‘Listen, Politics is not for Children:’ Adult Authority, Social Conflict, and Youth Survival Strategies in Post Civil War Liberia.

DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the historical causes of the Liberian civil war (1989-2003), with a keen attention to the history of Liberian youth, since the beginning of the Republic in 1847. I carefully analyzed youth engagements in social and political change throughout the country’s history, including the ways by which the civil war impacted the youth and inspired them to create new social and economic spaces for themselves. As will be demonstrated in various chapters, despite their marginalization by the state, the youth have played a crucial role in the quest for democratization in the country, especially since the 1960s. I place my analysis of the youth in deep societal structures related to Liberia’s colonial past and neo-colonial status, as well as the impact of external factors, such as the financial and military support the regime of Samuel Doe received from the United States during the cold war and the influence of other African nations. I emphasize that the socio-economic and political policies implemented by the Americo-Liberians (freed slaves from the U.S.) who settled in the country beginning in 1822, helped lay the foundation for the civil war. I also argue that the oppressive regime of Samuel Kanyon Doe (1980-1990), the first indigenous non-settler president of Liberia, failed to address the prevailing social, economic and political inequalities that had been fostered by the Americo-Liberians, and this failure provided additional impetus that ignited what seemed clearly to be a time-bomb waiting to explode due to the deep inequality in Liberian society, an inequality that had made a segment of the society already angry with the political status quo. The youth of Liberia were among those who
resented the political status quo fostered by the Americo-Liberians and later entrenched by the Doe regime. Thus, contrary to prevailing notions in the bulk of the existing literature that depicts the youth as innocent people drawn into civil conflicts against their will, I argue that Liberian youth considered themselves active members of their society, who must contribute to its transformation even if that meant picking up arms against corrupt leaders.
Dedication

To the children and youth of Liberia who in the midst of tremendous obstacles and challenges labor daily to survive.

For Alexandra and Uriyah.
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Fields of Study

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# Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................................ii
Dedication ..............................................................................................................................iv
Acknowledgements ...............................................................................................................v
Vita........................................................................................................................................vii
Introduction .............................................................................................................................1

Chapter 1: From Slaves to Aristocrats: Americo-Liberians and the Formation of a new Republic (1847-1979) .................................................................................29


Chapter 3: When Doe died, the War should have Ended (1990-2003) .........................142

Chapter 4: ‘Vote for me:’ Papa will Come Home with Black Plastic

    Bag (2005-2010) ..............................................................................................................177

Conclusion ..............................................................................................................................225

Bibliography ..........................................................................................................................237
INTRODUCTION

This dissertation explores the historical causes of the Liberian civil war (1989-2003), with a keen attention to the history of Liberian youth, since the beginning of the Republic in 1847. I carefully analyzed youth engagements in social and political change throughout the country’s history, including the ways by which the civil war impacted the youth and inspired them to create new social and economic spaces for themselves. As will be demonstrated in various chapters, despite their marginalization by the state, the youth have played a crucial role in the quest for democratization in the country, especially since the 1960s.

The end of the Cold War in 1989 was an important watershed in the history of modern Africa. This period was marked on the one hand, by the decline of direct foreign interventions in the domestic politics of many African countries, especially in Southern Africa where the end of Cold War politics probably led to a majority rule in South Africa, facilitated the process of Namibian independence, and stimulated political stability in Mozambique. On the other hand, we witnessed the intensification of pre-existing civil conflicts in places like Angola, Ethiopia, and Sudan, and the outbreak of new ones in the Congo, Algeria, Rwanda, Burundi, Somalia, Algeria, Sierra Leone, and Liberia. Within
the West African sub-region, Côte d’Ivoire, a neighbor to Liberia and Sierra Leone, would be added to the list of countries torn by civil strife, starting from the late 1990s.¹

While the correlation between the end of the Cold War and the intensification of civil wars in Africa, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, is beyond the scope of this dissertation, it provides an important background to exploring the sudden outbreak of civil wars in many parts of Africa during the 1990s, especially in countries such as Sierra Leone, Côte d’Ivoire and Liberia that were once considered stable democracies. In these countries, the correlation between the end of the Cold War and the outbreak of civil wars is not readily evident, suggesting that we explore the histories of these societies in order to provide a deeper insight into the causes of these conflicts and why they emerged at this specific moment in African history. This dissertation is posited on the premise that to understand civil conflicts in contemporary Africa, one must pay attention to internal and external factors, and to examine these factors in a longue durée.

In the case of Liberia more specifically, we can trace the outbreak of the civil war to the trajectory of the country’s unique history, while paying attention to the ways by which the end of the Cold War provided new political space whereby internal conflicts that had remained dormant for more than a century, suddenly exploded and facilitated the formation of ethnic alliances to contest for power without much apprehension of the possibility of intervention by the global powers. Liberia, which was, as many have observed, essentially an informal United States’ colony, provides a good example.

When the civil war reached a high peak in early 1991, the US expressed its reluctance to intervene. Rather, the US focused its political energy on liberating Kuwait from Iraq.

In the following pages, I explore the trajectory of Liberia’s history up to 2010 in order to reconstruct the history of Liberian youths. I focus more specifically on the ways by which Liberia’s unique and tortuous history shaped the economic and political positions of the youth and how the society’s neglect of the youth’s social and economic needs encouraged them to develop unique strategies of survival during and after the civil war. My intentions for this project is to historicize the evolving social locations of the youth, analyze the complexities of their survival techniques beyond the often characterization of them as a helpless segment of the society, a characterization that leads to neglecting their unique history in the larger narrative. By exploring more deeply the ways by which the youth carved out their positions within the society and in the process developed new strategies of survival in the midst of economic decline and political instability, I seek to recognize their historical agency that is often absent in most analyses of the youth in post-conflict societies.\(^2\)

Clearly, the youth, along with women and children, were and still are the primary victims of any civil conflict. This observation has led many scholars and policy-makers to depict the youth as victims without carefully exploring the ways by which they negotiate their victimhood in order to develop a degree of social and economic autonomy crucial for their post-conflict survival.

The general framework employed by scholars concerned with youth and civil wars in Africa overwhelmingly focuses on the use of children as child soldiers. Dodge, Palme, Zack-Williams, de Waal, Sesay and Ismail, Volker Druba, etc. Druba defines child soldiers as follows:

[child]soldiers are all people under the age of eighteen who are recruited to a country’s armed forces or to a non-government entity (NGE), even if the country is in a state of peace. The term used is heterogeneous and includes all children and young adults, whether they were legally conscripted, voluntarily enlisted or recruited by force.

By focusing on how the youth was forcefully drawn into civil wars, scholars offer a range of policy recommendations for rehabilitations that often overlook those youth who did not participate in wars, especially those who were left to fend for themselves due to the collapse of the economy and or the loss of parents and relatives during the war. In particular, a focus on writing for policy prevalent in most of the literature ignores the historical context and cultural perceptions of what constitutes the “youth” in African societies.

Equally important, such analyses neglect to examine the shifting trajectories of the youth as they reconstruct their identities and social locations within the changes occurring in their societies after a civil conflict. I argue that, while the youth are indeed victims of civil conflicts, we also need to explore the extent to which they can also be

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considered actors in their own histories, which is evident in the different strategies they
employed to survive during and after wars. De Boeck and Honwana point out this
apparent shortcoming in their analyses of the perception and representation of youths.
They note that by disregarding the “multiplicity in the positions of young people,
children and youth have been routinely portrayed as innocent and vulnerable, in need of
adult protection.”5 In other words, by viewing the youths only as victims, we neglect to
pay attention to their agency. The construction of children as innocent and vulnerable is
rooted in western middle class values of childhood. In these societies, children are cared
and provided for, either by their parents or by the state until the age of eighteen. This
representation of childhood has led to the universalization of a specific definition of
childhood—below the age of eighteen years by the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the
Child; U.N. Geneva Convention; and the African Charter of Rights of the Child.6

Conversely, such a definition fails to account for the diversity of youth
experiences around the world and how their lives and experiences are shaped and
circumscribed in part by the environment in which they live. As De Boeck and
Honwana explain, “In Africa, very few children and young people enjoy the luxury of
being taken care of by their parents or state until they reach the age of eighteen.”7 To
the contrary, children and teenagers are expected to work and assume social
responsibilities at an early age. Subsequently, African youth are constantly crossing the
frontier between childhood and adulthood. De Boeck and Honwana explain further: “As

and Place” in Makers and Breakers: Children and Youth in Postcolonial Africa (Africa World Press Inc,
2005), 3.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 4.
they actively create and recreate their roles in the face of changing conditions, they blur that social divide.\(^8\) This suggests that the universalization of a specific definition of childhood is inadequate to account for the diversity of youth experiences in every part of the world, including Africa. What is needed is a culture-specific conceptualization of childhood, beyond the universal definition.

A related perspective regarding the social locations of the youth prevalent in the literature is that young people are prone to violence, an idea that is not supported by history since nowhere in history can we identify youths as initiators of wars. Boyden argues that the claim that youths are prone to violence is only a reflection of adult’s imagination.\(^9\) The conception that youths are prone to violence resulted from a focus on how children were drawn into conflicts, a focus that often ignores local and historical contingencies, as well as the diversity of social backgrounds that determine whether or not a child was likely to be recruited to participate in a war. Needless to say, children of the rich and powerful seldom participate in armed conflicts; it is children from poor and disenfranchised families that were and still are, drawn into wars.

Zack-Williams highlighted this position when he explains that most children recruited as soldiers during the Sierra Leonean civil war, were economically disadvantaged; hence socio-economic status plays an important role in the recruitment of child soldiers. In essence, children from privileged families rarely become child soldiers compared to non-privileged youths. Also, during these conflicts, boys were often made

\(^8\) Ibid.
to commit atrocities such as rape, torture and murder, while females were used predominantly as sex slaves in addition to committing violence against civilians.\textsuperscript{10}

Although the strong emphasis on child soldiers and their rehabilitation is extremely important, the experiences of non-combatant youth are often ignored in the discourse about the impact of African civil wars on the youth.

In a review of the theories and literature about the involvement of children and youth in armed violence in the twenty-first century, Boyden identifies and analyzes the inherent weakness of these theories, including environmentalist ideas of environmental contributors, naturalist ideas of young humans’ innate aggression and “[t]he dialectical relationship of structural conditions and human agency,” each being used as evidence although inadequate according to her to account for the involvement of children and youth in armed conflict.\textsuperscript{11} Boyden argues that the limited usefulness of these theories, with regards to Africa, stemmed from the fact that the theories are rooted in structuralism, a concept that is by itself, too limited and thus inapplicable to Africa. She notes:

Structuralist theories of conflict have become particularly influential in research on Africa. Two co-existing aspects of structure are highlighted. The first being the oppressive forces associated with failed post-colonial states and the economic and socio-political inequalities of globalization and the market economy. The second being the opportunities brought about by poor governance and corruption on the one hand and by the promise of socio-political reform and access to modern resources and the spread of modern technologies on the other hand. In Africa, the increase in number of young people as a proportion of total population and their raised aspirations associated with the expansion of education, and other trappings of modernity are juxtaposed with entrenched gerontocratic hierarchies and with debilitated patrimonial states. Analysts point to a crisis for rural youth associated with limited school places, low absorptive capacity of the job market, poor access to resources, high levels of forced migration, rapid rates of


\textsuperscript{11} Boyden, “Children, War and Disorder in the 21st Century,” 255.
urbanization and a collective awareness among the young of their socio-political and economic marginalization. These factors are said to prevent young people from being able to pass through acceptable social thresholds to reach maturity, leaving them isolated from both traditional and modern political and economic processes that are the domain of adulthood and with a strong sense of grievance and alienation that underlies the will to overthrow established political regimes.\textsuperscript{12}

Calling for a post-structuralist approach to conceptualizing the involvement of youth in armed conflict Boyden argues that “[w]e need far more effective theories and evidence than at present on children and adolescents’ action in war, theories that take account of social power, ideational and structural forms, and emotional and cognitive processes.”\textsuperscript{13}

An inclusive analysis of the various factors that influence the involvement of children and youth in civil wars, will allow for an in-depth analysis of children’s and youths’ participation in armed conflicts. Yet, this cannot be understood in absence of empirical evidence rooted in a specific culture and history.

Given the preeminent involvement of youth in African civil wars, this project examines the historical context of the Liberian civil war as it concerns the youth, while moving beyond the dominant trope of victimhood used with regard to youth in civil wars by examining the experiences of Liberian youth, especially ex-combatant and non-combatant teenage girls and boys. I explore the experiences of both combatant and non-combatant teenage girls and boys in order to highlight their historical agency. This is important for expanding our understanding of African youths in a post-civil war environment, without overlooking the cultural and historical context in which they create and recreate mechanisms for survival after the conflict. Specifically, I am interested in

\begin{itemize}
  \item the continuities or discontinuities in youth experiences, which I trace from the arrival of
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 271.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 275.
the Americo-Liberians in 1822 to the outbreak of the war in 1989 and the aftermath of the war. This broad historical stroke allows us to understand the history of Liberian youth more deeply, without overlooking specific factors that allow us to demonstrate that they were active participants of the history of their societies whether during war or peace.

I contend that the youth of Liberia are not simply victims of the country’s fourteen year civil war (1989-2003), but active agents who developed a series of strategies to address their marginalized statuses. By carefully historicizing the experiences of Liberian youths, I hope to demonstrate the extent of a historical continuity that informed the experiences of the youths, while paying close attention to changes that occurred in the Liberian society after the war that shaped their strategies of survival. I believe that such a holistic approach, especially one that highlights the interconnections between history, culture, social locations, and the roles of international organizations, in analyzing the history of postwar youth, may provide policy-makers with crucial tools for formulating more effective policies.

Contrary to the prevailing notions in many media sources regarding the youth and the Liberian civil war, I place my analyses of the history of the youth in deep societal structures related to Liberia’s colonial and neocolonial status, as well as the impact of external factors, such as the financial and military support the regime of Samuel Doe received from the United States and the influence of other African nations. I also emphasize that the socio-economic and political structures (which discriminated against and exploited the indigenous population) implemented by the freed slaves from the United States, who settled in the country beginning in 1822, helped lay the foundation for the civil war. I also argue that the oppressive regime of Samuel Kanyon Doe (1980-
1990), the first indigenous non-settler president of Liberia, failed to address the prevailing social, economic and political inequalities that had been fostered by the Americo-Liberians, and this failure provided additional impetus that ignited what seemed clearly to be a time-bomb waiting to explode due to the deep inequality in Liberian society, an inequality that had made a segment of the society already angry with the political status quo. Like the Americo-Liberians and their descendants, Doe ruled the country with an iron fist and exploited the nation’s resources to enrich himself and those loyal to him. This entrenchment of inequality in the society exacerbated an already volatile situation and contributed to the onset of the civil war. The youths of Liberia were among those who resented the political status quo fostered by the Americo-Liberians and later entrenched by the Doe regime. Consequently, if the youth joined different factions in the war, it had to do in part, with this pre-existing frustration (chapter 2). For the marginalized youth, joining the war was, at least in part, due to their desire to help overthrow a corrupt regime and to replace it with a new society that would provide equal opportunities to all citizens. This is particularly evident in the ways the youth, since the early 1960s, criticized the Liberian government in student newspapers, for fostering inequality and for failing to develop the nation (chapter one). Thus, contrary to prevailing notions in the bulk of the existing literature that depicts the youth as innocent people drawn into civil conflicts against their will, I argue that Liberian youth considered themselves as active members of their society, who must contribute to its transformation even if that meant picking up arms against corrupt leaders.

**Methodology**
An in-depth historical study of the experiences and economic activities of Liberian youth is invaluable because the success of democracy in the country hinges in part on the economic success and empowerment of the youth. This project addresses the following questions:

1) What experiences with, and access to, education did Liberian boys and girls have prior to the outbreak of the conflict in 1989?

2) What are the perceptions of older people about changes in childrearing practices about youth behavior compared to when they were young?

3) What were the experiences of Liberian youth in the pre-war period, especially regarding their rights and economic opportunities?

4) What were the experiences of children during the war and the impact of those experiences on survivors?

5) What mechanisms, if any, have the youth developed to insure their survival in post-civil war Liberia?

6) How is the government responding to the needs of the youth?

7) And, finally, what have international agencies such as the U.N and NGOs done to address the problems of Liberian youth?

In seeking responses to these questions, I conducted extensive fieldwork and archival research in the country. My field research began with a preliminary fieldwork in the city of Monrovia, the capital, for two months in the summer of 2008. This visit enabled me to establish local contacts and to sharpen my research focus. It had been five
years since Ellen Sirleaf Johnson assumed the presidency of Liberia and it appeared that very little had changed in the country, a situation that persists to the present. The vast majority of Liberians were, and are still living in immense poverty including many children. I noticed that many boys and girls, some as young as five, were selling petty goods in the streets such as, oranges, water, cookies, and grocery bags with a price tag of five Liberian dollars each (about ten cents USD). These children were from a marginalized segment of the society; torn by war either as orphans or from unemployed parents, they had to sell to help support themselves and their families, in a very dangerous urban environment. I once saw one of these children run over by a car and killed, a scene, I was told, was quite common and part of the realities of these children’s daily encounters (chapter 4).

Besides the hawking of petty goods, some teenage boys were pen-pen drivers; pen-pens are motorcycles used for convenient transportation due to the limited availability of conventional public transportation. Most of these teens either have never been to school or had to drop out because their parents were unable to afford their school fees. Schooling was thus not part of their activities; this option, they believed, would add nothing to their existence (chapter 4). Unlike in the United States and in other western societies where taxes cover elementary and secondary school fees, parents in Liberia, as in most African countries, are responsible for paying school fees for their children. As a result, education has become a scarce commodity few can afford. During this short fieldwork I held several informal conversations with teens that revealed the complexities of life in post-civil war Liberia. One Saturday, while on the back of a pen-pen, I asked my driver whether he was in school. He responded:
No, not anymore. What for? What’s the point of going to school when you will not be able to get a job afterwards? You see, to get a job in this country you have to know somebody. The government gives the jobs to people they know. So tell me, when I am hungry, can I cook my notebook and eat it? With this pen-pen, I eat every day.\footnote{Conversation with teenage “pen-pen” driver Paynesville, Red Light, 30 August, 2008.}

Such responses provided the foundation for my research, which I consider to be timely. I pursued these questions further during the longer fieldwork from 2009 to 2010. As Liberians seek to make progress in the years following the civil war, it is imperative that scholars historicize and contextualize the country’s current problems, particularly as they relate to the youth.

Conducting research in post-civil war Liberia presented a host of challenges. One of the major obstacles to conducting research on the country’s recent past in that during the fourteen years of civil war, no efforts or initiatives were taken to keep, protect or preserve archival records. Because most rebel groups viewed universities as the source of elitism and the cause of their socio-economic disadvantages, they specifically targeted all institutions and centers of learning, including the National Archive of Liberia, for destruction. In spite of this, I was able to conduct some useful research at the Archive. The library of The University of Liberia yielded significant data about students’ activism from the 1970s through the 1980s.

The real archive, however, is on the streets of Liberia. It is in the daily experiences and lives of the people that I have found a vital source of both historical and contemporary information. The foundation of this project relied heavily on my ability to
conduct field interviews with various subjects across the political and socio-economic spectrum of Liberian society. In order to adequately examine the impact of the war on ordinary youth, the use of oral history is vital. The experiences of a fifteen-year-old girl or boy interviewed about life in Liberia, who may have never been to school and work as a pen-pen driver or seller to survive, will undoubtedly differ radically from an account provided by a privileged youth. Moreover, the account of life in Liberia provided by a government official may be riddled with bias in support of a past or current administration.

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed in the study. Survey/questionnaires were used to collect data such as age, birthdates, occupations etc. The sample comprised ninety youths and sixty adults. In accordance with the approval of this project by the Internal Review Board (IRB) at The Ohio State University, the contemporary portion of the research, which focused overwhelmingly on interviews and participant observations, was double blinded to conceal the identity of the informants. Thus, each participant was assigned a number thereby minimizing potential risks associated with exposing the identities of the informants. Random sampling and the snowball method were used to recruit participants. As part of the qualitative research, I interviewed government officials and international aid workers who had relevant knowledge and were amenable to being interviewed. I spent the academic year of 2009-2010 conducting fieldwork in Liberia.

I conducted on-site research in one of the busiest commercial and political districts within the area of Monrovia-Paynesville Red Light. The area is also the hub of the country’s “informal” economy. Traders from all eighteen counties bring their
produce to sell in this district. More importantly, it has a large population of teen pen-pen drivers, child street sellers, market women and men work in the area. There are many wholesale businesses in the area and several banks, including a branch of the National Bank of Liberia. The Red Light is not only economically diverse, but also ethnically; inhabitants and sellers in this area are representative of the country’s sixteen indigenous ethnic groups, which allowed for a diverse sample.

