordinate youths watched their tongues so as not to give details on issues that would displease their seniors. A young Palace dweller could be beaten up severely for any small matter, as in the case of Small Kamara described above. Just how open one could afford to be was also dependent on contacts outside the Palace; having good contacts with patrons, big men, in larger society had its implications for what one dared to say, and to whom. For instance, on the issue of illegal activities, youth with good contacts within the police dared to be fairly open about their activities because they could count on aid if they were caught. Getting caught by police and ending up in jail could be very dangerous without such contacts. In the incident related above, Noah was lucky to get out of jail so quickly.

Which rebel army they had fought for was also of great importance. Being an NPFL fighter during the April 6 war makes life easier in the post-war setting. In post-war Liberia it is only NPFL soldiers that dare to talk
allowed Palace youth to be frank with me, thus after four months in the Palace I knew that I had to change to another setting to get to the heart of war issues. By moving up to Nimba County, NPFL heartland, I later managed to locate a set of young people that dared to talk about their everyday life in wartime Liberia.

**Multi-layered Stories**

Doing research among groups of people living in a disturbed environment, such as Palace youth, is inevitably a navigation through multilayered stories. The production of different stories for different audiences is a method of survival in dangerous life realms. During the time I spent in the Palace, the youth categorised me in different ways at different times; thus the stories they related to me varied from occasion to occasion. After some months, when their trust of me had deepened, some of the youth came closer to relating their own honest versions of their experiences. Time was the most important ingredient in this arrangement. The story told by Samny highlights this. The full version was given to me quite early in our friendship. In due time he gave me other pieces of information. With these bits and pieces I patched together an alternative story – it is not the ‘true story’ but it is a story that lies closer to reality than the one that he presented to me earlier on.

During my time in Liberia I did some work for an INGO. We spent five days in Southern Liberia conducting close to 100 taped semi-structured interviews with young people, many excombatants. It amounted to an impressive set of data. As a comparison, after four months in the Palace I had not done a single taped interview. In retrospect I can see that the taped interview material I collected in Southern Liberia was almost entirely wasted effort; every interviewee complied with one of the preset frames of victimhood. To tape any interviews in the Palace was out of the question as their life realms were just too insecure. Such is the case in most Liberian post-war settings and indeed excombatants worldwide would not directly discuss issues involving their war crimes with just any outsider. My work in the Palace came, to a large extent, to revolve around topics of everyday life played out in front of me by the Palace youth. In due time trust increased and I believe that we jointly managed to produce a unique picture of everyday life for excombatant urban youth in post-war Liberia.

**The Temporal: ‘It all Chakla’**

The Palace as research space highlights the temporality of research itself. Having an outsider status as occasional visitors, turned into core Palace dwellers. Likewise, within a few months, some of my central informants left the building and were replaced with new ones. The fluidity made it difficult to establish stable relationships. My prime informant, Samny, for example, took some material and money from our micro project and left never to return. Less than a month later, two of the other leaders of the group moved to another building. Even if I had kept in contact with them, it could never have been with the same frequency as before.

As smoothly as the gate once opened when I first arrived at the Palace, it closed in front of me. After four months in the Palace I was absent for a month. When I returned I found a new leader in control. Still having some of my closer contacts among the Palace youth, I thought I had a fair chance to reestablish my presence in the building. However, the new leader did not like my presence and managed to turn some of the Palace youth against me. At this difficult moment I had brought my sister (a freelance filmmaker) with the intention of recording the Palace and maybe making a television documentary about it. The new leader, however, seized the initiative and convinced most of the Palace youth that I would make a lot of money by producing a movie of their lives and that I would not let them take any of the profit. Within a single day they turned from friends into strangers. In the morning we were shooting footage and then, when we returned after lunch, they confiscated the camcorder and took me as a kind of hostage until my sister could pay for our release. As I was moving upcountry to continue my research it was not a disaster from a research point of view. I had managed to get an INGO interested in developing the micro-economic project that we had established in the Palace, so I knew there was some actual hope for the Palace youth for whom I had found great sympathy. Yet I was sitting there on the ground of the basketball court we had once cleared together. It was rather pathetic. My sister (in shock) eventually came with the money. All in all they had only demanded L$800 (about U.S.$20). I made a last effort to distribute the money equally to all, but the new leader had a different idea. He selected a ‘trusted’ member of the group to keep the nuku for the time being. Convivial with the leader the boy snatched the nuku and dashed out of the Palace followed by a wild bunch of his deceived friends. Later on I came back for visits as a friend, but by this time the Palace as research space was unconditionally closed. I had been excluded, again turned into an outsider. Palace youth would say ‘it chakla’ – it fell apart.