This project fills a void in the existing literature on African youth and civil wars, which overwhelmingly focuses on the experiences during the war of boy soldiers and often omits girls and non-combatants.\textsuperscript{15} Moreover, the unilateral focus on the civil war itself often ignores contributing factors lodged in pre-civil war youth experiences, as in the case of the Liberian civil war. I will also examine the complexities of their lives and struggles for survival during the post-conflict era. By looking at the lived experiences and material realities of Liberian youth post-conflict, I hope to examine the impact of the war on Liberians from the perspective of those who are marginalized and often excluded from the dominant discourse about the war. Finally, and most importantly, this project is not only concerned with the experiences of Liberian youth from the inception of the war to its end 1989-2003, but also I contend that the fundamental impact of the Liberian civil war on youth and their struggle for survival in post-civil war Liberia cannot be understood without placing these issues in the trajectory of Liberia’s unique history. Hence, to achieve this endeavor, the project covers the period from 1822, when freed

\textsuperscript{15} For Sierra Leone, see for example, Susan McKay and Dyan Mazura, \textit{Where are the Girls? Girls in Fighting Forces in Northern Uganda, Sierra Leone and Mozambique: Their Lives During and after War}. (Montreal: Rights and Democracy, International Center for Human Rights and Democratic Development, 2004).
slaves from the United States began to settle in the country, and moves through the twentieth and into the twenty-first century.

Since gaining independence from colonial rule in the 1960s, several African countries have been plagued by civil wars. A common trend during these wars is the use of child soldiers. Often, at the end of these wars, scholars and international agencies such as the United Nations generally focus on the rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-combatants into their societies. Over the years, many reasons have been advanced by scholars for the use of child soldiers in African civil wars. For example, analyzing the use of child soldiers in the Sierra Leonean civil war Williams argues that,

> Peripheral capitalism has transformed the form of the family, loosening control over children. With ongoing crises in both the economic and political realms undermining kinship structures and leaving children with little security, some have turned to surrogate families for protection, either on the streets or in the ranks of combatants.\(^{16}\)

He goes on to explain that under normal circumstances, the older generation would create a positive environment for the next generation, but the combination of “[d]isintegrating family forms, an authoritarian state and a grasping global capitalism,”\(^{17}\) has led to the vulnerability of the youth, which makes them easy recruits for warring factions. I agree with Williams that the use of child soldiers in Africa cannot be narrowed to a single cause, but rather that the issue is multifaceted. In the case of Liberia, as will be demonstrated in the chapters of this dissertation, the authoritarian regimes of the Americo-Liberians (1847-1980) and Samuel K. Doe (1980-1990), and the relationships of these regimes to global capitalism, especially as represented by the United States, have

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\(^{17}\)Ibid.
contributed significantly to the exploitation and oppression of Liberian youth since the inception of the country in 1847 (chapter 2). This historical vulnerability helps to explain the use of child soldiers and youth in the country’s bloody civil war.

In a similar vein, analyzing the use of child soldiers in the Mozambique civil war, Jessica Schafer argues that, “[a]s part of their mobilization strategy, the military leaders of both government and RENAMO forces took advantage of the recruits’ psychological need for a substitute family.”

Her assertion echoes the argument that have been presented by other scholars, including Frank Faulkner, that the inability of many African families to provide for their children led many of the latter to seek alternative families in which some of their needs are met. However, child soldiers are not always victims. On the use of female fighters in the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique, West argues, “To begin with…young female guerrillas were not merely indoctrinated by FRELIMO-for better or for worse-but also themselves contributed substantially to the narratives that would frame their experience as combatants.”

The dominant discourse about women and girls during wartime overwhelmingly depicts them as victims. While it is accurate that the majority of war victims are women, their agency and the varied position they occupied during wars had often been ignored.

According to Aning,
Until recently in the few cases where women and their respective functions during the Liberian and Sierra Leone civil wars have been illustrated, they have generally been presented as hapless victims of senseless male brutality. Instances of atrocities committed by women and their active involvement in violent conflicts have tended to create analytical difficulties for observers who, more often than not, have found it perplexing to reconcile such with popular perceptions.  

Like the western middle-class value of childhood as innocent, women and girls around the world are deemed to be ‘peaceful,’ vulnerable and harmless by nature. Aning’s work is part of a growing body of literature about the multiplicity of women’s and youths’ experiences and involvement in armed conflicts. Others include Boyden, de Berry, Utas, Schafer, Zack-Williams, etc. Their body of work in one way or another illustrates that women and youth are not simply victims of wars, but are also agents who employ a series of survival strategies in the midst of tremendous obstacles. It should be emphasized that in some cases, they were also perpetrators, as well as participants in peace initiatives that ended their countries’ civil wars. A major contribution of this body of work to the study of women and youth in armed conflicts is that it allows scholars to move beyond the

binary of victim/perpetrators to an in-depth analysis of the varied experiences of women, children and youth in armed conflicts.

Moreover, Alidou and Sikainga call for an examination of the conceptual framework employed by international organizations and policy makers to the ending of civil wars and reconstruction efforts in Africa. They argue that,

Despite the divergence of opinions on this fundamental question, it is clear that some of the main pitfalls of peacemaking and reconstruction efforts in Africa have something to do with the conceptual framework and approach of the international community to conflict resolution and reconstruction. A great deal of attention and major efforts were given to peacekeeping, political reforms, democratization, and the expansion of the market economy. These issues were considered essential components of peacemaking and reconstruction. This approach neither addresses the root causes of conflicts nor deals with the social, cultural, and political consequences of wars.23

The issue that Alidou and Sikainga have raised here is precisely one of the interventions and contributions this dissertation hopes to make; understanding the causes and ending of Africa’s civil wars is imperative to a contemporary analysis of Liberian youth. While much has been written about the Liberian civil war, little attention has been given to the historical experiences of Liberian youth; a critical attention to the youth’s historical experiences will help explain the use of child soldiers and youth in the Liberian civil war. However, the rehabilitation of ex-combatants youth into Liberian society was the major focus of U.N and NGO post-civil war initiatives.

This study is premised on the historical as well as contemporary exploitation, oppression, and exclusion of Liberian youth from participating in the political process are deeply rooted in adult authority. My conceptualization of authority relies on analyses of

the term by social anthropologists, which, according to Paula Brown states, “In every group, certain individuals hold authority that is; they are able to obtain obedience to their commands. The content of the commands made by a particular person in authority may be narrowly limited by law or custom or may be allowed to vary over a wide range.” In the case of Liberia, individuals in position of authority (parents, elders, teachers, police and military officers, presidents, etc) have had the absolute power to control, dominate and discipline the youth at will without any accountability. Historically, this lack of accountability by those in authority has led to the continuous victimization and exploitation of Liberian youth. This source of adult power and authority, I argue, can be found in pre-colonial and colonial childrearing practices in Liberia.

The socialization of Liberian youth to be obedient at all times and never to question the actions of adults is partly embedded in local childrearing practices and institutions. Anthropologists, including James Gibbs, Margaret Miller, Gerald M. Erchak, and Caroline Bledsoe have written ethnographies on the Kpelle and Loma ethnic groups of Liberia. Erchak’s work on the Kpelle specifically examines the childrearing practices of the group. Based on his research, he concluded that, “Until the age of two, children are very much indulged; from age 2 to 6, they are trained through threats and ridicule; after age 6, corporal punishment is frequently used. At all ages, curiosity is

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stifled and innovation actively discouraged.”  Although Erchak’s work focuses on the Kpelle people, his analysis of their childrearing practices can be applied to the fifteen other ethnic groups of the country, as personal insults and corporal punishment are commonly used to “discipline” children.

This analysis, however, should not imply that Liberian parents are simply child abusers, who do not love their children. Having been raised under the same system, I note that parents believe that such practices enable their children to succeed in the future. Besides the influence of parents and family, formal institutions also played an integral role in the socialization of children. Discussing one of these institutions, Brown contended that,

There was a formal means of performing this task outside the framework of home and family and the informal contacts between youths and adults. This was the Poro whose origin on this Coast as mentioned supra, dates back to the seventeenth century. This institution, within the “tribes” which had it, provided for the education of all youths. 27

The Poro society was a secret male- only institution held in the forest. Although no age limit was set, initiates entered between the ages of seven to nineteen. 28 In Poro, boys were taught the skills of farming and hunting by male elders. Moreover, that power and status was largely determined by age, they were also taught to be respectful and obedient to all authority. Therefore, it was considered taboo for youth to question or disagree with adults. 29

26 Ibid., 62.
29 In accordance with the Internal Review Board (IRB) at The Ohio State University, all interviews during my fieldwork were double-blinded to limit potential risks and to ensure confidentiality for participants.
The female counterpart of Poro in Liberia is commonly called the Sande Bush. Like the Poro, it met secretly. Girls were generally admitted between the ages of four and twelve, which is much lower than the age of male initiates. The earlier socialization of girls was to help prepare them for marriage. In conjunction with learning to cook, fish, and farm, girls were instructed on the importance of being “obedient” to adults at all times including recognizing their husbands as authority figures. Thus, the education the youth received was gendered. Sande, as well as other secret female societies, can also be found in other African countries such as Guinea and Sierra Leone and function similarly.

Unlike settler societies such as Algeria, Kenya and the United States, the settlement of freed blacks from the United States to Liberia was considered a Christian endeavor by its supporters through the establishment of the American Colonization Society (ACS) in 1817. Explaining one of the fundamental reasons for the creation of the ACS, Wickstrom argues that,

> Individual Christians began to look upon the Negroes as an object of God’s loving concern and entitled to share in His redeeming grace on an equal basis with the white master. This was especially stressed during the second half of the century by Samuel Hopkins and his followers. Out of the Second Awakening in the beginning of the nineteenth century came interdenominational mission societies, both domestic and foreign.

The members and financial supporters of the ACS included both blacks and whites; an influential member was Paul Cuffe, a successful half black and half Indian business man

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Subsequently, participants were randomly assigned numbers and none of their official names were recorded. Interview with a seventy-nine year old grandmother about childrearing practices during her childhood, Paynesville, Redlight 23 March, 2010.


31 Interview with eighty-two year old grandmother, Paynesville, Redlight 10 February, 2010.

and a devout Christian, who believed that it was in the best interests of freed slaves to return to Africa to spread Christianity. Other support for the colonization of Liberia was based on racism and the desire to maintain the institution of slavery. According to Wickstrom, “In the meantime the number of free Negroes continued to rise. In 1790, they numbered 59,481. In 1800 the figure had almost doubled, or reached 110,073.”

Subsequently, many slave owners who were also Christian feared that the growing population of freed slaves would incite their slaves in the south to rebel, and therefore saw Liberia as a solution for protecting their wealth.

Christianity not only played a central role in the resettlement of freed slaves in Liberia, but its principles became the foundation of the settlers’ rule. The types and forms of religious doctrine freed slaves encountered and experienced in the U.S. were replicated in Liberia. Analyzing the primary reason for the introduction of Christianity to slaves in the United States, Cole asserts that,

Religion was introduced as a device for social control, and censored meetings stressed the virtues of obedience and subservience while heaven was held up as a reward for the faithful slave... The values and institutions of the Old South were carried with the Americo-Liberian and in a large measure perpetuated in his “new world.”

As part of their “civilizing” mission in the country, Americo-Liberian Baptist, Episcopalian, Methodist and Presbyterian churches established mission schools in various

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33 Ibid., 26.
34 Ibid., 8.
locales for indigenous youth. For example, according to Shick, “Reports of religious revivalism in Liberia were frequent. In 1859, news reached America that scores of children and youth were being converted to Christianity. The report claimed that forty persons had joined the Methodist Episcopal Church, while the Baptists and Presbyterians also received many new devotees.” In school, children were taught to be obedient at all times, as God expected and required them to be. Any deviation from such values often resulted in corporal punishment for child/children involved. Based on biblical principles, teachers and parents were not to spare the rod and spoil the child. Religion therefore, in particular, Christianity, became another device for maintaining power and control over the youth.

Although Christianity was used as a tool of control by the settlers, it is important to note that it afforded some indigenous people the opportunity for upward social and economic mobility. According to Shick,

Many settlers adopted Africans, particularly young children, and used the family structure as the means of socializing them to settler culture. In cases where the association of Africans with settler families resulted in the assumption of the settler lifestyle, the achievement was noted in the press. When Lewis Tulliver died, on April 11, 1840, the Methodist newspaper Africa’s Luminary, published an obituary. “Native” youth raised by settlers and converted to Christianity while in the family of Stern Tulliver, a settler living then in Upper Caldwell. A year later the paper announced the passing of another African long associated with the Afro-American settlements Eliza Jones, adopted as a child by the Reverend Anthony D. Williams and later married to a settler man, became a member of the Methodist Episcopal Church before her death.

38 Ibid., 64.
The adoption of indigenous children to be raised Christian by settlers’ families as a gesture of good will and uplift towards the indigenous population is not unique to Liberia. In the U.S. for example, Native American children were once forcefully removed from their families and placed in boarding schools or with white families, who job it was to “civilize” them—that is make them Christians. Tsianina Lomawaima’s *The Story of Chilocco Indian School: They Called it Prairie Light* (1994) is only one of many books that examine the “civilizing” mission of whites towards Native Americans.  

Based on indigenous child-rearing practices rooted in the cultures of the different ethnic groups that comprise Liberia, I have attempted to re-conceptualize the local notions of youth and children that are different from Western liberal notions of youth. Although legally a person is considered an adult when they turn eighteen, in reality this is not the case. The evidence suggests that Liberians’ notion of youth and children derives from both African social structures of gerontocracy, where age is a source of power, as well as Western Christian ideas and values. It appears that by the late 19th century, these two have merged to further complicate the definition. In this fused framework, there is no sharp demarcation between a child and a youth, as the boundary between the two is porous, and allows adults to have absolute authority over when to accept an individual as an adult. For example, university students above the age of eighteen were considered children by the general public (see chapters 1 and 2). The youth on the other hand, as I analyze in this project, consistently contended this subtle but realistic marginalization by

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asserting their agency whenever necessary. Chapters one and two elaborate on this issue.

In order to assess the shifting historical and cultural notions of “youth,” I asked my informants, whom I selected from among different age sets, to describe what they considered to be “youths” in terms of their own experiences and those of others, including their own parents. By ranging my survey to include adults who remembered their experiences as youths as well as contemporary younger generations, I am able to assess the complexity of indigenous notions of youth and children and how these notions changed over time. I then compared their perspectives with what has been recorded by anthropologists in socialization rituals such as the ancient Poro and Sande societies.

Chapter 1, “From Slaves to Aristocrats: Americo-Liberians and the Formation of a new Republic (1847-1979)” provides a historical account of the socio-economic and political policies implemented by the Americo-Liberians and their descendants during the First Republic (1847-1980), and the impact of those policies on the local population, in particular the youth. Such historicization provides a contextual framework for analyzing the historical as well as the contemporary experiences of Liberian youth before, during and after the civil war. The Liberian cultural belief that the youth are to be “seen and not heard,” has been a huge obstacle to the empowerment of Liberian youth. Such an attitude towards the youth is still a major problem, even in post-civil war Liberia. Yet, as will be demonstrated, in the midst of insurmountable obstacles and challenges, student activism, in the absence of civil organizations, would embody the most important voices for social and political reforms in the country, beginning in the 1960s.

Chapter two, “The Samuel Kanyon Doe Regime: ‘Native Woman born Soldier, Congo Woman born Rogue’ (1980-1990)” examines the social, economic and political
policies and practices of the ten-year regime of President Samuel Doe. It begins with the military coup of April 12, 1980, which ushered him into power, and ends with his execution in 1990. A fundamental argument of the chapter is that despite the harsh realities and dangers fostered by the Doe regime, student activism led by such organizations as the Liberia National Students Union (LNSU) and University of Liberia Student Union (ULSU) continued to lead the quest for democracy in the country, just as they had done beginning with the Tubman administration during the period from the mid-1950s. Contrary to his promise of returning the country to civilian rule immediately following the coup, Doe continued to remain in power. Instead of democracy, military rules and decrees became the new laws by which all Liberians were governed.

The third chapter, “When Doe Died, the War Should Have Ended (1990-2003)” is concerned with three primary issues. First, it examines the military intervention of ECOWAS, and further analyzes its successes and weaknesses. Second, it addresses the use of child soldiers and youth as rebels by various warring factions during the country’s fourteen years civil war. Contrary to the dominant discourse about women and girls, which more often than not, constructs them as innocent victims of male aggression during armed conflicts, the chapter also discusses the multiplicity of roles women and girls played—both as victims and actors of violence, sometimes occupying both roles simultaneously. The administration of Charles Taylor (1997-2003) is a major focus of the chapter. A fundamental argument of this chapter is that during the presidency of Taylor, the environment in which the majority of Liberians found themselves, including the youth, was similar in many respects, to that of the Doe regime (1980-1990). The chapter concludes with the exile of Charles Taylor to Nigeria in 2003.
Chapter Four, “Vote For Me, Papa Will Come Home with Black Plastic Bag” is concerned with the presidency of Ellen Sirleaf Johnson as it pertains to the youth. Of particular interest in this chapter are the educational, economic and political policies of her administration. I argue that, despite her promises of providing economic and educational opportunities for Liberians, including the youth, very little has changed in the socio-economic status of most Liberians since she became president in 2005. The youth continue to occupy a marginalized status, and socioeconomic inequalities continue to widen. A major focus of the chapter is the examination of the various strategies the youth of Liberia, which vary by gender, have developed to address their marginalized status.

Chapter five is the conclusion. Here, I summarize the main arguments and provide some insights into other aspects of the history of Liberian youths that are crucial, though not covered exhaustively in this study, which I encourage other scholars to pursue.

The study of youths in various parts of Africa has gained prominence in the works of social scientists and historians. This work is located in that growing literature with a focus on Liberia. The history of Liberian youth is a crucial aspect of Liberian history that is neglected in the current literature, except in the context of the Liberian civil war. By placing the youth in the larger narrative of the Liberian civil war, scholars tend to depict them as victims in need of post-conflict rehabilitation. This dissertation goes beyond such a narrow view to explore more deeply youths’ engagements with their societies during specific historical moments from the beginning of Liberia’s history, through the civil war, and its aftermath. Focusing on the pre and post-conflict era, the discussion that follows examine in details, the ways by which specific historical contexts affect youths’
strategies of survival. The current project therefore seeks to bring a neglected history, that
is history of the youth, into the larger narrative in order to broaden our understanding of
the history of Liberian youth more specifically, and the history of African youths more
broadly.
CHAPTER: 1

From Slaves to Aristocrats: Americo-Liberians and the Formation of a new Republic (1847-1979)

In 1822, the first group of freed slaves from the United States arrived on the Malagquette Coast of modern day West Africa, which they later named Liberia. The arrival of the freed slaves marked the beginning of a tumultuous history of the territory, a history that is yet to be fully explored especially the ways by which the encounter between two cultures—that of the indigenes on the one hand, and that of the freed slaves from the United States, impacted the youth. The arrival of the settlers and the political, social, cultural and economic activities they pursued transformed the social, cultural and political foundations of the ethnic groups that already inhabited the territory. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a historical background crucial for understanding the Liberian conflict and the impacts of that conflict on Liberian youth. The history of Liberia has been written, quite exhaustively, by a number of competent historians. Consequently, this overview will be brief as I highlight only the issues that I believe are pertinent to the broader theme of this dissertation. Calling themselves Americo-Liberians, the freed slaves segregated themselves from the indigenous population and

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40 The exact number of the first settlers has been debated by historians of Liberia. However, Liebenow’s estimate of about nineteen thousand settlers between 1822 and 1867 is generally accepted as quite accurate. Gus J. Liebenow. Liberia: The Evolution of Privilege. (Cornell University Press, 1969), 47.

believed themselves to be “superior” to the local inhabitants. Their perceived notion of
“superiority,” was premised on the fact that, although black in ancestry, yet they had been
born and raised in the United States. Although most had been slaves at one point in their
lives, they believed Western cultural, economic and political institutions, in particular
American, to be “superior” to others and reproduced such ideals and values in Liberia as
vehicles for asserting control and dominance over the indigenous population. Notions of
the “civilized” freed slaves and the “backward” indigenous population soured the socio-
political and economic relations between the two groups right from the beginning.
Economically, the gross exploitation of indigenous labor, in particular young able-bodied
men to work in Fernando Po, French Gabon and on the Firestone Rubber Plantation in
Liberia, in 1929 prompted the League of Nations to launch an investigation into the
issues of slavery and forced labor in the country.42

The Formation of Liberia

Long before the arrival of the freed slaves, sixteen indigenous ethnic groups
inhabited the Malaquette region, which had no centralized government pre-colonially.
They included the Kpelle, Lorma, Kru, Kissi, Bozzi, Vai, Gola, Grebo, Mano, Bassa,
Bandi, Sapo, Krahn, Geo, Mandi, and the Dei. While most lived in self-governing
communities composed of one ethnicity, some intermarried when more than one ethnic
group inhabited a region. For example, the Lorma, Gissi and Bandi ethnic groups have
occupied the northern part of the country (Lofa) for generations and long before the
arrival of the freed slaves. Although they were three distinct groups, with different

languages, cultures, and customs, they managed to live in peace and harmony, often referring to each other as relatives, which meant they could not fight each other according to customary laws. Despite occasional conflicts, most groups coexisted peacefully. Socially, a commonality that existed crossed the sixteen inhabiting ethnic groups in what is now Liberia was that authority and status in one’s community was based on age, with governance by the elders. For example, seniors (parents, grandparents, chiefs, etc) wielded power and authority over juniors (children and young adults). While older women occupied a more privileged status than young men and women, overall, women were deemed second to men. The elders of each group governed according to established cultural, religious, economic and social practices.

A major social characteristic of all the sixteen ethnic groups was that political authority and social status derived from age, which meant that, comparable to most African societies, power and authority were wielded by the elders, who served as the decision-makers in these decentralized societies. For example, parents, grandparents wielded power and authority over juniors (children and young adults). While older women occupied a more privileged status than young men and women, overall, women were deemed second to men in terms of communal and household authorities. The elders of each group governed according to established cultural, religious, economic and social norms that had evolved from within their respective societies.

However, the arrival of the Americo-Liberians would significantly altered the existing social structures, replacing them with American socio-political and economic

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44 Interview with an eighty-year old grandmother about childrearing practices during her youth. Paynesville Redlight, October 12, 2009.
institutions, including the establishment of the Firestone rubber plantation and the use of indigenous labor on the French Panama Canal. In Liberia, the freed slaves believed that they were more “civilized” than the indigenous population, since they had experienced western civilization and had acquired western cultural values, skills and attitudes. According to Nass, the freed slaves that settled in the colony saw themselves as a distinctly enlightened group in comparison with local Africans, whom they often referred to as “heathens and savages.”45 This attitude, which generated notions of the “superior and civilized” freed slaves, and the “inferior and backward” indigenous inhabitants soured socio-political, and economic relations between local Africans and the settlers from the beginning. When Liberia declared itself an independent republic on July 26, 1847 from the ACS, the new constitution excluded the indigenous population, whom they referred to as the “native” and “tribal” people, from all political, social and economic participation. They were denied the right to vote (they could only do so beginning in 1948) and thus were denied citizenship in their own country, subjected to heavy taxation, removed from fertile farmland and subjected to forced labor on governmental projects.46

These aspects of the new republic made it typical of settler colonies, such as the United States, Kenya, Zimbabwe and South Africa. Thus, during the Americo-Liberian rule (1847-1980), ethnicity and class would come to determine one’s access to education or the lack thereof, employment, and politics. Ethnicity has been a major theme in African history since the 1960s.47 More recently, scholars have focused their analytical lenses on issues of belonging and exclusion that has pervaded the African political

46 Ibid., 9.
47 For a review of the major works prior to the end of the millennium, See Crawford Young’s review article, “Deciphering Disorder in Africa: Is Identity the Key?” World Politics 54, no.4 (July 2002): 532-557.
landscape and appears to threaten contemporary democratic initiatives. The discussion of the politics of constructing and maintaining “ethnic” or group hegemony pursued by Americo-Liberians since the founding of the Republic, and perpetuated by non-settlers leaders such as Samuel Doe is crucial for understanding the root causes of the Liberian civil war, and threats of ethnic identity politics facing the current fragile Liberian democracy.

The Americo-Liberians viewed the indigenous populations as unimportant and discriminated against them. According to Nass,

Citizenship was restricted to the settlers and their descendants. The Africans were required to pay taxes such as the obnoxious hut tax. It took quite a long time before the Africans had the right to send representatives to the government in Monrovia, initially only as non-voting observers. For several decades, only those Africans who were “civilized” with western cultural values were granted citizenship. The Aboriginal people were powerless. As second-class people, they were required by law and custom to adopt the western way of life before becoming full citizens.

Furthermore, in addition to acquiring western cultural values and practices, indigenous

49 Ibid.
Liberians were also required to convert to Christianity and had to renounce their indigenous religious beliefs and practices for three years before they could become citizens. However, the fulfillment of these criteria did not guarantee them social equality with the Americo-Liberians; the segregation policies implemented by the settlers remained. For instance, Liberian Christian converts had to enter the home of an Americo-Liberian through the back door\textsuperscript{50} instead of through the front, indicating the cultural superiority Americo-Liberians felt towards the locals.

**The Americo-Liberian government and indigenous labor: the economic background**

While the self-acclaimed cultural superiority of the Americo-Liberians framed the narrative of the history of the relationship between the settlers and the indigenous populations, perhaps the most salient aspect of that relationship, which I argue, laid the foundation for the civil war, was economic exploitation. The indigenous populations became the source of free labor for government projects such as the constructions of roads and public buildings. Similarly, the indigenous population was forced to provide free or extremely cheap labor to private industries. The obvious example was the Firestone Company. Explaining the political and economic relationship that developed between the Firestone Company and Americo-Liberian political elites is crucial for understanding the roots of the Liberian civil war. For this reason, I discuss this relationship extensively below. I use a combination of written records and oral interviews to reconstruct this relationship, and how it was perceived by the indigenous population, as well as the international community.

As the reader will notice, neither the international community nor the indigenous population had the power to minimize the brutality of the Firestone Plantation regime. The inability of the international community to curtail pervasive exploitation of the indigenous people by the company, derived from the lack of commitment by the Americo-Liberian political elites, who were indeed, participants and co-beneficiaries of the company’s practices. The discussion below also places the Liberian situation in the context of other colonial regimes, which suggests that although a black republic, Liberia was not different from other territories under colonial rule. And although a black republic, Liberia could not escape from the violence that engulfed white settler colonies throughout Africa. Liberia can thus be considered an irony in the sense of blacks colonizing other blacks; all the trappings and characteristics of colonial regimes were also present in Liberia, except the color of the colonizers.

The Firestone Company

On September 16, 1925, the government of the Americo- Liberians signed a contract with the American Rubber Company, Firestone. The most ambivalent aspect of that contract was that, the government would supply fifty thousand laborers annually, to work on Firestone’s one million acre plantation. However, the government was not able to supply the required amount of labor; by 1930 Firestone had only approximately ten thousand workers. One reason why the Liberian government was not able to meet this labor demand was because it was supplying laborers to other Western firms. To

come up with the required number of workers, the government created a Labor Bureau, which was responsible for recruitment. Often, the task of finding workers rested on the shoulders of indigenous chiefs and kings; those leaders who refused to comply with the government’s request were dealt with ruthlessly by the new Liberian military- the Liberian Frontier Force. Indigenous laborers worked long hours without pay and yet those who benefited from their hard work included the government, according to Nass,

Thus, the advantages of the contract labor generally benefited only a minute percentage of the population in government positions and their proxies. From the point of view of the contract laborers, the contract was only in favor of those who sent them and those who employed them, with total disregard for the laborers. The terms of these contracts made one wonder if they were not worse than the slave trade.53

The environment in which the workers lived and worked were unfit for animals let alone humans. Nass, describes the living conditions of workers on the Firestone rubber plantation:

Conditions of the laborers in the farm could best be described as very appalling and at worst as inhuman and satanic. The workers were quartered in dingy shanties with little or no regard for the provision of most basic social amenities. The Corporation was only concerned with their labor output and had no commitment to their welfare and survival. The Corporation only dealt with the Liberian government. Their only concern was to ensure that any short fall in the stock of fit laborers resulting from sickness and death was replaced by the Liberian government. The contract laborer was never paid nor given medical care.54

The oppressive work conditions of the Liberians were not that different from those experienced by the slaves in America. It was also obvious that the once oppressed slaves had indeed, become the new oppressors in Liberia.

54 Ibid., 13.
Prior to 1925, many European countries had also taken advantage of the “abundance of labor” in Liberia and treated the laborers with the same inhuman conditions. For example, in 1890, the French through the Americo-Liberian government recruited Liberians to work on the Panama Canal and to serve in their colonial army. Again, in 1897, the Legislature of Liberia granted a German firm a labor recruiting concession. By 1925, Liberia had become a breeding ground for forced labor, a situation of near slavery that began to gain international attention by 1928. The person who did the most to bring such issues to international attention was Thomas J.R. Faulkner, mayor of Monrovia during this time. Although part of the Americo-Liberian elite establishment, Faulkner was deeply nationalistic and believed that the indigenous population was equally Liberian and therefore should be allowed to participate in politics and should also benefit from the resources of the country. With constant reports coming to missionary and philanthropic groups in the United States about the poor working conditions of indigenous Liberians, the United States government played a pivotal role in organizing an international inquiry into the issue in June of 1929. Subsequently, on September 16, 1929, The League of Nations Permanent Court of International Justice and the International Labor Office launched an investigation into the issue of slavery and forced labor in the country. The Liberian government fervently denied these allegations and agreed to allow an international investigation into the allegations.

56 Ibid., 159.
The League of Nations appointed a Commission whose members included the African American sociologist, Charles S. Johnson of Fisk University, Arthur Barclay, former president of Liberia, and the Englishman Dr. Cuthbert Christy, a medical officer with colonial experience in East, West and Central Africa. The Commission traveled to Liberia in 1930 and conducted interviews with chiefs in the hinterland, laborers and with government officials about the recruitment of labor, wages and working conditions. To ascertain whether the charges leveled against the Liberian government were accurate, the Commission based its investigation on several questions. Among them were:

(A) whether slavery as defined in the Anti-Slavery Convention in fact existed in Liberia;
(B) whether this system was participated in or encouraged by the government of the Republic;
(C) to what extent compulsory labor existed as a factor in the social and industrial economy of the state, either for public or private purposes, and, if it did exist, in what manner it was recruited and employed, whether for public or private purposes;
(D) whether shipment of contract laborers to Fernando Po under the terms of arrangement with Spain, or shipment of such laborers to the Congo or any foreign parts was associated with slavery, and whether the method employed in recruiting such laborers carried any compulsion;
(E) whether the labor employed for private purposes or privately owned or leased plantations was recruited by voluntary enlistment or was forcibly impressed for this service by the Liberian government or by its authority, and finally;

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(F) whether the Liberian government had at any time given sanction or approval to the recruiting of labor with the aid and assistance of the Liberian Frontier Force or other persons holding official positions or in government employ, or private individuals had been implicated in such recruiting, with or without the government’s approval. 69

During their investigation, the Commission spent six months (April to September of 1930) travelling to various parts of the country such as Sinoe, Maryland, Kakata, Webbo, Grand Cess and Bambo conducting interviews with local chiefs. 60 Upon completing their investigation, the Commission found the government of Liberia and its agents guilty on all charges. The Commission had found that Mr. Allen N. Yancy, Superintendent of Maryland County from 1920-1928, who later became vice president of the country in 1929, and President Charles D. B. King had indeed been responsible for many of the incidences of compulsory recruitment of labor and forced labor in many parts of the hinterland. Such guilt was made clear in the many testimonies provided by local chiefs, including that of chiefs Jeh and Marten. The Commission reported:

When Jeh returned he found his towns empty and his women weeping and asked what grief had come to them. They told him of the shipment of 500 of their men and boys and that Yancy had demanded 200 more. Jeh said “They cannot go. It will destroy our country.” According to President King’s instructions he ordered three men sent to Supt. Yancy for punishment. The men were carried by Supt. Yancy to his private farm in Webbo and placed at work. When Supt. Yancy heard that Jeh was refusing to send 200 additional men, he became vexed and sent a large company of soldiers under John Delaney to rebuke his impertinence and to take the men… Leaving Cape Palmas at the south, they did not attack the first Wedobo towns but marched through until the last town had been reached and suddenly fell upon the town of Julucan…Here they demanded young men and “went flogging men, women and children” indiscriminately. The people ran into the bush. Finding no young men they caught and secured

60 Ibid., 9.
12 of the old men of the town; demanded and received one bag of rice, one cow, three goats, and £10.00 sterling for their food. From Jalatuen the procession moved onto Gbanga. It was midnight and the rain had been falling. Soldiers surprised the chief and the town people of Gbanga by dragging them from their huts, throwing them to the ground, and flogging them with whips. Chief Marten asked: What be this matter? Be Fernando Po palava? The first men gone, 500. Why you no let me know you come for more?...The long procession then left the country, going by way of Wedabo Beach to Garroway, then to Harper. The old men and the chiefs were flogged during the march. As added punishment, they were forced to carry a goat in their outstretched arms and forbidden to put the animal either on their heads or shoulders. The hostages were delivered to Supr. Yancy in Harper, and at first placed in jail for detention until the 200 young men were delivered. While they were being held, chief Zubo’s son, a young man, came to the Superintendent and said that there were not 200 men left in the towns and that holding the old men was useless. He was placed in confinement with the old men. Later these old men were removed to Supt. Yancy’s farm at Webbo and set for clearing coffee and cassava, carrying sticks and making lines for his rubber trees…They remained at this about two months when the full 200 young men surrendered, thinking that the respected elders of the two towns might be released. Then Superintendent Yancy approached Zibo’s son saying: “You see you have 200. Just for this, I am going to send you to Fernando Po as headman over these men.” The 200 were shipped. Of the original 700 many died; others returned, but with very little money. 61

From this narrative, it is clear that the labor question was a pivotal one for the Liberian government and its agents, a question that the government and its patrons, including Firestone took aggressive measures to ensure went answered. That so many young men were forcefully taken from their villages to become laborers significantly impacted the population of those communities and also altered the social and economic structures of the affected communities, as evidenced in Chief Jeh’s refusal to provide the additional 200 men demanded by Superintendent Yancy. 62 That agents of the government paid no attention to the ramifications of their recruitment practices for local communities, speaks to the fact that the hinterland was viewed as a reservoir for forced cheap labor and the population not considered an intrinsic part of the country.

The Commission’s investigation also concluded that the Liberian government was not only guilty of recruiting forced labor for foreign use, but also guilty of recruiting

61 Ibid., 30-32.
62 Ibid., 30.
forced laborers to work on governmental projects such as the construction of roads, providing inadequate food for workers and heavy taxation and fines for chiefs if labor quotas were not met. In testimonies given before the Commission at Kakata on April 30, 1930, a witness explained the harsh realities of working on governmental road projects: “We want to go somewhere else to stay now. This work we do it,- if we don’t they beat us with that whip. When we tell the Paramount Chief he said what he can do. All the little children you see the Vai people got, when they fine us we pawn them to the Vai people to get the money.”63 The Americo-Liberians did not introduce pawning in Liberia; the practice was already in existence there. However, the pawning of children was exacerbated by the high demand of labor imposed by the government and its agents.

Whether or not the government had intended it, children pawned to pay labor fines to the government ended up as slaves, resulting in broken families in the process, especially if parents could not repay their debts. In an aggressive labor recruiting territory like Liberia, where heavy fines were a mechanism for acquiring forced labor, the latter seems plausible. Pertaining to the issue of slavery in Liberia, the Commission concluded that “[a]lthough classic slavery carrying the idea of slave markets and slave dealers no longer exists as such in the Republic of Liberia, slavery as defined by the 1926 Anti-Slavery Convention does exist in so far as inter-and intra-tribal domestic slavery exists. In addition, pawning is also recognized in the social economy of the Republic.”64 While the Commission did not find the government and its agents guilty of operating slave markets, it was blunt about the issue of slavery in its findings for labor recruitment outside the country.

63 Ibid., 86.
64 Ibid., 133.
The Commission finds that a large proportion of the contract laborers shipped to Fernando Po and French Gabon from the southern counties of Liberia have been recruited under conditions of criminal compulsion scarcely distinguishable from slave raiding and slave trading, and frequently by misrepresenting the destination.  

Since the government received a dollar per head for each worker sent to Fernando Po, which in 1925 brought in twenty-two thousand dollars, it is clear that government labor recruiters were driven solely by economic incentives and utilized whatever method they could, even if their means of compulsion were similar to those used to recruit slaves. Workers were not seen as humans, but as a means to an economic end. Most of the young men recruited to work on Fernando Po’s cocoa-producing plantations were taken from the coastal Grebo and Kru ethnic groups and were therefore referred to as the “Kru boys.” As a result of this levy, the youth population of the coastal towns was severely depleted.

The Commission was not only concerned with the forced labor and exploitation of indigenous laborers for overseas clients of the Liberian government, it also investigated allegations of forced labor and exploitation at the Firestone Rubber Company plantation. The opening of the Firestone one million acre plantation in 1925 generated much criticism of forced labor and slavery and was thus investigated by the Commission. The Commission’s investigation not only brought to national and international attention the harsh labor practices of the Firestone rubber plantation, but also had strong implications involving the loss of land by the local population. The testimony provided by one of the

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65 Ibid., 134.
67 Sundiata, Black Scandal: America and the Liberian Labor Crisis 1929-1936, 1.
inhabitants of Kakata to the Commission about Firestone illustrates the impact and significance of Firestone acquiring land to open their plantation, “This year we will have no rice because Firestone has taken our land… We got nothing when Firestone took our land… We don’t know of white people Firestone, but the piece of ground we had Firestone took it and we have no place to work now.”

The impact of the massive loss of indigenous land for agricultural production is significant in that rice was and is the staple food of Liberia; the people of the hinterland depended on agriculture for their daily subsistence needs. The loss of farm land affected their food supply, and therefore their very survival. As in Liberia, the loss of indigenous land is a common feature of settler colonies such as Kenya, South Africa, and the United States. In contrast to those colonies, however, Liberia’s alienation of land was by its own government to a big company by concessionary agreement, rather than by a foreign colonial government. Nonetheless, the consequences were as harmful to most Liberians as those experienced by, for instance, subjects of the Congo Free State.

While the massive loss of indigenous land was significant, the exploitation of their labor was a key feature of Firestone economic initiatives in the country and therefore the primary focus of the Commission’s investigation. That the Liberian government had signed a contract with Firestone, agreeing to supply its labor force for the rubber plantation, would lead the government to increase its control over the indigenous population. As stated in the Commission’s report, “With the signing of the agreement it became apparent that this was the instrument intended to be used as a safeguard to the Government, both in establishing and maintaining its control over the

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hinterland population which had not been hitherto exposed to any contact with modern industrial organization. Thus, through the introduction of the new labor regime— the use of overseers, headmen and managers—indigenous workers would be pushed further into the capitalist machine, where their physical movement, activities and lives would be structured and controlled for maximizing profits by Firestone and its beneficiaries, including the Liberian elite. The exploitation of African labor by Western companies was critiqued by Buell, when he asserted that, “If the continent of Africa becomes covered with vast European concessions as the only form of industrial enterprise, the African would soon—if indeed he is not already in some areas—become a serf to European capitalism.” Firestone not only exploited indigenous labor but also became influential in shaping the Liberian government’s policies.

The Commission’s investigation into the labor practices of Firestone revealed that compulsory labor and lack of wages were common features of the Firestone plantation. A major complaint of laborers to the investigators was that they worked long hours and did not receive wages for their labor. According to the Commission, “If it were a matter of wages for the laborer, the situation would not be regarded as so serious. The benefits, however, appears to accrue almost entirely to the interior officials.” Ironically, although the Commission received many testimonies from Firestone plantation workers, in which they complained about both the harsh labor recruiting methods of governmental agents, as well as the lack of wages they received for their work, at the end of their investigation the Commission’s findings were surprisingly favorable to Firestone, with all

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69 Ibid., 123.
the responsibility for the exploitation of indigenous labor being placed on the shoulders of the Liberian government. Pertaining to Firestone,

The commission finds that labor employed for private purposes on privately owned plantations has been impressed for this service on the authority of high Government officials; that there is no evidence that the Firestone Plantations Company consciously employs any but voluntary labor on its leased rubber plantation. But this, however, was not always the case when recruiting was subject to Government regulations, over which the company had little control; that all the company’s laborers are free to terminate their employment at will. 72

The assertion made by the Commission that “[t]here is no evidence that the Firestone Plantation Company consciously employs any but voluntary labor” reflects the inherent bias of the League of Nations’ investigation in the country. The Firestone Company did have control over the Liberian government and its policies since it had advanced several loans to the government and relied heavily on its recruiting efforts for their labor supply, contrary to the Commission’s claim that the Company had little control over the Liberian government.