**Notes**
3. One of the best known is the Dutchman Gus Kouwenhoven, a large-scale drug trafficker who has made Liberia a base for his illegal operations in drugs, arms, diamonds and timber (see Global Witness 2001).
4. Popular estimations point towards 200,000 deaths, but in a recount Ellis (1999) argues convincingly for a much lower figure (60,000).
5. A former UNDHA employee states that the demobilisation exercise was merely a numbers game (e-mail communication).
6. ‘April 6’ is the name used for the last part of the civil war. Renewed fighting on 6 April, 1996, in Monrovia signalled the onset.
7. The fighting forces consisted only of about 2-4 percent women (David 1997; UNDHA-HACO 1997).
8. Children at such a young age did generally not form part of the regular troops and would more often function as assistants to older soldiers, forming a first step in a military career.
9. I place ‘free’ in quotation marks because structural constraints tend to be more limiting in times of war than in peace.
10. I have elsewhere shown that it might be equally effective for a family if a daughter is going out with an important commander (Utus forthcoming).
11. Stories of cannibalistic rituals among combatants during the civil war were widely told and most Liberians never doubted their validity. Clearly such rituals took place, but it appears to me that the regularity is exaggerated by Liberians, by international media and in some academic writing (as for instance in Ellis 1999).
12. One American journalist had recently visited the Palace and promised them all that he would send them beds to sleep in. He also talked about establishing long-term contacts, which might one day lead to a visit to the U.S.
13. Something that signalled their ULIMO-J status was that they had red nail polish on one fingernail. When I asked about it, they agreed that it had been a marker for ULIMO-J affiliation during the war but that in the post-war setting it was mere street fashion.
14. After his death I made some investigation in the matter among my acquaintances within the security forces. According to those familiar with the case it was quite clear that he had not played any active part in the 18 September unrest.
15. In Liberia as a whole, primary school enrolment is 51 percent for boys and 28 percent for girls. Secondary school enrolment is 31 percent for boys and 13 percent for girls (UNFPA 1999, based on prewar surveys).
16. Economic assistance from abroad is one of the main sources of income in post-war Liberia.
17. Ranks were often given to soldiers as proof of bravery rather than commanding position, hence many of the fighters obtained unusually high ranks. For instance, one of the youngest of the Palace inhabitants (15 years old in 1990, 17 at the onset of the war) had a captain’s rank.
18. Since the Firestone deal in the 1920s, U.S. dollars have been the main currency in the country. During the early 1980s a national currency was introduced but only in coins, while U.S. bills were widely used. Today Liberia has its own currency system but U.S. currency is still used in parallel.
19. Psychiatrists working at Save the Children Foundation in Monrovia say that as
20. ‘Beer money’ signals the size of the bribe not its employment. If someone wants a smaller bribe they will ask for ‘cold water’.
21. As a consequence of NPF flushing out people associated with the Samuel Doe government during the early phase of the war, many people with origins in southern Liberia were forced into exile. Earlier, similar cleansing exercises were carried out by the Doe administration.
22. This incident has been widely reported. Some witness accounts have been made publicly available, see for instance Liberian Studies Journal (2001).
23. A cultural ideal of secrecy (Bellman 1984) also makes it hard to get a straightforward account. As Mariane Ferme has noted among people inhabiting the forest regions of Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia, ‘truth is what lies under multiple layers of often conflicting meanings’ (2001: 7).

References

Anthropology Under Fire: Ethics, Researchers and Children in War

Jo Boyden

Introduction

As one of the most horrifying and momentous experiences known to humankind, war is of major theoretical and empirical interest to many scholars in the social sciences. International relations, economics, sociology and political science have been at the forefront of research in this field. Anthropologists, however, have tended to neglect the topic of war. In so far as the normal condition of human society is taken to be one of order, stability and equilibrium, anthropology tends to regard armed conflict as an atypical and calamitous state that, as such, merits little theoretical or empirical scrutiny. This outlook can be attributed in part to the influence of Marcel Mauss, whose theory of gift exchange promoted the idea that human interaction is founded on mutual interest and peaceful transaction. It has, however, been criticised in recent decades by those who suggest that it exaggerates both the accord and consistency of societies at peace and the anarchy of war (Allen 1989; Colson 1989; Davis 1992; Nordstrom 1997; Reynolds-White 1998). The critics stress instead the order that prevails within the disorder of war. They highlight the morality that persists in an immoral context and the culturally encoded meanings that structure and regulate individual and collective experience even in communities exposed to extreme violence and discord. They understand armed conflict not as a societal aberration, but as growing out of either a specific form of social organisation or a specific cultural phase. Some call for greater attention to conflict, or for the development of what