The fact that the Commission was deliberate in rendering a guilty verdict against the Liberian government and its labor recruiters for engaging in forced labor for private, governmental projects, as well as to Fernando Po and French Gabon, while simultaneously ignoring the harsh labor practices of Firestone, suggests that the League’s investigation into the issues of forced labor and slavery in Liberia was not entirely a humanitarian initiative. Instead, it seems to have been intended in part to cut off the supply of laborers to work outside the country, which would subsequently have generated more workers for Firestone. The argument of American imperialism as being one motive

72 Ibid., 134.
for the investigation of forced labor and slavery in Liberia is convincing, especially when one looks at the fact that one of the recommendations made by the Commission at the end of its investigation was that the five district commissioners in the hinterland be fired because they are “dishonest, corrupt, and backward” and should be replaced with a commissioner who is “skilled, honest, and fair-minded.” And who might this be? “He should, we think, be either European or American.” The discourse of Western “superiority” and African “backwardness” was used by the League of Nations to intervene in the issues of forced labor and slavery in Liberia, maintaining that if left alone, Africans were “incapable” of solving their problems, hence the constant need for Western intervention. Moreover, the automatic “he” as the proposed new commissioner for the hinterland, illustrates the inherent bias against and exclusion of women from the public sphere, which in the early to mid-twentieth century was still the norm in the West.

Although the findings of the Commission forced President Charles D. B. King and Vice President Yancy, Superintendent of Maryland to resign, and called for international administrators to be sent to the country, their findings did little to improve the working conditions and status of those most affected, and it only strengthened and further solidified the powers of the ruling elite. Sundiata asserts,

> Sedition laws imposed during the 1930s identified dissent with external subversion, and Barclay was able to solidify his position by pointing out the danger dissent presented to the entrenched power of the elite. The crisis of the thirties was a challenge and response situation in which the Liberian executive responded by strengthening its power.\(^\text{74}\)

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\(^{73}\)Ibid., 141-142.  
Included in the sedition laws of the 1930s was a law that said that anyone who provided information about governmental activities to foreigners would be jailed for three to seven months. Such a law was a direct response to and warning from the government to the chiefs and workers who had cooperated with the Commission’s investigations.

Moreover, although the League of Nations had reportedly investigated the reports of slavery and forced labor in Liberia as a “humanitarian” effort, the results of their investigation did very little to positively impact the lives of those affected by the harsh economic practices of the government and Firestone. For instance, the names of chiefs, workers and the towns in which they resided, and who testified against the government and its labor agents were included in their reports and made available to the Liberian government and the international community. Consequently, the government retaliated against those who had cooperated with the Commission’s investigation by killing chiefs and some workers, thereby furthering its control over rural territories. Moreover, although the Commission had published its findings at the end of their investigation in 1930, the report failed to publicize the inhumane living and working conditions of workers on the Firestone plantation beyond the lack of fair wages. Thus, the minimization of Firestone’s culpability in the exploitation of workers in the Commission’s report in part, enabled the Company, with the cooperation of the Liberian government, to continue its exploitation of rural laborers, with impunity.

The brief life histories of two informants recorded on November 10, 2009 in Monrovia further illustrate the social and material realities under which workers lived and worked on the plantation and also demonstrate that the Commission’s assertion that the Firestone Rubber Plantation did not engage in forced labor and nonpayment of wages

was grossly inaccurate. They both lived and worked on the Firestone plantation at various points in their lives. The first informant, whom I will refer to as Mary was born in 1924 and was eighty-five at the time of the interview. She recounts her experiences of life as a non-waged cook on the Firestone plantation from 1939 to 1942:

I was about fifteen when I was taken away from my home in Zorzor, Lofa, to go and work on Firestone plantation by armed men. Before being taken, I worked on our family rice and cassava farm with my mother; she was a very good farmer and performed a lot of the work. She was also part of a female farming network and they helped each other during various phases of the planting and harvesting seasons... When we reached the big farm, I saw a lot of people working... I will never forget the site of the female quarter. A number of small, small huts were all crowded together. In the hut I was taken to, there were no beds or other furniture in the room, just a mat was on the floor and five of us had to sleep on it. Sometimes when it rained, we got wet since the thatched roof was leaking, it was really bad. The first month was really hard for me. I missed my family a lot! I also missed the warm cover cloth my grandmother had made for me when it would rain and we were wet and cold.

Pertaining to my work, I worked as a cook. Almost all the women worked as cooks. However, I did hear that earlier on, women were involved with the planting of the rubber trees and helped with the weeding, but I never did that... I was always in the kitchen. Working in the kitchen was very hard... we had to cook a lot of food for countless people. We awoke every day at 2am and did not get done with all the cooking, serving of the food and washing the dishes until around 8pm. We were always tired, but we had to be strong because if you got sick, what would you do? No medicine, no time...everyone was busy all the time. I mean, I was very lucky; I never got sick in the six years I was there. God really took care of me, but not everyone was lucky... some got sick and died. Burns were common in the kitchen. We were always in there, so accidents were always happening. You see, what made it bad was we were never paid for all that hard work. No one ever give me money or anything. Maybe some of the women got paid or received something, but I know that none of the women in my quarter got a penny because we were always talking about how we had nothing.76

Mary’s account of her family, capture, and experiences on the Firestone plantation sheds light on several important issues. First, her discussion of the centrality of her mother to the success of her family farming activities further demonstrates the critical role African women played in agriculture. In pre-colonial African societies, Liberia included, labor

and tasks were performed based on gender. Based on this practice, women were mostly responsible for agriculture and did most of the labor intensive work associated with farming while men did the clearing. According to Margaret Jean Hay, “Women were responsible for house work and stored and cared for their food supply. In addition, they did most of the planting, weeding, and harvesting of crops, and cleaned and repaired the walls and surfaces of the houses and granaries.”77 It is no surprise then that Mary’s mother would have relied on a female farming network to help with farm labor. Female farming networks were very important in that it decreased the amount of work a woman and her family would have to perform, considering that women were also responsible for performing household tasks.78

Second, her account of being forcefully taken from her mother and the anguish, pain and loneliness that caused her resonates with some of the accounts provided by other African women and men who met the same fate when they were forcefully taken to work on colonial plantations and other projects. No case in the history of colonial Africa is more brutal than the atrocities committed against Congolese women, men and children by King Leopold II of Belgium. In King Leopold’s Ghost, Hochschild documents the crimes of the Belgian army against the Congolese people for refusing to collect wild rubber or to work on colonial plantations. Ilanga, a Congolese slave survivor recounts this story of the day she was captured:

We were all busy in the fields hoeing our plantations, for it was the rainy season, and the weeds sprang quickly up, when a runner came to the village saying that a large band of men was coming, that they all wore red caps and blue cloth, and carried guns and long

knives…. Three or four came to our house and caught hold of me, also my husband Oleka and my sister Katinga. We were dragged into the road, and were tied together with cords about our necks, so that we could not escape… We then set off marching very quickly.\textsuperscript{79}

Ilanga explained further that her husband had been stabbed to death after six days when he refused to continue walking and carrying the goat they had given him.\textsuperscript{80} Besides the beatings and killings of some Congolese who refused to work or migrate to colonial rubber plantations, the hands and feet of women, men and children were commonly cut off as punishment for not collecting enough rubber.

Although in the case of Liberia there is no evidence that such atrocities were carried out on workers on the Firestone plantation, the use of forced labor and the inhumane treatment workers were subjected to, is also similar to the experiences of workers in settler colonies such as South Africa. The account provided by John, who was seventy-eight at the time he was interviewed about his experiences as a contract laborer on Firestone, sheds further light on the exploitation of indigenous labor:

When I turned eighteen, Papa and Mama agreed that it would be good for me also to go and work for Firestone. You see, since my brother left, we had not heard from him, so my mother told me to find him when I got there so we could return home together. In those days, transportation was very scarce, so we had to walk a lot…When we did find transportation, we took it. What little money Papa had, he had given it to me. I do not remember exactly how much it was, but it helped a lot on my journey. The other boys I was travelling also had a bit of cash and so we shared it with each other. People were also very kind to us. When we arrived at Firestone, I was very surprised to see how big it was, I had never seen anything like this before. Once on the plantation, I was taken to see a man who was either in his forties or early fifty. He introduced himself as one of the overseers on the plantation. He explained that I had to sign a contract to work on the plantation. I stated to him that I could not read or write and so he asked me for my name and wrote it on the contract. He explained that my meals would be provided as

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 133.
well as housing. About my wage, he explained that it would be discussed later. I did not push the subject because he was older and I did not want him to think I was disrespectful. My mother always told me to respect my elders and so I agreed that when he was ready, we would discuss my wage.

Daily life and work on the plantation was extremely hard. We were always cold during the night, especially when it rained. The cover cloths we had were too thin, so they did very little to keep us warm...we always had a cough. The meal I was informed I would be receiving on my first day was hardly enough, I never felt full... I was always hungry. Working on a rubber plantation is hard work, especially since everything was done by hand. First, we woke up very early in the morning, at the crack of dawn, when dew was still on the grass and it was very cold. We would not return to bed until way past ten in the night. I worked different jobs on the plantation-planting new rubber trees, weeding, but my primary job was tapping rubber. Women were never allowed to tap; only men did. Tapping is very hard work. For tapping, we used a sharp knife-like tool with a wooden handle. The end of the metal was shaped like a hook, which was used to the rubber tree while the tapper made a straight cut crossed the tree.

The white milk that would flow from the tree was collected into the cup attached below the tree. The tool was extremely uncomfortable. Holding the wooden handle with our bare hands for sixteen hours a day tapping, caused our hands to bleed a lot. Blisters would form and burst, which caused more pain and made it hard to work, but you had to... Someone was always watching you. Calluses were also a big problem. I used to cut them from my palm as if I were peeling a mango, that’s how terrible they were... But look at my palm...I still have tapper’s hands at seventy-eight although I have not tapped in over forty years. With all of this suffering and pain, we were barely paid. When we were paid, it was only a few dollars for all that hard work. With what little we were sometimes given, we had to buy things like soap and other small, small things from the store on the plantation, so they took everything... I was never able to save a penny the entire ten years I worked on the plantation.81

John’s account of the demanding workload workers had to complete on the plantation is substantiated by a 1953 company report which confirmed that “Tappers on the Firestone plantation set out to work each day at sunrise and tapped 250 to 300 rubber trees a piece.”82 In a 1926 letter to President Charles D. B. King, Harvey S. Firestone wrote that:

> From the beginning, the company was careful not to disrupt customs and practices which had existed for centuries among the natives. Native workers were employed in full cooperation with tribal chiefs...We desire to point out to the government again that the success of our development in Liberia is largely dependent upon the organization of a permanent and contented labor force. This can only be done through free and

81 Interview with former worker from the Firestone Plantation. Paynesville Redlight, November 9, 2009.
unrestricted employment and upon terms and conditions which are agreeable to the laborers themselves. 83

Clearly, the working conditions on the plantation described by Mary and John contradict Mr. Firestone assertion that initiatives undertaken by his company were in compliance with indigenous laws and practices. He failed to acknowledge the annual labor quota of 50,000 workers the Liberian government had to supply his plantation with. Moreover, as shown by the 1930 League of Nations investigation into the issue of slavery in the country, local chiefs were forced to supply these workers and failure to do so often resulted in harsh punishment.

The low wages and exploitation of indigenous labor by the settlers in Liberia is not unique since in other settler colonies including South Africa, Zimbabwe and Kenya such exploitation of indigenous labor was a common phenomenon of the colonial order. Writing about the demand for African labor in colonial Kenya, Hay argues that:

The development of labor-intensive plantation agriculture in the white highlands after 1908, the construction of roads and railways, the need for African soldiers and porters in the First World War; all accelerated the demand for African labor, though this demand was not accompanied by a willingness to pay reasonable wages. 84

Thus, it is clear that the exploitation of African women and men and the refusal to pay fair wages was a common feature of colonial economic practices, including the black settler colony of Liberia.

Another commonality that exists between the experiences of the two accounts given by informants working on the Firestone plantation in Liberia and colonial Africa is the gender dynamic of the colonial enterprise. First, although John’s wages as a tapper

83 Ibid., 7.
were extremely low and infrequent, his female counterpart Mary received no compensation for her work as a cook, because her labor was not considered “work” by the plantation management. Moreover, the exclusion of women from working as tappers (waged economy) reflected the Western notions of womanhood of the time, where men were considered “superior” and women “inferior,” hence women’s work was not considered work. In her account of the impact of French colonial economic practices on the Baule women of the Ivory Coast, Etienne asserts that

Just as the colonial administration—when it demanded that more cotton be produced—had addressed its demands to men, early and later agricultural experts and their male extension agents, when they introduced new techniques, addressed their teachings to men. It is, therefore, not surprising that cash-crops became the man’s domain.  

The French colonial favoritism involving Baule men even while simultaneously exploiting them served as a reflection of Western patriarchal values—women as subordinate to men and therefore incapable of performing manly tasks. The exclusion of women as wage earners, such as tappers on the Firestone plantation, was one of the many forms of discrimination that faced Liberian women, reflecting the deep-seated patriarchal practices exhibited by the Company. As will be shown in future chapters, the economic, social and political practices of the Americo-Liberian government would have an adverse effect on the economic, educational and political opportunities for Liberian women.

Another important similarity that exists between the experiences of Mary and John, and with the broader experiences of colonized women in Africa, is the centrality of both of their mothers in agricultural production. The vital role their mothers played in

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performing the vast majority of agricultural tasks such as planting, weeding and harvesting of crops further illustrate the point made elsewhere that, prior to the imposition of colonial rule in Africa, women performed the vast majority of agricultural labor. That fifty thousand laborers had to be recruited annually by the Americo-Liberian government to work on the Firestone plantation and that such workers were overwhelmingly men, would have further exacerbated the workload of women on their farms. The impact of colonialism on the gender division of labor in Africa is well documented. For example, analyzing the consequences of colonialism for the gender division of labor among the Shona women of Zimbabwe, Schmidt argues that “As men left the rural areas to enter wage employment…[a]n increasing burden of agricultural labor fell on women’s shoulders. Tasks that had previously been accomplished with the help of other household members were, by the 1930s, often done by women alone.”

With the male help they once received mostly gone, women were now responsible for all agricultural work, including the clearing of the land.

The exploitation of indigenous labor and slavery on the Firestone plantation and the impact of such practices on the gender division of labor were not the only consequences of the Americo-Liberian governmental policies suffered by the indigenous population. The rural areas (interior of the country) became a reservoir for cheap and forced labor, creating an urban/rural divide. Very little to no investment was made in schools, hospitals and other economic infrastructure in the interior of the country by the government, a fact that remains today and can be attributed in part to the onset of the country’s civil war, beginning in 1989. The profits from the labor in the interior and the

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resources of the country were concentrated in the capital, Monrovia, and were used to further enrich the ruling elites, their families and their clients, including the Firestone Rubber Company. Such economic fragmentation significantly impacted all facets of Liberian society.

Educationally, the vast majority of rural communities lacked basic primary school education and health care services. Consequently, only a small percentage of the Liberian population was educated. In fact, the only national university in the country, The University of Liberia, was built in the capital, which meant that opportunities to attend college were mostly available to those residing in Monrovia. Very little investment was made in the interior of the country where the vast majority of the population lived and worked. The economic, social and political decisions made by the Americo-Liberian government caused discontent among indigenous communities and would help garner support against their government in the 1980 coup led by Samuel Doe, who would become the first indigenous president of the country.

**Resistance against the Americo-Liberian government: the political background**

For over one hundred years the Americo-Liberian political party, the True Whig Party, ruled Liberia with an iron fist and kept the indigenous populations isolated from political participation, and socio-economic growth. The True Whig Party was the only legal political party in the country and as such, faced no opposition. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the indigenous population fiercely resisted their oppressors in the same way as the freed slaves had resisted slavery in America. As noted by Omonijo,
“History has been largely silent on the heroic resistance by the local population to the new system of overlordism. At various times, the indigenous Liberians fought their new rulers who had succeeded largely in robbing them of their political rights.”

Much resistance came from the Kru, the Gola, and the Grebo, who fought vigorously against their loss of land to the Americo-Liberians. Furthermore, the passing of the Hut Tax law, which required indigenous people to pay taxes on whatever properties they owned, only led to increased resistance against the government.

Dispute over land was a major source of indigenous resistance against the settler communities in Liberia. According to Liebenow, “The settlers and their agents did not appreciate that the concept of “sale” of land had no meaning in societies where land was distributed communally on the basis of usufructuary right of occupancy rather than individual private freehold.”

The fact that the settlers did not understand or take the opportunity to learn about the structures and workings of indigenous societies, would subsequently lead to wars between the inhabitants of Liberia and the settlers. In 1857, for example, the Grebo of coastal Liberia declared war on settlers’ communities because of the appropriation of their land. The Grebo not only sought to protect their land and sovereignty, but also to maintain the autonomy they had had over the coastal territory they occupied, which enabled them to trade with the British, French and Dutch. Besides the war of 1857, the Grebo and the settlers would engage in a series of battles, including the battle of 1875.

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On October 10, 1875, the government launched a major attack against the Grebo people, for rendering an 1834 land treaty invalid. The Grebo claimed that the land ceded to the Liberian government was much smaller than what the government had appropriated. In 1873, various Grebo communities had established The Grebo Reunited Confederation after years of conflict amongst themselves, vowing to live in peace with each other. Thus, when the government launched its attack, the Confederation was able to summon ten thousand warriors to fight against the government. Realizing the sheer strength and level of Grebo mobilization, the government requested help from the U.S. and was able to win the war with the help of the U.S. warship *Alaska*.\(^91\) Pertaining to the significance of the war Sawyer asserts,

> The war of 1875 brought to the fore the worst fears of the settler authorities. It was the most serious challenge faced by the settler state since independence. The strength of the combined Grebo forces and the solidarity manifested elsewhere in many indigenous communities provided a sobering lesson for thoughtful settlers.\(^92\)

As is the common experience of colonial Africa, the more sophisticated weapons in the end proved to be too much for indigenous resistance.

Land was not the only source of indigenous resistance against the Americo-Liberian government. Another major grievance was the hut tax, which the people believed to be too excessive and oppressive. One example of such resistance was the Kru War of 1915. In 1915 war broke out between the Kru and the Americo-Liberian government. The Kru had risen in rebellion due to the heavy taxation the government

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\(^{91}\) Ibid., 134-136.  
\(^{92}\) Ibid., 137.
had imposed upon them and the continuous exploitation of their labor.\textsuperscript{93} When a group of customs officers arrived to collect taxes, they were attacked and killed by Kru rebels, thereby starting the Kru War, which lasted till 1916. The Americo-Liberian government often ignored the true causes of such armed revolts, often attributing them to the nature of the indigenous people. According to Sundiata, “The official Liberian reports did not attribute troubles on the Kru Coast to the seditious activities of outside agitation and to the desire of the people not to pay tax.”\textsuperscript{94} By ignoring the fundamental causes of indigenous resistance (heavy taxation, forced labor on governmental projects, etc), the Liberian government was refusing to become introspective, a decision which cost them dearly.

The war continued from 1915 to 1916 and it was only with the military assistance of the United States that the Liberian government was able to end it.\textsuperscript{95} Although the weaponry of the Kru proved to be no match for the sophisticated guns provided to the government, in some cases, the indigenous people scored some victories over the government. To this end Liebenow asserts,

On occasion, however, the superior skills of the indigenous people in guerrilla warfare, enhanced by arms secured from outside sources, tipped the scales temporarily in favor of the tribal element. In such cases, Liberian authority was established only after many years of fighting and considerable loss of life and property by both sides. The Gola people in the early period and the Grebo and the Kru as late as the decades of the present century are outstanding examples of indigenous resistance to Liberian occupation.\textsuperscript{96}

\textsuperscript{93} Sundiata, \textit{Black Scandal: America and the Liberian Labor Crisis 1929-1936}, 18.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 131.
\textsuperscript{95} Liebenow, \textit{Liberia: The Quest for Democracy}, 18.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 27. Although Liebenow’s analysis of local resistance against Americo-Liberians demonstrates indigenous agency, his use of the term “tribal” when discussing various ethnic groups is problematic. Historically, the term “tribe” has been used to construct Africans as “primitive” and “barbaric” people, divided into irreconcilably hostile “tribes” who fought each other until pacified by “civilized” European rule. The term is also vague and does not provide any specifics on Africa’s varied ethnic groups.
Resistance against the Americo-Liberian government in one form or another, continued into the 1930s. Moreover, the resistance of the indigenous groups against the settler communities illustrates that the conquest of Liberia was not an easy task for the Americo-Liberians, as the indigenous people fought to maintain their sovereignty.

With the election of William V. S. Tubman in 1944, the tide of progress for the indigenous people would begin to change, although slowly. According to Liebenow, “It has only been within the present century, indeed, within the presidency of William V.S. Tubman that the tribal person has had a realistic chance of participating in the government of his own country.” As part of his program for the hinterland, President Tubman implemented a unification policy and the ‘Open Door Policy.’ In 1946, his unification policies, the first in the history of the country, finally granted the hinterland the right to send representatives to the national legislature in Monrovia to represent the interests of their people. Prior to 1946, indigenous delegates had to deposit the sum of $100.00 United States dollars to the Liberian government in order to observe the proceedings of the national legislature and had no voting rights. The right to vote, for the first time in Liberian history was extended to indigenous men and women, although such right was contingent upon property ownership and payment of taxes.

Furthermore, in an attempt to implement his unification policies, President Tubman outlawed the ethnic label “Americo-Liberian,” arguing that the label was divisive and did little to unite the people of Liberia. However, the change of label was one thing, while genuine social, economic and political reforms were another. For,

although President Tubman had stated that the ethnic label of Americo-Liberian was counterproductive to his attempts to unite the country, he still, nevertheless, believed in the “supremacy” of the ruling elites and did everything he could to maintain, protect and further the interests of the Liberian aristocracy. To this end, Hlophe asserts that, “Regardless then of the amount of rhetoric and formalism on unity, anti-sectionalism, and representation of the state legislature, the access to the resources present in the Liberian society continued to be disproportionately distributed, with the Americo-Liberian family stratum possessing the largest piece of the pie.”\textsuperscript{100} It was the uneven distribution of national resources and the lack of access to gainful employment and opportunities that most concerned the Liberian people, not so much the outlawing of ethnic phrases, although such outlawing could have been of tremendous value had the government been genuinely interested in nation building. Today, like then, the politicization of ethnicity continues to be a threat and an impediment to the concept of national unity in Liberia.

In the 1950s, President Tubman also implemented his ‘Open Door Policy.’ This policy opened up trade and allowed the movement of goods freely from the hinterland to Monrovia. His economic policies also allowed and encouraged more foreign investment.\textsuperscript{101} As part of his integration and economic policies, President Tubman also facilitated the building of some schools in rural areas and most importantly, under his administration some students from rural communities were able to attend the University of Liberia,\textsuperscript{102} which, prior to his presidency had remained exclusively the school for the children of ruling elites only; when an indigenous person had lived with or been adopted by a descendant of Americo-Liberians and been given their name were they able to attend

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 276.
\textsuperscript{101} Boley, Liberia: The Rise and fall of the First Republic, 64.
\textsuperscript{102} Sawyer, The Emergence of Autocracy in Liberia, 207.
the university. With all of the social and economic improvements President Tubman made, he remained, however, a very vigilant man—always suspicious of “plots” to overthrow his administration. He did everything to ensure he remained in power.

According to Boley,

Loyalty to the President was the order of the day. Any opposition, real or imagined, was mercilessly crushed in the manner characteristic of Tubmanism. Family connections were a powerful determining factor in political upward mobility and consolidation of a force loyal to the President. Families or individuals whose loyalty to the President was questionable were often callously displaced. A cohort of Public Relations Officers and a chain of Security Agencies—the Nation Bureau of Investigation (NBI), the Executive Action Bureau (EAB), the Special Security Service (SSS) and the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS)—were organized and created to assist the President.103

With the creation of these national security agencies, President Tubman was able to spy on and monitor citizens he viewed as opposition, since the True Whig Party was still the only legal party in the country. He also spied on university students, whom he severely distrusted as anti-government elements.104 By opening up the hinterland for trade, providing more educational opportunities for indigenous people and extending the right to vote to indigenous inhabitants, President Tubman hoped to silence the masses and to prove to the world that his administration was committed to improving the status of the indigenous population, in order to counter the international disrepute caused for Liberia by the League of Nations investigations into the issues of forced labor and slavery in the country in 1930.105 Ironically, Tubman’s approval of the formation of labor unions, opportunities for rural students to attend college in Monrovia and the opening up of trade

103 Boley, Liberia: The Rise and fall of the First Republic, 66.
104 Ibid., 77.
in the country to appease the international community soon backfired on him, as each of these groups began to protest against a corrupt and oppressive state.

Since 1949, a year after Tubman’s administration had signed the international treaty regulating Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize, trade unions have operated in Liberia. Some of these unions included the Firestone Rubber Tappers Association, The Labor Congress of Liberia and the Congress of Industrial Organizations. But, although President Tubman had allowed the formation of unions to avoid criticism from the International Labor Organization (ILO), he utilized other mechanisms to ensure their failure. Thus, according to Liebenow,

\[\text{[t]he Liberian government has not opposed unions per se; they have opposed only effective unions. One device for keeping unions ineffective has been control of their leadership…Moreover, to prevent the possible consolidation of union power, the government in 1966 specifically forbade the formation of unions that would represent the interests of both agricultural and industrial workers. In addition to controlling the leadership and organizational structure of unions in Liberia, the government has pulled their teeth by outlawing their ultimate weapons: strikes and boycotts.}\]

Regardless of governmental constraints, in the 1960s, there were a series of labor strikes at the Firestone Rubber Plantation, LAMCO iron mining operations in Nimba County and at the Goodrich Rubber Plantation. At each of these locales, the grievances of the strikers were the same—low wages and poor working conditions. The government responded by unleashing the military against strikers; some were killed and wounded, while others were arrested and imprisoned. The use of the military to suppress those government deemed to be troublemakers, had by the 1960s become a common weapon

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106 Ibid., 87-89.
107 Ibid., 88-89.
108 Ibid., 90.
employed by the government while simultaneously protecting the interests of the bourgeoisie and their clients, including the Firestone Rubber Company. The reaction of the government to the wave of strikes in the 1960s received criticism from the ILO, something President Tubman had hoped to avoid by allowing the formation of unions in the first place.\footnote{Ibid., 91.} Besides the suppression of unions, the President would also target other civilians who dared question his government critically. One such target was students, in particular university student activists. Throughout the tenure of his presidency, Tubman viewed these students with disdain, often labeling them as communists and anti-government and imprisoning them.

**Student Activism**

Even this cursory history of student activism in Liberia must include analysis of the cultural environment under which the youth perceived themselves and were perceived by those in authority. In Liberia, as in many parts of the world, the dominant ideology says that youth are to be seen and not heard. They are groomed to be involved with their schoolwork and not politics. Moreover, they are expected to be obedient at all times and to all authorities without questioning.\footnote{Interview with former student from the University of Liberia. Paynesville Redlight, February 23, 2009.} Adults, including parents, teachers, and others in positions of power have had the absolute power to discipline them at will without any legal repercussions, even in instances of gross violence against them, as will be demonstrated throughout subsequent chapters. Such an attitude towards youth is still a major problem, even in post-civil war Liberia. Yet in the midst of grave obstacles and
challenges, youth activism, in particular university students’ activism, with the support and solidarity of faculty members, became the most critical avenue of change in Liberia, beginning in the 1960s.

President Tubman’s ‘Open Door’ policies made it possible for people from the hinterland to travel from rural areas to Monrovia to engage in trade and other activities. Included in those who benefited particularly from such policies were rural students, mostly male. For the first time, those whose parents could afford to send their children to the University of Liberia could do so without changing their indigenous names to “civilized” names. In 1964, a report on the geographical origins of University of Liberia students indicated that 62% of the nearly two thousand students attending the University of Liberia came from communities outside Monrovia. This, of course, does not negate the fact that constitutional, economic and political discrimination against the indigenous population still remained the rule of the day. What the opening of the hinterland did in part for students was that it provided a common ground—the University of Liberia—for them to meet to discuss the different challenges and obstacles they experienced in their various locales and allowed for the formation of some unity between rural and urban students. Subsequently, several student organizations were created at the University of Liberia as well as nationally.

For example, The Federation of Liberian Youth (FLY) was created in the mid-1950s; the Liberia National Student Union (LNSU) in 1957; the University of Liberia Student Union (ULSU) and the Student Unification Party (SUP) in the 1960s; and a chapter of the Movement for Justice in Africa (MOJA) in 1973. The Progressive

111Ibid.
113Interview with former University of Liberia student activist, Paynesville Redlight, February 23, 2010.
Alliance of Liberia (PAL) founded by Barcus Matthew in 1978 would also come to play a critical role in student activism.\textsuperscript{114} While the agenda of each student organization varied, a commonality did exist in their mission statements: they were all concerned with changing the one-party system in Liberia and abolishing The True Whig Party as the sole party. They were also concerned with closing the urban and rural divide, and fostering social justice, peace, and academic freedom, and they sought legal redress whenever the rights of students were violated by the government.

Although the formation of university student organizations began in the 1950s, it was not until the 1960s that student activism became prominent. The wave of decolonization across Africa in the 1960s, protests against the Apartheid regime in South Africa, the struggle for civil rights in the United States by African-Americans, and the centrality of students in these struggles, all influenced university students to fight for change in Liberia and Africa at large. Moreover, students were also leading the charge for change because they were young, energetic and mostly males who did not have the responsibility of caring for a family and were therefore willing to take more risks.\textsuperscript{115} In the 1960s, for example, various student organizations led a series of protests in Monrovia denouncing French nuclear testing in the Sahara. They argued that the decision by the French to conduct nuclear tests in the Sahara was an expansion of European imperialism that devalued the lives of Africans and called on the Liberian government to condemn such actions.\textsuperscript{116} The Tubman administration was infuriated by the actions of the students and ordered their arrest. Many were arrested and imprisoned for fear that their actions could jeopardize the French-Liberian relationship.

\textsuperscript{114}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{115}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{116}Ibid.
Besides the arrest and imprisonment of student activists, the government accused students of being anti-government and communist. Below is a portion of an interview conducted with one of the key organizers of student led protests in the 1960s against French nuclear testing in the Sahara and against the Liberian government for its discriminatory policies against the majority-indigenous Liberians:

Like in the United States, we had our own form of McCarthyism in Liberia. Our McCarthies were spies hired by the government to infiltrate our organizations as members and were to report back to the government about our activities. Others were hired to follow key student organizers like myself. They were to provide reports to the government about where we went, who we were associating with, and were to collect whatever paper trash we threw away, so that they could be analyzed for “anti”-government sentiments and for our “support” of communism. Based on the gathering of such “intelligence,” many students were arrested and imprisoned by the government without trial. I vividly remember one of my own encounters with such government agents. It was about 9 am in the morning and I had just mailed off a letter to South Africa. You see, a week before, a small delegation of university students had come from South Africa to the University of Liberia to share further light on the apartheid regime, and the letter I had written to them was about our meetings and our commitment to standing with them in solidarity. As I made my way down the steps of the post office, I was called by name and approached by a well dressed man. I waited for him and inquired if I knew him and he nodded no. He stated that although I did not know him, he knew a lot about me, including my “anti-government activities.” I told him that he could not be more wrong. I stated that in fact, I, along with my colleagues, to the contrary were very pro-government. It was our belief in the power of government to create equal access to employment, education, healthcare and every other opportunity possible for all citizens of Liberia that motivated us to protest against the politics of exclusion that for so long had plagued the country. As if he had not heard what I just stated, he began to reprimand me. He told me that I should be ashamed of myself for the disgrace and humiliation my actions would bring to a prominent political family such as mine and that he was only warning me this time because he knew my parents and a key government official had sent him to warn me. As he turned to walk away, he turned back to me again and said in a very firm voice, “you need to focus on your studies and on getting a very good governmental job when you graduate, so leave the people business alone”! I was so surprised by all this. I mean, I knew the government was paranoid about our activism, but I had no idea they would go as far as searching our mails coming in and going out of the country. From that day forward, I, along with some of my colleagues began burning all of our paper trash and were very careful about what we wrote in letters, for fear that our words and ideas could be misinterpreted as communist and anti-government.117

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117 Interview with a former University of Liberia student activist. Paynesville Redlight, December 3, 2009.
The extent of government action to crack down on perceived communists—students and others who dared question its social, economic and political policies—not only illuminates the authoritarian nature of the Liberian government but also illustrates their efforts to exclude youth from actively participating in the shaping of national discourse about Liberia as a nation. Therefore, the warning, focus on your studies and leave the people’s business alone stated in the narrative speaks to the historical as well as contemporary cultural practice in Liberia that children are to be seen and not heard. Although university students were not children, socially, they were regarded as such. Subsequently, by involving themselves in politics, they were violating the dominant discourse of society and had to be dealt with accordingly.

While President Tubman, in the 1960s, claimed that the youth of Liberia were integral to the advancement of democracy in the country, his rhetoric was emptied and undermined by his actions. In his 1966 Independence Day speech, he stated:

We know within the framework of democracy we can build a just and brotherly society in which creative talents may be truly evoked and man may live in security, enjoy leisure and fruitful labor, in which the impulse to creative action and service will be stronger than the acquisitive impulse. We need to recruit the youth as well as all the citizens of the nation and acquaint them with the thousand year old struggle for political freedom, fire them with passion to preserve it and, still more, to use it to bring equality and fraternity to their fellows. We need to teach them that they must launch out with a firm determination to work, to face the problems that beset Liberia and the world, with cool and resolute minds, ready to live and die, so that the society in which freedom and justice reign supreme may emerge in that condition which makes it fit to be called a democracy.  

Contrary to his claims of the youth being of intrinsic value to the prosperity of the nation, President Tubman had a disdain for university students, in particular, whom he viewed as

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118 President Tubman’s Independence Day speech, Executive Mansion, July 26, 1966.
trouble makers and anti-government. In fact, not long after students had protested against the French nuclear testing in the Sahara, the government banned all student organizations for fear of communism and socialism.\textsuperscript{119} However, regardless of governmental bans, university students remained active in their quest for political, economic and social equality, and such activism gained prominence beginning in the 1970s. It would be credited for helping end one-hundred and thirty-three years of Americo-Liberian rule. University students became critical elements of change due partly to their geographical location of being in Monrovia. The Executive Mansion, Temple of Justice, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and other key governmental agencies are all located within five to ten minutes walk from the University of Liberia, which made it easier for students to stage protests.

Logistical issues such as bad road conditions, lack of transportation and resources made it difficult for rural students and other marginalized youth to travel to Monrovia for protests. Although such factors severely limited rural dwellers’ agitation against the corruption and injustices of the state, they were mere not bystanders, watching the changes that were occurring in Monrovia. In fact, it was their active participation in rallies and demonstrations that made it possible for university students to agitate. For example, when the Progressive Alliance of Liberia, Liberia National Student Union and other student organizations called on Liberians to demonstrate against the government’s attempt to increase the price of a bag of rice in 1979, it was the masses in the form of school teachers, wheelbarrow boys, market women and others who responded to their call.

\textsuperscript{119} Interview with a former student activist leader from the University of Liberia. Paynesville Redlight, December 3, 2009.
and took to the streets in protest. Many of these protesters were beaten, arrested and imprisoned, while others paid with their lives.

Although women played a fundamental role in protests, organizationally they were marginalized. The leadership of student organizations was dominated by men, with women in secretarial positions. At the University of Liberia, only 15% of the student population was females. 120 Although the university was founded in 1862, it was not until 1901 that women were first allowed to enroll at the institution. 121 Thus, the exclusion of women from attending the university for almost forty years demonstrates how engrained the Victorian ideology of womanhood was in the psyche of the ruling elites. Also, when the hinterland was opened, the majority of rural students who got the opportunity to attend the University of Liberia were males. The male privilege enjoyed by most students in part, accounts for the gender bias against women holding key positions in students’ organizations. Even the most progressive and liberal of student organizations such as ULSU and LNSU have both never elected a female to the office of President or Vice-President of their organizations. With the exception of a few women, including Esther Richards, former student activist at The University of Liberia, and Ellen Sirleaf Johnson, current president of Liberia and first female head of state in Africa, then, like now, politics in Liberia remains the domain of men.

In July of 1971, President Tubman passed away unexpectedly at the age of seventy-five at an eye clinic in London, England. His Vice-President of twenty years, William R. Tolbert became the nineteenth president of Liberia on July 23, 1971. 122 Like

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121 University of Liberia Register of Graduates 1866-1978.
President Tubman, Tolbert promised to unify the people of Liberia and to create equal opportunities for all. In his first inaugural address as president, Tolbert declared:

We seek a wholesome functioning society where merit, not favoritism, productivity, not influence and connection, selflessness, not selfish individualism, form the criteria for real distinction…Wholesome functioning society must express concrete concern for the poor and underprivileged, and must ensure security and protection for its citizens, and their freedom from fear and intimidation. It must guarantee opportunities for all, with the corresponding responsibility that all must be equally dedicated, as a prerequisite, to enjoyment of the benefits to be derived there from.\footnote{123}

The President’s call for the collective cooperation and hard work of the Liberian people were taken very seriously, especially by the marginalized sector of the population, since his economic plans, in part, focused on the development of the interior, which had been neglected except for the exploitation of indigenous labor and resources. With regards to the youth, he said they were his “precious jewels” and organized the first Youth Day, celebrated on October 29, 1973.\footnote{124} October 29\textsuperscript{th} is still acknowledged as Youth Day, although it is not a national holiday.

Although President Tolbert had promised equal economic and social opportunities for all Liberians, the vast majority of the Liberian people remained impoverished, while the elites and their patrons continued to become wealthy. To this end, Kieh asserts, \footnote{125}

[t]here were inequities in the distribution of wealth. For example, before the 1980s, members of the ruling class, constituting 4\% of the population, owned and controlled approximately 60\% of the wealth, whereas the subaltern classes, 96\% of the population, struggled over the remaining 40\%. By 1985, the expanded ruling class, comprising approximately 6\% of the population owned and controlled about 70\% of the national wealth.\footnote{125}

\footnote{123}President Tolbert’s first Inaugural Address, Executive Mansion July 23, 1971. 
\footnote{124}Boley, Liberia: The Rise and fall of the First Republic, 85.
\footnote{125}Kieh, The First Liberian Civil War: The Crisis of Underdevelopment, 104-105.
Hence, it was the continuous uneven distribution of national resources and the lack of viable economic, social and political opportunities for most Liberians, including the youth that became the rallying call of the people and propelled student activism to new heights and change in the 1970s. Students, at all levels, including secondary, were disconcerted by President Tolbert’s failed promises and their lack of economic opportunities. One such student was Joe Wylie, a junior at Charlotte Tolbert High School, who wrote a poem about his life as one of President Tolbert’s “precious jewels:”

*Am I a Precious Jewel?*

When I have to quit the countryside
To come to the city in search of education
Because no attention is paid to my village
In spite of the hut-tax my people pay
From year in to year out,
May I ask one question
Am I a precious jewel?

When education is not free
And books, uniforms, and school fees
Are more than I can afford
And I live in New Kru Town or Old road
And there is no bus to get me to school too,
May I ask you again, Sir;
Is there anything precious about me?

When I have to starve daily because I,
A self-supporting student,
Cannot afford a bag of rice,
When some of my starving brothers get
Jailed and killed because they have
To steal to escape death from starvation,
And you there, with your arms folded,
Saying or doing nothing about it,
Just building huge palaces
While a million bellies go empty
Am I your precious jewel?

When you give me, free of charge,
   To Western capitalists
   To make their super-profits
Which you share with them,
   Making you rich while I,
Whose sweat produces the wealth,
   Am impoverished and ignorant,
Think not that I am stupid
   I am not a precious jewel!126

Wylie’s poem not only illustrates his experiences and consciousness as a disadvantaged youth, it also represents the experiences of thousands of youth, who found themselves living in immense poverty without any attention being paid to their plight by the Liberian government. In fact, as Wylie’s poem shows, the government was as culpable in their oppression and subjugation as Firestone, since it was the government that had signed the labor recruitment contract. The exploitation of indigenous labor, including low wages and forced labor by Firestone and other western companies operating in the country, with the support and backing of the government were factors that Wylie not only understood, but lived daily as consequences of such governmental policies.

President Tolbert’s promise of a host of social reforms and his failure to deliver on them, including freedom of the press, ending governmental corruption, equal economic and political opportunities for all Liberians, increased students’ activism around the country and in particular at the University of Liberia for reasons discussed earlier such as the University’s close proximity to governmental institutions.

At the root of these protests were students from rural areas, who more often than not recruited the participation of students from elite families. Thus, according to Hlophe,

The strategy of involving members of ruling Americo-Liberian families in confrontations against the governing stratum in Liberia has been frequently resorted to by the indigenous technocratic radicals who were often at the bottom of most of these struggles. University student strikes and demonstrations, since the Hoff administration in 1972, often turned into pitched battles between the authorities and the children of the ruling families, who were pushed into conspicuous leadership positions by the predominantly indigenous-Liberian student body during periods of crisis. In the May 1972 student strike at the University of Liberia, a public statement was made by the Student Association, petitioning President Tolbert to redress their grievances against Dr. Advertus Hoff whose ‘…policies have create an atmosphere of fear, tension and intolerance with adverse effect on the climate of an institution of higher learning… and exemplified in every degree a dictatorial and reign of terror attitude in the administration of his office…’ This statement, however, was not signed by the indigenous-Liberian students who had drafted it and had instigated the strike, but by students from elite Americo-Liberian families who made up the committee for the statement. Among these were George Dunbar Knuckles, as secretary; Joseph Dennis, Esther Richards, C. Walker Brumskine, and Seward Cooper, as members; and Willard Russell and Amos C. Monger as chairpersons.127

The strategy of recruiting sympathetic members of an elite group, and or the adopting of elite names by marginalized peoples in their quest for equality and justice has been a recurring phenomenon in human history. For example, before and after the antebellum era in the United States, some enslaved and freed black women wrote articles and essays about the horrors of slavery and demanded equality, adopting white women’s names. Similarly, some women suffragists in the United States and England wrote about the need for women’s rights, using Anglo-Saxon male pseudonyms to take their case to the public. The recruiting of students from elite families to serve in key leadership positions whenever demands were being made to the university or to the government is demonstrative of their agency. Like some anti-slavery black women and white female

suffragist writers, indigenous students at the University of Liberia understood that their causes could be taken more seriously by members of the ruling stratum, if some of such members were vocal and outspoken about the injustices suffered by those marginalized.

Dr. Hoff, like all previous University of Liberia presidents, had been appointed to the post by the President of the Republic and in particular, university students were annoyed by some policies and practices of the Hoff administration. For example, among other things, he had attempted to introduce a policy banning the holding of hands between student couples on campus, and forbade co-ed dormitories. As a former University of Liberia student activist stated, “Dr. Hoff forgot that he was living in the twentieth century, at a time when young people were demanding major changes in the country and not in Victorian England. That he was concerned with trivial things such as the banning of holding of hands, shows how out of touch he was with critical issues that were important to us.”

Important to students’ protests against President Hoff, was their belief that Tolbert, a first cousin of Dr. Hoff, had appointed Hoff University president as another way of curbing their activism. This example of nepotism was only one among many and a subject of common critique against the ruling elites.

Revelation Magazine

By the beginning of 1973, President Tolbert’s “Precious Jewels” and other marginalized Liberians had not yet experienced any alleviation of economic hardships the president had promised to remedy in his presidential inaugural address speech in 1971.

As though the perpetual economic hardships of the Liberian people were not enough, the

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128 Interview with a former student activist from the University of Liberia, Paynesville Redlight, December 3, 2009.
president sought to control and to destroy every outlet for dissent. The government’s attitude towards freedom of speech and the press was dismissive. Although the First Amendment of the Liberian Constitution, a replica of the American Constitution, guarantees the right of freedom of speech and of the press to all its citizens, it was ignored by the president, just like those before him. Censorship became the rule of the day; any newspapers, journalists, students and others who dared question the failed policies of the president or wrote about the plight of the Liberian people were arrested and imprisoned.\textsuperscript{129} The imprisonment of journalists, students and other activists was a common practice. It was the government’s repression of freedom of speech and of the press that led some University of Liberia students to establish their own publication, a magazine entitled, \textit{The Revelation: “A Social, Political, Economic and Cultural Monthly”} in 1973.

The magazine was created to serve as an outlet for concerned Liberians to express their thoughts about the ills of Liberian society and to provide possible solutions for them at a time when the government was launching a series of attacks on freedom of speech and the press. According to Hlophe,

\begin{quote}
The launching of the radical bulletin, Revelation in June 1973 by Monrovia youths, and the founding of the Movement for Justice in Africa (MOJA), a radical youth organization on March 21\textsuperscript{st}, 1973 pushed the Liberian Student Movement a step further. MOJA and the Revelation were established in the same year and owed their existence to the radicalizing influence of some indigenous-Liberian faculty at the University of Liberia and the dominance of the student body by students from the Liberian interior.\textsuperscript{130}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{129} Interview with former student writer of \textit{the Revelation Magazine} Paynesville Redlight, January 5, 2010. \textsuperscript{130} Hlophe, \textit{Class, ethnicity and Politics in Liberia: A Class Analysis of Power Struggles in the Tubman and Tolbert Administrations from 1944-1975}, 238.
The influence of university professors on the raising of students’ critical consciousness cannot be overstated. It was in their classrooms and under the *palava hut*, that concerned faculty members would challenge their students to think critically about the society they were living in and the future they desired for themselves and their posterity. Such professors, in most instances were indigenous Liberians who themselves had experienced some of the same economic hardships their students and the majority of Liberians were experiencing. Due to the discriminatory policies of the Americo-Liberians, some of these faculties as students had to adopt “civilized” names before they could be admitted to the University of Liberia. One of such professors was Dr. Rudolph Roberts, who later changed his name to Togba Nah Tipoteh, what he stated was the real name his Kru family had given him.\(^{131}\) Professors from various fields would also contribute articles and essays to the magazine from its inception in June of 1973 to 1975.

Although faculty members played a fundamental role in the fostering of critical thinking and consciousness- raising of students about the inequalities of the Liberian society, these students were mere not vessels that were being used by “radical” professors to promulgate their agenda of economic, social and political reforms. To the contrary, most students at the University of Liberia by the 1970s had come directly from the interior of the country and could bear testimony based on their lived experiences about the social and material consequences of the socio-economic and political policies of the Americo-Liberian aristocracy. In other words, most indigenous students were aware of the inequalities that existed in their society long before they were given the opportunity to attend college - a good example of students’ consciousness is reflected in junior high

\(^{131}\)Ibid., 240.
school student Joe Wylie’s poem *Precious Jewels* cited earlier in the chapter.\(^\text{132}\) Hence, what progressive faculty members at the University of Liberia did was provide a forum and opportunity for students from all parts of the country to engage in meaningful dialogue with each other about the problems of the country and their role in bringing about change, which was reflected throughout the publication of their magazine.

Serving as editors of *Revelation* were Vittorio A. J. Weeks, Othello Brandy, Ernestine Cassell, Patrick Burrowes, Willard Russell, and K. Neville Best. All were students from the University of Liberia except Kenneth Best. Prior to his coming to *Revelation magazine*, Best had been a journalist at *The Star Newspaper* before he was fired for writing “inflammatory” stories about the President’s policies.\(^\text{133}\) With their limited resources, the magazine was very low budget; students had to hand draw and then photo-copy all of the sketches that often went with the articles and essays. From June of 1973, when the magazine was first launched and at the end of its publication in 1975, *Revelation* became one of the most trusted critics of Tolbert’s administration, during a time when the curtailment of freedom of speech and the press were being enforced by the President. National civil rights leader and hero Albert Porte wrote several articles about the plight of the Liberian people and the need for the active involvement of young people in leading the country to democracy, which were published throughout the run of the magazine. Other activists such as the future president Ellen Sirleaf Johnson, professor and interim government President, Dr. Amos Sawyer, and Dr. Togba Nah Tipoteh also contributed articles to the monthly magazine.

\(^{132}\) In several interviews with former students who attended the University of the Liberia in the 1960s and 1970s, they insisted that their activism for change in the country were driven by their desires to reform their society for the better, and that they were not being used by “radical” professors to promote a communist agenda as the government had charged.

\(^{133}\) Interview with former student activist, Paynesville Redlight, March 22, 2010.
The motto of the magazine stated, “Be not Warned by the Speaker, but what the Speaker Speaketh.” Such a profound statement can be interpreted in many ways. However, within the cultural framework of Liberian society in which children are to be seen and not heard, and where university students are considered to be children regardless of their age as discussed earlier, founders of the Revelation attempted to engage literate Liberians to think critically about the issues they were writing about, instead of simply dismissing their quest for democracy as being pursued by out of control children, who needed to focus on their school work and were to stay out of grown folk business. In Liberia, politics has always been the business of grown folks.

Essays and articles published in each volume covered a wide variety of economic, political and social topics: colonialism; the lack of youth voting rights; issues regarding the prospect of dual citizenship for African Americans, lack of educational opportunities for the masses, etc. Along with essays about pressing economic and political issues, students published pieces about the scarcity of various entertainments such as playgrounds, parks, movie theaters, and other recreational centers and activities for Liberian youth. It is imperative to note that, for every problem the students and other contributors identified, they suggested solutions for solving the problem to the Liberian government. Subsequently, Revelation Magazine was not only concerned with informing the public about the discriminatory policies of the Americo-Liberian government, but was also committed to being part of the solution for democracy in the country.

The magazine published letters in a section called “The Boima Sharp Column,” written to the Liberian government and other officials by anonymous students about various political and economic issues. Boima Sharp was portrayed as an ordinary

\[134 \text{ The Revelation: “A Social, Political, Economic and Cultural Monthly,” (June, 1973): 1.} \]
Liberian who was hardworking and paid a great deal of attention to the social, economic and political issues of the country. Colonialism, manifested in its varied facets, was a common theme of the column, as illustrated in the following letters:

Liberian Government,

So we are really taking a stride towards liberating our brothers from the bonds of colonialism in Southern Africa, Guinea Bissau etc. In the budget, we give a contribution of $79,338 for freedom fighters and President Tolbert just gave another $25,000 at the OAU. But how soon are we going to liberate ourselves of Firestone, Ford, Mobil, Bank of Monrovia, Chrysler and Chase Manhattan? Boima Sharp

In this letter, the hypocrisy of the Liberian government is illuminated when the question is posed to the government about when it intended to free the Liberian people from the corporate colonialism that for so long had plagued the people, now that the government was making financial contributions to decolonization struggles in colonized Africa. In other words, one must first clean one’s own house before attempting to offer assistance to another. Beyond calling on the government to rid the Liberian people of the exploitation of foreign businesses, students were also covertly telling the President that his government was also a colonial entity and needed to decolonize, since it profited immensely from the exploitation of its people, with little or no regards for their welfare:

President Tolbert,

The “Liberian Age” quoted you the other day while commenting on something which you are supposed to have begun, as saying that it will be a good thing if after your death, the next president could continue this practice. Do you mean to say that you intend to remain president until you die, Mr. President? Maybe you did not really mean this, but don’t you think we ought to be trying to restrict the length of time which one man may serve since we only have one political party which always put forth one “Standard bearer” as Presidential candidate?

Revelation Magazine 1, no.1 (June, 1973) :16.

80
Sometimes, it is not always good to keep one man in office for too long just because he is capable and willing... you know. 

–Boima Sharp

Since the True Whig Party had been the only legalized political party in Liberia since 1847, Liberians reading the column would understand the message implicit in the letter—a critique of how the one party system was preventing the indigenous population not only from voting, but was also preventing their election to national offices. The students’ covert critique of what President Tolbert had allegedly said about remaining in office until his death was well-founded. Prior to becoming President, Tolbert had served as Vice-President to President Tubman for twenty-seven years. In fact, it was only death that removed President Tubman from office, a history democracy reformers wished to avoid repeating.

Another critical issue that students were concerned with was the right to vote. Although the voting age had been lowered from the age of 21 to 18 years, the youth and the mass of the Liberian people remained disenfranchised due to a real estate clause, which required potential voters to present proof of property ownership before they could be permitted to vote. In several of the Boima Sharp columns, the issue was addressed, as shown in the example below:

President Tolbert,

….With all that, the lowering of the voting age loses its significance. Since we have universal suffrage, couldn’t you propose legislation to cut out the real estate clause? You know, in the United States of America, all you need to vote is the chronological age of 18. Real Estate comes in when one seeks political office. I know you will do something about it because the other day you said that if the people are not in agreement with any particular policy of yours,
you would change it. And don’t worry… we know cassava snakes too. We will try hard not to step on your tail; please don’t give me any reason to!—Boima Sharp

Historically, the ownership of property, as a legal requirement for voting has been used across Europe and in the United States to deny women and other marginalized peoples their voting rights. Also, in the United States, freed slaves in the Jim Crow South were required to take and pass a literacy test before they could cast a ballot. Therefore, the mentioning of the voting laws in the United States was not a mere abstract reference, but a strategy. Since the freed slaves who settled in Liberia created a Constitution that is a replica of the United States constitution and practiced some of the same discriminatory policies they had once been subjected to against the indigenous population, the letter was reminding the President that voting laws requiring property ownership had been abandoned in the United States and was urging him to do the same in Liberia.

Moreover, students were aware that the Real Estate Clause was another tool used by the Liberian aristocracy to deny the indigenous population and young people voting rights. After all, the youth constituted the largest percentage of the Liberian population and the government understood that if they were allowed to vote, the True Whig Americo-Liberian government would be ousted. Also, the message student activists were conveying to the Liberian government in the use of the snake analogy at the end of the letter was that they were aware that the government was sneaky and watchful of them, just as the snake is of potential prey. A more powerful message embedded in the use of the analogy was the warning to the President that if he was not willing and committed to

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helping move the country towards democracy, then they, the youth, were prepared to continue their activism for reforms in the country.

As he had been with other forms of media criticism against his policies, President Tolbert was infuriated by such material published in the Revelation magazine and in 1975, banned it. Prior to banning editors of the magazine and other student activists were often harassed, arrested and imprisoned for anti-government activities. In a 2010 interview, a former Revelation editor, commented about the impact of the governmental crackdown on the magazine:

We were living in a culture of silence and fear and we wanted to change that, which was the primary reason for the formation of the magazine. As part of our commitment to that philosophy, we published letters and articles sent to the magazine from not only college students and professors, but also from high school and elementary school students. The government was so paranoid about the impact our work was having on the consciousness of the people that we were once shut down for publishing three letters by elementary school children. In these letters, the children simply pleaded with the President to release students in its custody on charges of “anti-government” activities. We were shut down several times after that and on January 28, 1975, I along with three other editors and some other student activists, were arrested and interrogated about possible “conspiracies” against the government. I explained to them during my interrogation that I was unaware of any conspiracies against the government or anyone for that matter. After awhile, I was released because I knew nothing.

In accordance with the cultural practice that children are to be seen and not heard, President Tolbert demanded and expected total obedience from his “Precious Jewels.” That they were questioning his policies and were demanding reforms in the country, were considered to be disrespectful and unruly, hence they needed to be chastised for straying away from the social norms of staying out of grown folk business. Although most students were in their twenties and some in their thirties, they were considered to be children, since the majority of them were not married with a family. In Liberia, a person

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138 Interview with former student activist from the University of Liberia, Paynesville Redlight, February 17, 2010.
is considered to be an adult when he or she has married and is no longer dependent on their parents for support; it is common for a thirty-year-old man or woman to still be living with their parents.

Therefore, the disciplinary actions the government was taking against student activists seemed appropriate to the government and its supporters, since students were not seen as concerned citizens who cared about the future of their country, but as mere children who needed to focus on their schoolwork. The permanent state of childlikeness that the government and its patronage assigned student activists while simultaneously prosecuting them, did little to quell youth activism in the country. Although by the middle of 1975, the Tolbert administration had succeeded in banning the Revelation Magazine, it had failed to end the waves of student activism that were sweeping the country. The government’s inaction in addressing the social, economic and political reforms Liberians were calling for would prove to be the downfall of the Americo-Liberian aristocracy.

Rice Demonstration of 1979

As already demonstrated student activism calling for the total reformation of the Liberian economic and political systems, had begun in the 1960s and gained momentum in the 1970s, with the coming to power of Tolbert. One of such organizations was the Movement for Justice in Africa. Analyzing the centrality of MOJA’s activism in the mid 1970s for democracy in the country, Sawyer writes,
Organized in 1973 by a group of students and professors of the University of Liberia, MOJA was initially a liberation support group. It was dedicated to enlightening the public and mobilizing material support for the wars of liberation against Portuguese colonial forces and the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. As membership expanded, the movement was motivated to concern itself with local issues. Questions about civil liberties, equality of opportunity, and urban and rural poverty in Liberia became as important among its concerns as the problems of Portuguese colonialism and South Africa. Within seven years, MOJA, with the help of supporters, has organized grassroots opposition to the legalization of gambling, support for legal defense of Albert Porte in a libel suit brought against him by the President’s brother (who was also finance minister), and the creation of a socioeconomic advisory service called Susukuu.\textsuperscript{139}

The ability of MOJA to organize grassroots opposition to inequalities within the confines of the country, instead of focusing solely on decolonization efforts in other parts of the continent has a lot to do with the fact that most members of students’ organizations such as ULSU and LNSU, and who were also members of MOJA, had come from the hinterland and had experienced the inequalities imposed by the ruling class and therefore personally understood the plight of the people. Based on their lived experiences, students were able to some degree, form solidarity with other marginalized Liberians to effect change in the country. MOJA was not born in Liberia, but instead was a trans-national movement with individual branches across Africa, including Ghana, Sierra Leone and Nigeria, with emphasis on achieving the full decolonization of Africa. Like in Liberia, students all over Africa were fully engaged in their nation’s struggles for independence. For example, the South African Students Organization (SASO) played a critical role in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. Even in the United States, African-American students’ organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) fought tirelessly in the struggle for civil rights and played a major role in organizing freedom rides and sit-ins.

\textsuperscript{139} Sawyer, \textit{The Emergence of Autocracy in Liberia}, 289-290.
By the late 1970s, very little had changed in the life of the everyday Liberian; President Tolbert’s economic policies were still supporting and maintaining elite economic and political privilege, resulting in increasing discontent among the masses. Also, the government took every initiative possible to suppress and oppress all media outlets, individuals, and organizations serving as pressure groups. MOJA, PAL, and the Union of Liberian Associations in the Americas (ULAA) by 1978 had become extremely active in forming coalitions with each other, due to the fact that the Tolbert administration was not delivering on the reformation of the country it had initially pledged. Their common weapon of choice for the democratization of Liberian society would be demonstrations.\textsuperscript{140}

Both PAL and ULAA were founded by diasporan Liberians, most of whom resided in the United States. Founders and many members of these organizations, had attended college in the United States, including Baccus Mathews-founder of PAL. In the United States, they were exposed to and influenced in part by the struggles for civil rights by African-Americans and by the waves of decolonization in Africa.\textsuperscript{141} The increase in the social consciousness of Liberians residing in the United States who sought legitimate reforms in their homeland, shared similarities with other Africans who also attended schools in the Diasporas and returned to their countries to help in their decolonization struggles. Often, it is the most famous of such individuals that books and articles are written about. One such was Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, who, upon graduating from college in the United States, returned to Ghana and promulgated the tenets of Pan-Africanism not only as integral to Ghana’s independence, but to the entire continent.

\textsuperscript{140} Boley, \textit{Liberia: The Rise and fall of the First Republic}, 97.
\textsuperscript{141} Interview with former student activist from Cuttington University, Paynesville Redlight, February 17, 2010.
Two important factors contributed to what would become known as the “Rice Riot” of 1979. One was Dr. Amos Sawyer, then associate professor of political science and Dean of the college of humanities at the University of Liberia, declaring his candidacy for mayor of Monrovia in 1979. Analyzing the consequences of that decision, Liebenow asserts:

The tendency toward formalism was readily apparent in the constant emphasis upon constitutionalism, adherence to legal technicalities in the courts, and the charade of conducting elaborate electoral campaigns when there were no opponents to the True Whig Party candidates. Indeed, when a forceful individual violated the expectations of formalism—as Amos Sawyer did in boldly opting to contest the Monrovia mayoral elections in 1979 and pit himself against the slated candidate—the election was canceled.¹⁴²

This action by the government only exacerbated the general contempt the people had towards the ruling establishment. The economic relief and improvement initiatives promised by the President in his first inaugural address in 1971, all appeared to be simply rhetoric, as the majority of Liberians remained impoverished. MOJA, along with other student organizations such as the Liberian National Student Union, the University of Liberia Student Union, and pressure organizations such as PAL and ULAA, all condemned the actions of the government for cancelling the elections and argued that such decision was not in accordance with the Constitution of the Republic, which guarantees the right to political participation in the governing of the country to every citizen. Moreover, activists charged that the government had cancelled the elections because it was afraid that, if allowed to contest the election, Dr. Sawyer would have been

¹⁴²Liebenow, Liberia: The Quest for Democracy, 159.
victorious. Thus, the Americo-Liberian establishment was not prepared to yield power in the capital—the hub of their influence.  

With ferment still in the air from the fallout of the Sawyer for Mayor Campaign, it was announced by the government that the price of a bag of rice, Liberia’s staple food, would be increased by fifty percent, which meant thirty United States dollars for a hundred-pound bag. Liberia was and is not self-reliant in the production of rice, and with a high percentage of the population living in poverty; many feared the price increase would simply lead to starvation. Analyzing the motivations of demonstrators who participated in the rice riot, Sawyer contends,

The public’s passion to demonstrate against an increase in the price of rice stemmed not only from the fact that under it a bag of rice would have cost as much as one third of the monthly wages of low income earners, but also from the widespread perception that Tolbert, his relatives, and a few high officials, as large-scale rice producers and importers, were to be direct beneficiaries of this policy.

Since most of President Tolbert’s cabinet members consisted of his close relatives, it was not surprising that the perception of massive corruption permeated the public outcry for reforms in the country. Thus, the continuous corruption of the government in a situation where it simultaneously failed to address and improve the material conditions created by those policies that had affected the masses, helped to significantly increase public support for pressure groups such as MOJA and PAL.  

Upon hearing about the price of rice increase, a coalition of pressure groups, led by Baccus Mathews of PAL, asked the government for a permit to hold a demonstration

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143 Interview with former student activist from the University of Liberia, Paynesville Redlight, February 17, 2010.  
144 Liebenow, Liberia: The Quest for Democracy, 171.  
145 Sawyer, The Emergence of Autocracy in Liberia, 291.
against the projected increase on April 14, 1979. Their request to assemble peacefully, another right guaranteed by the Constitution, was denied by the government. Authorities warned that if demonstrators insisted on holding the march, they would be met with force. Regardless of the level of governmental threats against protesters, organizers remained firmly committed to having the march.\textsuperscript{146} They called on market women, wheelbarrow boys, students, and all other concerned Liberians to meet on Board Street for the march against the rice price increase on April 14.

As a result, over two thousand unarmed protestors including students and market women showed up to protest against the projected price increase.\textsuperscript{147} As the crowds gathered for the march, armed police officers and military soldiers from the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) had already been stationed along the routes of the march. At its beginning, the police fired tear gas into the crowd to disperse protesters. When that failed, the police opened fire using live ammunition, killing two hundred persons and leaving hundreds injured. Most of the dead consisted of students and market women.\textsuperscript{148} Contrary to many government representations of the demonstrators’ intentions,\textsuperscript{149} the demonstrators who gathered to protest against the rice price increase, they were unarmed and peaceful. They did not come to the march with guns or other weapons, all of which would have been indicative of violence. The only ones armed that day were police and military officers.

News of the massacre spread rapidly by word of mouth and radio. The brutality of the government security forces’ actions against unarmed civilians outraged the public.

\textsuperscript{146} Liebenow, \textit{Liberia: The Quest for Democracy}, 172.
\textsuperscript{147} Sawyer, \textit{The Emergence of Autocracy in Liberia}, 291.
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid., 292.
\textsuperscript{149} Liebenow, \textit{Liberia: The Quest for Democracy}, 172.
and many took to the streets in protest. What started as a peaceful protest—a right guaranteed by the Constitution, within hours turned into mass chaos and looting. The businesses of Lebanese merchants and others deemed to be directly responsible for the inflation in the price of rice were targeted.\footnote{Gus Liebenow. \textit{African Politics: Crises and Challenges} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 172.} The looting of Lebanese businesses was justified by the perception that they were clients of the ruling elite who had been given business opportunities by the government but did little to improve the lives of the people. In other words, Lebanese merchants, through business agreements with the government, were exploiting the resources of the country and were sending the profits they earned to Lebanon and did not invest in Liberia.

To help restore order, the Liberian government requested military assistance from President Sekou Toure of Guinea. Analyzing the heightened tension that had arisen in the country as a result of the police brutality against protesters, Liebenow asserts, “The situation was so out of hand that a number of observers were convinced—in retrospect—that any determined group of protesters could that day have easily stormed the Executive Mansion and brought about the fall of the Tolbert regime almost a year earlier than the April 1980 coup.”\footnote{Ibid.} Instead of utilizing the incident to help reform Liberian government, President Tolbert ordered the arrest and imprisonment of activists, including many from MOJA and PAL.

It was in the context of exploitation and exclusion of indigenous people, including the youth, from the political process and their widespread discontent, that Samuel K. Doe, a Master Sergeant in the Liberian Army, staged his coup in 1980. Almost a year
after the “Rice Riot,” on April 12th of that year, a group calling itself the People’s Revolutionary Council (PRC) led by Doe, attacked the Executive Mansion, killing President William R. Tolbert and key members of his cabinet.\(^{152}\) The murder of President Tolbert would end 133 years of Americo-Liberian rule and would usher in the beginning of indigenous rule. Contrary to his promises of equality and justice for all Liberians,\(^{153}\) Doe became the epitome of what he claimed to be against: he politicized ethnicity for his personal gain and perpetuated the politics of exclusion; most of the officials he appointed to high offices belonged to his ethnic group, the Krahn. Like previous Americo- Liberian administrations, Doe’s regime in the 1980s would be plagued by widespread corruption, massive unemployment and lack of viable opportunities for the youth of Liberia.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I examined the socio-economic and political policies implemented by the Americo-Liberians and their descendants beginning in 1847 to 1980. I have demonstrated that the socio-economic and political policies instituted by various Americo-Liberian administrations were deeply rooted in their perceived notions of “superiority” over local inhabitants, who had occupied the Malaguette Coast long before the arrivals of freed slaves from the United States beginning in 1822. Although most had been slaves at one point in their lives, they believed Western cultural, economic and

\(^{152}\) Adebajo, *Building Peace in West Africa: Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea-Bissau*, 41.

political institutions, in particular American, to be “superior” to others and reproduced such ideals and values in Liberia as vehicles for asserting control and dominance over the indigenous population.

In Liberia, Americo-Liberians denied local people citizenship, including the right to vote and to send representatives to the National Assembly until President Tubman did so in 1948. Along with the denial of citizenship rights, the settlement of freed slaves in Liberia led to the massive loss of indigenous land. One of the major losses of indigenous land was the one hundred year lease of one million acres of land to the Firestone Rubber Company by the Americo-Liberian government on September 16, 1925. The massive loss of indigenous land and the denial of citizenship to local people made Liberia typical of white settler colonies such as Algeria and South Africa, even though Liberia was not racialized in the same way.

In conjunction with the lack of political rights and the loss of their land, the labor of local people was greatly exploited throughout the First Republic (1847-1980). The exploitation of indigenous labor, in particular young able-bodied men, was not limited to forced labor on governmental projects. In 1890, for example, the French through the Americo-Liberian government recruited rural boys and young men to work on the Panama Canal. Also, in 1897, the legislature of Liberia granted a German merchant a labor recruiting concession in the hinterland. Young men, referred to as “Kru boys” were recruited, often through the use of force by government labor recruiters to work in Fernando Po, and French Gabon. The government was also responsible for supplying Firestone with fifty thousand laborers annually to work on their one-million acre rubber plantation.
The sole beneficiaries of their labor were the government and the corporations for which their labor were recruited. The profit generated from the exploitation of local labor was used for the development of settlers’ communities, including Monrovia, the hub of their political power. This economic fragmentation created a urban/rural dichotomy that remains a major obstacle to national development. The exploitation of indigenous labor was so significant that in 1929 the League of Nations launched an investigation into the issues of slavery and forced labor in the country, and concluded in 1930 that the Americo-Liberian government was guilty of practicing forced labor.

I have also demonstrated that rather than being hapless victims of Americo-Liberian imperialism, local people actively resisted. Much of the indigenous resistance against settlers came from the Kru, the Grebo, and the Gola, who fought vigorously against their loss of land to the Americo-Liberians. The Grebo Wars of 1857, 1875 and the Kru War of 1915-1916 are all examples of local people’s agency. Armed resistance against the Americo-Liberian government in one form or the other, continued into the 1930s. Moreover, the resistance of the indigenous groups against the settler communities proved that the conquest of Liberia was not an easy task for the settlers, as local people fought to maintain their sovereignty.

The election of President Tubman in 1944 marked the beginning of some changes in the country. For example, even though the right to vote was extended to the hinterland in 1948, a Real Estate Clause made it difficult for most to vote. The implementation of his ‘Open Door Policies’ in the 1950s allowed for the free movement of traders between the interior and Monrovia. The flow of rural students to attend the University of Liberia marked the beginning of a new era in local resistance against the discriminatory policies
of the Americo-Liberians. At the University of Liberia, rural students, who had experienced firsthand the discriminatory policies of the ruling elites, forged support from progressive students of elite families and with the encouragement of some professors, created students’ organizations such as LNSU, ULSU, SUP and MOJA. The primary goal of these organizations was the democratization of the Liberian society.

Influenced by black South Africans struggle against apartheid and the decolonization of most African countries in the 1960s, student activists demanded genuine political, social and economic reforms in the country and led a series of peaceful protests in the 1960s and 70s, demanding such changes. Based on the cultural belief that youth are to be seen and not heard, Presidents Tubman and Tolbert viewed student activists with contempt and they were often harassed, beaten, arrested and imprisoned without trial, even killed by government security forces. It is important to note that the disempowerment of Liberian youth has not been in the best interest of the country. The fact that the youth are not viewed as future leaders of the country has meant that their knowledge and skills which could help the country develop, have been ignored and not utilized.

Regardless of the amount of governmental persecution, student activists remained committed to the cause of equality for all Liberians throughout the administrations of Presidents Tubman and Tolbert. Thus, the continuous uneven distribution of national resources and the lack of viable economic, social, and political opportunities for most Liberians, including the youth, propelled student activism to new heights in the 1970s. The most significant of student-led activism against the Americo-Liberian government was the Rice Riot and massacre of 1979, which ultimately led to the end of 133 years of
Americo-Liberian rule on April 12, 1980. Finally it can be concluded that without the support and solidarity of the urban poor (wheelbarrow and shoeshine boys, petty traders, the unemployed), and market women, student activism in Monrovia would have had little to no effect on the quest for democracy in the country. In the next chapter, I will examine the regime of Samuel K. Doe in the contexts of students’ struggles for democracy in Liberia.
CHAPTER: 2


The People’s Redemption Council and the Military Coup of 12 April 1980

Samuel Kanyon Doe assumed the presidency of Liberia following a coup in 1980. He was not of Americo-Liberian descent. Thus the presidency of Doe aroused expectations that the country would move in the direction of genuine economic, social and political reforms needed to address the legitimate concerns of the Liberian people, particularly the indigenous groups. However, I argue that contrary to his promises of “equality and justice for all Liberians,” Doe became the epitome of what he claimed to be against: he politicized ethnicity for his personal political goals and perpetuated the politics of exclusion. Like the previous Americo- Liberian administrations, Doe’s regime in the 1980s was plagued by nepotism, widespread corruption, massive human rights violations, high unemployment and lack of viable social and economic opportunities for the Liberian youth.

On April 12, 1980 Liberian market women and other civilians took to the streets of the capital city, Monrovia, dancing and chanting: “Native woman born soldier, Congo woman born rogue” as they celebrated the military overthrow of the ruling government of President Tolbert that had occurred earlier that day. The coup had been executed by a military group which called itself the People’s Redemption Council (PRC), consisting of seventeen soldiers and led by Master Sergeant Samuel Kanyon Doe of the Armed Forces
of Liberia (AFL). In fact, all of the coup plotters were indigenous Liberians; hence the choice of the market women’s chant was not an accident, but rather a conscious choice depicting the thoughts and the overwhelming joy of the people. In Chapter one, I demonstrated how the Americo-Liberian settlers constructed a perceived “Other,” by referring to the indigenous people as “natives” and therefore “uncivilized.” Since the word “native” had been used systematically to degrade the indigenous people, the market women celebrating the coup appropriated the term to state their claim that the “uncivilized” woman had given birth to a hero (Doe), while the “civilized” woman (Congo)- a general term still used by Liberians to refer to settlers’ including freed slaves from the U.S. and recaptured slaves) had given birth to a criminal (President Tolbert). The criminalization of the “civilized” woman’s child was not meant for President Tolbert alone, but for the entire Americo-Liberian ruling elite, who, since 1822 had exploited the resources of the country and the labor of indigenous people.

On the day of the coup the PRC brutally murdered President Tolbert and key members of his cabinet at the Executive Mansion. Following the murders, Doe announced to the Liberian people that a coup had been staged and that President Tolbert had been killed. He also assured the people that the government would be turned over to civilian rule as soon as possible and would, for the first time in the history of the Republic, hold multi-party elections. Most importantly, he promised to pay attention to the plight of the large Liberian poor. Additionally, he vowed to build a new society in which there was justice and equal opportunity for all. In essence, Doe had declared to

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the Liberian people that the PRC was fully committed to the democratization of the country. Prior to the coup, not much was known about its participants. Excluding Doe, all were non-commissioned soldiers.\textsuperscript{156} The Armed Forces of Liberia was dominated by indigenous Liberians, because the vast majority of the Liberian people had been excluded from benefiting from the resources of the country and lacked other viable economic opportunities as well; hence joining the military seemed the only occupational choice available to them, as it also offered the prospect of some economic upward mobility, however minimal.\textsuperscript{157}

It should be noted that the 12 April, 1980 coup in Liberia was not a rare incident in Africa at the time, but had become a common occurrence. For example, on December 31, 1981 Flt. Lt. Jerry Rawlings staged his second coup in Ghana under the Armed Forces Revolution Council (AFRC) which group had attempted its first coup in 1979.\textsuperscript{158} In 1983, a military coup in Nigeria overthrew the elected government of President Shehu Shagari,\textsuperscript{159} and in 1986, President Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso was brutally murdered in a military coup led by Blaise Compaore and the Popular Front (PF).\textsuperscript{160} According to Aning, “Between 1975-1980, the ECOWAS region had 31 successful military coups, 21 attempted coups, and 54 plots.”\textsuperscript{161} It is therefore accurate to conclude

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 3.
that since the mid-1960s military rule has been the common style of government across the African continent.

Besides the murders of President Tolbert and his cabinet members, known Americo-Liberian families were targeted by the military. Dolo states:

Hostility toward settlers was horrifying. Many members of the Tolbert cabinet were arrested, assaulted, jailed, tried, and 13 of them were executed. Settlers watched their properties get ransacked. And even more painfully, they watched powerlessly and in horror as their wives and children were treated with every level of disrespect that the soldiers and their supporters could supply.162

The murder of President Tolbert and key members of his cabinet, as well as the raping of their wives and daughters and the destruction of their property did very little to improve the relations between the Americo-Liberians and local people. With the fear of further retaliation against them by Doe and the PRC, some Americo-Liberians fled the country to the United States with their families. Moreover, like Doe, other military heads of state, including Rawlings of Ghana, also embarked on a “Violent house-cleaning exercise to restore society and to restore the credibility of the military.”163 With the success of his 1981 coup, Rawlings used military dictatorship to rule Ghana, and it was only in the last eight years of his government (1992-2000) that the country returned to civilian rule.

The reactions of Liberians to Doe’s coup was very mixed. According to Williams,

Liberians in general welcomed it, but the international community condemned it—especially because of the execution of Tolbert and members of his cabinet. Moreover, influential African nations like Nigeria and the Ivory Coast called for the immediate

isolation of Doe’s regime. However, once the African heads of state were confronted
with the fact that many of them had achieved power in similar fashion, opposition to Doe quickly subsided.\textsuperscript{164}

Other African countries, including Ghana, also criticized Doe’s coup and attempted to
isolate his regime. According to Aning, “Samuel Doe’s takeover of power in 1980 drew
more concerted hostile, regional and international response. Ghana supported both the
OAU and ECOWAS criticism of the brutality of the Doe takeover and the punishment
meted out to leading figures of the True Whig Party (TWP).\textsuperscript{165} The persistent coups
across the African continent at the time must have created hysteria among older African
heads of state, as each was aware that they could be next. Having a historical relationship
with Liberia, the United States condemned the actions of the PRC and initially ignored
Doe’s regime.\textsuperscript{166} However, all of that changed with the Reagan administration, when
Liberia became a strategic location in the United States’ Cold War efforts in Africa. The
complacency of the United States government in the face of the tyrannical rule of Doe
will be addressed later in the chapter.

\textbf{The President and the State of the Union}

The Liberian military coup was welcomed by the cross-section of the Liberian
society, including political activists, student organizations and pressure groups like the
People’s Progressive Alliance (PPA). To help establish its legitimacy as a ‘true’
revolution for the “people,” the PRC adopted the slogans of MOJA and the PPA: “In the

\textsuperscript{164} Williams, “End of an Epoch: The Tolbert, Doe Transition in Liberia,” 34-35.
\textsuperscript{166} Williams, “End of an Epoch: The Tolbert, Doe Transition in Liberia,” 35.
Cause of the people,” and the Struggle Continues.”¹⁶⁷ Because the Americo-Liberian ruling stratum from 1847 to 1980 had excluded the indigenous population from participating in the governance of the country, and had denied them a shared benefit of the national wealth; the latter now hoped that under Doe, their rights and liberties would be acknowledged by the state and would be protected by law. It was assumed that because Doe and all members of the PRC were indigenous Liberians, they could understand the sufferings of the people.

According to Nass, “For once, the occupants of the highest offices of the land were sons of rural Liberians who constituted the greater population of the land.”¹⁶⁸ However, their expectations soon became disappointment, as Doe became interested only in enriching himself. Alao argues that, “The new lease of life which many indigenous Liberians anticipated, did not materialize, as Doe, in whom they placed their expectation, was more interested in entrenching himself in power.”¹⁶⁹ Similarly, Nass asserts that “Gradually, the populist democratic rhetoric gave way to fascist law and order, and nationalism gave way to ethnicity and military repression.”¹⁷⁰ Just as the Americo-Liberians had done, most of the officials Doe placed in high offices belonged to his ethnic group, the Krahn, thereby isolating the rest of the indigenous groups. He took refuge in his Krahn constituency to seek support and ethnic solidarity. This political strategy, based on ethnic loyalty, led to further division in the country. Instead of working against the politicization of ethnicity, Doe’s actions epitomized it.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 41.
The promise made by the PRC to end corruption also did not materialize. Doe’s regime was rife with embezzlement, as capital generated from national resources was diverted into the private accounts of the president and top government officials. According to Adebayo, “Doe and his officials illegally acquired wealth and land blatantly, as the True Whigs once did. Revenue from logging concessions and fuel went straight to Doe’s private funds; even U.S. food assistance was diverted into private pockets.”\textsuperscript{171} The stealing of national revenue, by African heads of state, for personal enrichment has been a major problem on the continent in the post-independence era. Joseph Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), Muammar Gaddafi of Libya, and Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe are few examples of a long list of corrupt heads of state of Africa. By the end of his rule, Doe and his cronies had stolen a reported US$300 million in public funds.\textsuperscript{172} The continuous corruption of Doe led to the further decline of the Liberian economy and undermining of its international reputation, and further lowered an already low standard of living for most Liberians.

Besides the embezzlement of public funds, Doe’s policies towards workers, in particular laborers were no different from those of the Americo-Liberians. Illustrating the similarities between the labor laws of the PRC and the True Whig Party, Kieh explains:

For example, the LAMCO Mine Workers’ Union was denied legal status by the Liberian state from the 1960s to 1970s. Also, from 1926 to 1980, the workers at Firestone were denied the right to form a single labor union. In addition, the state enacted several anti-labor laws. The most draconian one was PRC Decree No. 12. This legislation, which

\textsuperscript{171} Adekeye Adebajo. \textit{Building Peace in West Africa: Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea-Bissau}. (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), 38.

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was passed in 1980, made it a criminal offense for workers to strike. These measures enabled foreign capital to accelerate its maximization of profits by paying workers low wages and in most cases not providing them with fringe benefits. The compradors regularly employed the state’s instruments of coercion—the police and the armed forces—to quell labor protests against foreign capital.  

The control of the Liberian government by foreign companies (corporate colonialism), dates back to the late nineteenth century (see chapter one), when the Liberian government signed contract labor agreements with foreign corporations. Based on the issuing of Decree No. 12, it is clear that like the settlers, Doe was not concerned with protecting workers rights and in fact exploited the labor of the rural areas for himself and foreign investors. He also used the power of the gun to keep workers in check.

While the president focused on generating wealth for himself and his clients, the Liberian economy continued to decline. Writing about the economic crisis Doe faced Harsch states:

Liberia’s real gross domestic product has declined by an astounding average of 5.5 percent a year since 1980. The U.S. dollar-legal tender in Liberia-has all but disappeared from circulation, while the Liberian $5 coin (known as the “Doe dollar”) has plummeted to less than half of its nominal value. Liberia’s foreign debt now stands at $1.7 billion. Unable to pay its arrears, the country has been cut off from further IMF funding. Loans from other sources have likewise shriveled… A third of children under five suffer from some degree of malnutrition and 15 out of every 100 children die before they reach the age of five.”

To say that Doe was solely responsible for the Liberian economic crisis in the 1980s would be incorrect. As demonstrated in chapter one, Americo-Liberian elites exploited the natural resources and indigenous labor of the country vis-à-vis foreign concession firms to work in places like Fernando Po and French Gabon. It was also the Americo-

Liberian ruling elites that signed the 1925 Contract Labor contract with Firestone. More importantly, it was the economic crisis of the 1970s that led to the Rice “Riots” of 1979, which ultimately led to the military overthrow of President Tolbert (see Chapter One). Although Doe was not the sole culprit in the collapse of the Liberian economy, his actions and decisions hastened its collapse. The widespread corruption of his government and the diversion of state funds into private accounts was enough to bring the Liberian economy to its knees. The promise of economic justice by the PRC for marginalized Liberians, and who form the majority of the country’s population, never materialized.

The President and the Media

The exact year of the start of the Liberian press remains a debate among Liberian media scholars. Some, including Rogers (1987) and Best (1997) argue that the first newspaper launched in the country, the Herald made its debut in 1826, while Burrowes argues that it was not until 1830 that the newspaper was first published.175 Regardless of the exact publication start date of the Liberian Press, the media have historically played a vital role in the dissemination of information about the plight of the Liberian people at both national and international levels. However, since the early twentieth century their efforts have been met with serious governmental repression. Thus, according to Best,

In 1916, during the administration of President Daniel E. Howard (1912-1920), a series of controversial anti-press laws were passed by the legislature. They included a ban on

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material intending to weaken the government, increase instability or demean public officials. The legislature passed resolutions on previously nonexistent crimes, such as criminal libel and obscene libel. The new legislation also prohibited comments which questioned the government’s behavior toward any of the country’s groups and thus threaten stability. Violators were subject to up to $2000 fine, five years in jail and loss of all their property.”\textsuperscript{176}

Attacks on the press by the government heightened under the Tubman administration. Best contends that, “It was under Edwin Barclay’s successor, President William V. S. Tubman that the Liberian press, for the first time began to experience very serious reversals, in the form of persistent and unrelenting assaults on press freedom, freedom of speech and even political pluralism.”\textsuperscript{177} In chapter one, I explained the major policies and actions of the Tubman and Tolbert administrations toward the media. For example, President Tubman often arrested and imprisoned journalists, students, and the prominent Liberian activist Albert Porte on charges of “plotting” against his government, because they wrote and spoke critically about the impact of his socio-economic and political policies on the nation. Similarly, President Tolbert also imprisoned many students, journalists, and other activists for being critical of his government by demanding economic, social and political reforms in the country. It was the continuous attack on freedom of speech and of the press that led President Tolbert to order the permanent closing of the student-owned- and- run Revelation Magazine at the University of Liberia in 1975.

Among the many promises Doe made to the Liberian people in 1980, was the enforcing of their right to freedom of speech and of the press - a right they had been denied for so long. Based on this promise, prominent newspapers such as the Daily

\textsuperscript{176}Ibid., 47.
\textsuperscript{177} Ibid., 49.
Observer (1981), Footprints Today (1984) and the Sun Times (1985) emerged on the national scene. Unfortunately, like those before him, Doe viewed the media with contempt and employed various methods such as arrests, imprisonment, beatings, and even murder of journalists, to censor and control the media. The newspapers played a critical role in raising national consciousness about the policies and practices of the Doe Regime. Not long after he assumed the presidency, Doe began his media crackdown. Rogers explains,

[...]he publisher and staff of the Observer, like their colleagues operating other newspapers that took such independent views, would pay dearly for their convictions. And, paying most dearly would be the Observer itself which, between 1981 and 1990, was shut down by the Doe government almost once a year.”

Like the economic and civil rights promises made by the PRC, the freedom of speech and of the press promise also never materialized. The security forces of the country (police and military) were routinely used by Doe to oppress the very people he claimed he had come to “liberate” from the Americo-Liberian oppression.

In the same fashion as he had issued anti-labor decrees, Doe also passed a series of anti-press decrees, in an attempt to curtail the successful functioning of the media. Rogers explains:

Operating from and by military decrees, the Doe government applied the same *modus operandi* to the press by promulgating several regulatory directives, including the infamous Decree 88A, bordering on outright censorship... With the Executive Mansion as the only exception, all releases and announcements from government ministries and Agencies must first be approved by the Ministry of Information before they are broadcast on radio or published in the newspaper; releases announcements on and about any Government Ministry or Agency taken directly to the media (radio and newspaper), must

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179 Ibid., 16.
be rejected and sent back to the Ministry of Information for scrutiny before being publicly released.”

By implementing such decrees, the government hoped to control and convey to the people what it wanted them to know about its functions and operations. No amount of manipulation of the press, however, could fool the people about Doe’s agenda of amassing personal wealth and power for himself, while fulfilling his obligations to companies such as Firestone. The vast majority of the population experienced firsthand, the impact of high unemployment and lack of opportunities in the midst of gross governmental oppression. Therefore, whether or not the government succeeded in the censorship of the press, the vast majority of the people knew that the government had reneged on its promises following the coup in 1980, even if they had no way of articulating it literally.

It is important to note that Doe’s attempts at curtailing press freedom and freedom of speech did not go unchallenged. In the midst of this police state, where the unspoken rule by the security forces was “shoot first, and do not ask questions later,” some journalists risked their safety and lives in the quest for press freedom (a key component of a democratic society). Two such journalists were Momolu V.S. Sirleaf and Klon Hinneh of *Footprints Today*. On August 1, 1984, the two were arrested and imprisoned for publishing a front page story entitled “Malpractice at Public Works.” Even with their arrest, the two journalists remained committed to their quest for press freedom.

According to Rogers, after their release from jail,

Rather than being thankful to the government for their release as journalists in the past did, Sirleaf who was also president of Footprints Enterprises, decided in 1985 to file a

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180 Ibid., 22-23.
181 Ibid., 16.
lawsuit against the government for their “false imprisonment.” Accordingly, the July 16, 1985 issue of Footprints carried an article affirming that Sirleaf and Hinneh had sued the Minister of State for Presidential Affairs, Dr. J. Bernard Blamo, and the Director of the National Security Agency, Mr. Sylvester Moses. That same day, Sirleaf and Hinneh were again arrested by agents of the Police Intelligence Unit on the orders of Justice Minister Jenkins K.Z.B. Scott, on charges of “breach of security and criminal malevolence.” The paper, however, continued to appear as pressure mounted from several quarters for the release of Sirleaf and Hinneh. The government, however, took its own time, first making them appear before the Special Military Tribunal rather than a civilian court, and then ending their ordeal abruptly with an executive clemency after they had spent 55 days in detention at the notorious military post stockade in Monrovia.\(^{182}\)

The military tribunal at which the two men appeared was the same tribunal that had convicted and ordered the execution of thirteen key civilian cabinet members of President Tolbert’s administration, after the PRC coup in 1980. The absolute power and authority that Doe assumed meant that he was above the law, even the country’s Constitution. The trial of civilians in military courts, instead of civilian courts, was another example of the imposition of military rule on the Liberian people by Doe. The military tribunal was so essential to Doe’s administering of “justice” that no one was spared from its grips - not even college students.

**The Honeymoon is over! Doe and Student Activism**

It is not clear whether or not a honeymoon took place between the PRC and student activists. If one ever occurred, it was short lived. According to Press, “The Liberian National Student Union helped organize a rally of thousands of students less than a month after Doe assumed power, calling on the military to return to their

\(^{182}\)Ibid., 18.
barracks." For as much as they had welcomed the ousting of President Tolbert, students were more interested in seeing the implementation of the economic, social and political reforms the PRC had promised. A major step that students and other activists were ready to see happen sooner, rather than later, was the transfer of power from military to civilian rule. By 1982, students had become increasingly restless with the lack of progress in the country. Their determination to free Liberia propelled them to speak out boldly against the Doe regime, thereby risking their lives. A former student political activist of LNSU explained the importance of their agitation for change as follows:

See, from the inception of the country, till now, no human rights organizations have existed. In their absence, our organizations have had to serve as pressure groups. We welcomed the ousting of President Tolbert with the deepest faith that, for the first time, all Liberians, regardless of ethnicity would have equal access to economic, educational, and political opportunities in the country. The PRC made several promises of reforming the Liberian society and we took them seriously. When it became clear that the PRC was more interested in repressing than “freeing” us, we knew we had to speak out against their repression. Thus, the return to civilian rule became one of our major outcries. Doe’s military regime was a clear violation of the Liberian Constitution and we pointed that out. Within a short time span, the PRC had committed more atrocities against the Liberian people than their predecessors had done over the last seventy-five years, in my view. In some of our demonstrations, we held mock funerals. Some students carried empty coffin boxes over their shoulders, symbolizing the death of military rule and our demand for a return to civilian rule.

The campus of the University of Liberia was an ideal place for student protests and demonstrations. As already mentioned in chapter one, the close proximity of the campus to the Executive Mansion, Capitol Hill, and other key governmental branches, made student activism effective in reaching the establishment with their concerns. A key strategy students employed in their agitation against the oppression of Doe was the

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184 Interview with former student activist form the Liberian National Student Union Broad Street, 4 December, 2009.
making of bold and critical statements about his regime. Being fully aware that such statements would invoke the anger and wrath of the PRC, the students were often arrested and taken to jail by the security forces. The arrest and imprisonment of these students would then cause an outrage among students and others concerned with the democratization of the country. Such tactics often resulted in “[m]ass demonstrations by students and their supporters.”

The primary base of students’ supporters included market women and the urban poor, who clearly understood the need for reforms in the country. According to Nass,

Market women and workers also had their grouses. Market women were disenchanted with the government and complained about the unstable and high prices they paid to wholesale dealers, most of whom were representatives of top government officials, or their close family associates. Market women were also unhappy with foreigners, especially Lebanese and Indians, who competed with them in the retail business and received much more patronage from government and loan facilities.

When market women answered the calls of the ‘children’ to join in protests and mass demonstrations against the ills of the government (during the reign of the True Whig Party and under Doe), they were acting in their own interests and those of ordinary Liberians. As controllers of the ‘informal’ economy, they were essentially responsible for the survival of their families, communities and nation. Although they never attended college (and most of them never had any formal education), they understood the efforts of the ‘children’ to change the country.

The significance of student activism is further illuminated when Press writes that “Many political organizations were banned under Doe except in the weeks immediately

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before the 1985 elections, leaving campus student organizations and the press among the few viable sources of resistance to increasingly authoritarian and harsh rule.”

As with every dictator, Doe did not take kindly to student activism. Like Presidents Tubman and Tolbert, Doe too, viewed student activists as being ‘anti’-government and ‘trouble makers’ who ‘needed’ to ‘focus’ on their school work, instead of involving themselves with ‘grown’ folks’ business-politics. Subsequently, police brutality, including beatings, arrests and imprisonment, rape, and murder became the primary tools Doe used to ‘discipline’ and to ‘keep’ students in their ‘place.’

In 1981 in an attempt to dismantle student activism, the PRC issued a ban on all campus politics and political activities in the country. Several newspapers, including the Daily Observer, Footprints, and New Liberian ran stories about the government’s ban on politics. For example, on January 19th, 1982, one of the headlines of the top stories in the New Liberian read “Engage in Development Projects, no Politics in School,” and again, on January 21st 1982, the top story of the New Liberian newspaper read: “PRC gives Stern Warning: no Politics until 1985.” The primary reason the PRC gave for banning students’ politics was that they wanted students to “focus on their lessons instead of engaging in reckless” behavior. According to Napoleon Teage, “The Liberian leader said the Council had always entertained the wish that students would choose work over idleness, unity instead of divergence and mobilize for greater prosperity instead of politicking for disruption.”

The persistent calls by officials for students to ‘focus on their schoolwork’ instead of engaging in politics, is deeply rooted in Liberian childrearing practices, where children are to be ‘seen’ but not ‘heard’ (see chapter one).

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Therefore, by issuing several public announcements and warnings that campus politics had been banned in all schools (elementary and high schools included), the PRC sought legitimacy from the public for whatever actions it took against students. Since, as ‘children’ they were to be obedient to authority at all times, any deviation from such norm justified their punishment.

Like his predecessors, Doe was out of touch with the needs and demands of students. Their calls for economic, social, and political reforms in the country were not based on mere idleness, as the government had charged. Rather, their quest for democracy was deeply rooted in their lived experiences. Most student activists did not come from elite families; they had grown up under the socio-economic and political policies of the Americo-Liberian rule, but were now experiencing the same oppression and hardships they had endured under the settler rule. However, no government threats and repression could turn off the burning desire of students for reforming their society. On January 19th 1982, the Liberian National Student Union issued a bold statement to the President, which was published in newspapers about the banning of politics on campuses across the country. Below is a portion of that statement:

Mr. Head of State, officials of Government here present, ladies and gentlemen, With clear conscience we have today come here in the name and, indeed, on behalf of the thousands of students across the length and breadth of this country to frankly and unequivocally discuss with you-face to face-the question of a ban on all student political parties in this our cherished home, Liberia. We firmly believe that when the pronouncement begins to take effect, a violation of the inalienable rights of students, who are the natural conscience of the Liberian people, would be made…The students of Liberia therefore believe that having students put full time to their lessons is not among reasons sufficient enough for a ban on student politics. Mr. Head of State and Chairman of the PRC, with regards to the elimination of political parties in our schools as a means of curbing student instability, we have yet to be convinced and given some information as to the basis of such a conclusion drawn by the government. We must sincerely say, however, that crushing political parties is not the answer to curbing instability. We quicken to mention, moreover, that we in no way advocate instability on the part of
students. Contrary to this, we hope to see in our schools a high level of revolutionary obligation on their part.

Besides, LNSU was instrumental in practically intervening in many matters of student unrest; a venture which brought a calm surface to many of our schools…. Statistical projections gathered from a study of causes of students’ unrests will no doubt indicate that about or more than 98% of student protest activities witnessed in Liberia are last alternatives which are by-products of the failure of all negotiation possibilities in handling these matters. It is also true that some of the problems are rooted in national policies and not necessarily in school administrators. We can all therefore convincingly agree that when we throw student political parties into oblivion, will not necessarily curb students’ unrest. In your Christmas address to the nation, you spoke about the need to curb students’ instability and have students’ concentrate more on their lessons. To achieve this, a solution proposed by you indicated that all political parties in all schools should be banned and that school administrators would appoint student leaders based on their academic standing etc. This pronouncement provoked in the student milieu a concern for an encroachment on their rights. Not only were the students just provoked over this decision, but they were equally taken by surprise and sent aghast that the April 12 for which they had expressed solidarity in May 1980 had so soon rejected them. We hope to specifically mention that the justification provided for the ban on student politics needs to be closely examined and analyzed.189

After the release and publication of this statement, the six student leaders who had signed the statement were arrested on charges that they had violated the law by criticizing Decree 2A, which had banned all campus politics until 1985-a year that the PRC promised to turn the country over to civilian rule. According to Liebenow,

The narrow interpretation of ‘political’ by the PRC, moreover, meant that any form of criticism of the Doe regime by the students was an occasion for quick retaliation. Various campuses had been closed several times since 1980 and student leaders had been detained and even threatened with death by firing squad.”190 Five out of the six student leaders arrested experienced firsthand the real threat of students facing a firing squad. The arrested included: Siapha Blackie, president of the University of Liberia Student Union; acting president of the Liberian National Student Union Ezekiel Pajibo; Nyomo K. Brownell, student president of

William V. S. Tubman College of Science and Technology; Menyongai Wilson, president of Ricks Institute Junior College Student Union; secretary-general of LNSU Ataric Tokpa; and Kpedee Woiwor, president of Cuttington University Student Union. 191

The trial of the students began on January 26, 1982. Instead of being tried in civilian court, as mandated by law, the students were tried by the Military Tribunal the PRC had established, immediately after the 1980 coup. The trial of the students was very swift, as five out of the six were found guilty of “treason” against the state. The sentence for their crime was death by firing squad. After the verdict was announced, students and other citizens across the country strongly expressed their disapproval with the decision and protested against it. On January 28, 1982, a day before the executions were to take place, Doe granted the students executive clemency, but not until he had admonished them for their bad behavior. In a radio address to the nation on that day about the situation, Doe explained:

Fellow citizens,

Just a month ago, in our Christmas message, we presented you with a testimony of genuine goodwill and positive reconciliation. At that time, we undertook many radical steps to remove all obstacles to the creation of peaceful and prosperous society… You will recall that at one instance, we freed all political prisoners, noting that we wanted nothing to do with such people. We offered general amnesty to all Liberians abroad. We lifted the freeze on all accounts of political detainees held since April 1980. We lessened the tax burden on our people, and we set the date of returning the country to civilian rule.

But, in all our moderation, we cautioned our people against political activities. We particularly referred to campus politics and warned students that this would not be tolerated in any respect… We have always entertained the wish that our students would choose work, instead of idleness, unity instead of divergence, mobilization for greater prosperity instead of politicking for disruption. Today, in what I consider another attempt by the enemies of the Revolution to discredit our revolution, six students, representing academic and professional institutions throughout the nation, have found themselves tied up in an unfortunate event. They have been tried by our Special Military Tribunal, responsible to try all violators of our laws, whether civilian or military, five

192 Ibid., 2.
found guilty and sentenced to death, while one was found not guilty and is to be set free. It should be emphasized that hereafter, anyone committing acts that would create unrest in our society will be sent to the Tribunal...The Council has given generously to the free education program. During our visit to the campus of The University of Liberia, we made a donation of $35,000 to improve laboratory facilities, as a demonstration of our love and affection for the students.¹⁹³

That Doe viewed the minute financial contribution of the PRC to education as being generous and as a form of ‘love’ and ‘affection’ for students, and not as a responsibility of government to invest in the future of its people, shows that he considered national resources and the wealth it generated to be the personal wealth of the PRC. Therefore, whatever he did to help the Liberian people was a charitable act - not an obligation. Also, with all the ‘kindness’ the PRC had shown students and Liberians in general, he could not fathom why they were being so ungrateful by violating the laws he was imposing on them. The use of words such as love and affection to describe the PRC’s feelings toward students also demonstrates the paternalistic attitude of the regime towards students. Just as fathers love and have affection for their children, so too did the PRC for the children of the nation (theoretically). Subsequently, by publically criticizing the ban on campus politics, the convicted students were not only violating the laws of the regime, they were also undermining his paternal authority and therefore they had to be disciplined.

After a series of disciplinary comments to students and the nation in general about the consequences of violating the laws, the President finally said at the end of his speech that he was granting executive clemency to the students because “[t]hey did not fully weigh the consequences of their acts.” He also warned them to focus on their lessons, instead of making trouble and “[w]arned administrators and faculty members on

campuses, parents and guardians, Sunday School teachers and church leaders to advise their children to refrain from politics for the next three years.\textsuperscript{194} One of the primary reasons for the granting of executive pardon to the students was that Doe believed that the students did not act on their own, but that they were influenced by radical teachers and professors who wanted to destroy his government. In the aforementioned speech to the nation about the actions of the students, he stated, “We know that some of them have been indoctrinated with varying political ideologies. We know that they have advisors in the broader society who may want to see Liberia in chaos. We know some of them have been trained in the business of confrontation.”\textsuperscript{195} The permanent childlike state to which all students - both high schools and universities - had been confined to made it difficult for adults to view them as individuals, with minds of their own and as persons capable of articulating complex issues pertaining to their nation. More importantly, it relegated students to the fringes of the society, in that, their talents and ideals were ignored as being trivial hence not worthwhile to be harnessed for the betterment of the Liberian society.

When the President declared:

\begin{quote}
In view of the decision handed down by the Tribunal, and endorsed by the Council, the five students are to be executed tomorrow morning. However, with the power invested in as Head of State, Chairman of the People’s Redemption Council and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Liberia, I hereby grant the five convicted students, executive clemency, and they are to be immediately released from further detention.\textsuperscript{196}
\end{quote}

With this final pronouncement, thousands of jubilant citizens from every walk of life took to the streets of Monrovia in celebration of the good news. The campus of the University of Liberia and surrounding streets became crowded, as the released students were carried

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\textsuperscript{194} Ibid., 5.  \\
\textsuperscript{195} Ibid., 8.  \\
\textsuperscript{196} Ibid., 5.
\end{flushright}
shoulder high by supporters. Market women, wheelbarrow boys, middle and high school students and various women’s prayer band groups were among those who turned out to celebrate with the students and to thank the President. As the crowd celebrated, they began to shout, “We want Doe!” We want Doe!”¹⁹⁷ In the midst of such national euphoria, the dictator had indeed become a hero.

A day after the release of the students’ leaders, several news papers, including the New Liberian published a series of articles, accompanied by pictures of the public’s reactions to the students being pardoned. In one of the pictures, a large group of women all dressed in white skirts and dresses, with white head wraps can be seen standing together. Below the picture was the caption, “Members of various prayer bands turned out to bless the Lord, and thank C-I-C Doe.” There was also a cartoon image of a woman praying with joy, “Lord, thank you for our children…Bless Doe, Bless P.R.C.”¹⁹⁸ The immense gratitude the women were showing God was based on the belief that God had answered their prayers by sparing the lives of the students. Moreover, for these women, the granting of executive clemency was not an act of man, but a divine intervention, since they had been praying for the safety and protection of the children since their arrests. Women’s prayer groups not only concern themselves with the spiritual welfare of their families and communities, they also pray for the physical wellbeing of their people. Although the various women’s prayer groups and the other thousands of women who showed up to welcome the students did not know them and their families personally, that did not matter to them. What did matter was that they were mothers and could therefore relate to the anguish the mothers of the boys were going through during the ordeal.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 8.
¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 7.
Unlike western societies, where tremendous advancements have been made in prenatal and natal care, the same cannot be said of Liberia and other underdeveloped countries. In Liberia, where maternal and infant mortality is extremely high, 994 deaths per 100,000 live births,\(^{199}\) motherhood has been a unifying source of power for women, although such authority has been weakened by the country’s fourteen years of civil war. The profound joy, solidarity, and relief the women felt for the release of the students is further depicted in a picture of a woman surrounded by a crowd of jubilant citizens. The lady is standing in an odd position, while squeezing her stomach. The caption beneath the picture read, “A lady demonstrates how happy she is for the release of the “children,” by demonstrating the complexities of childbirth.”\(^{200}\) By demonstrating the pain and difficulties of childbirth, she was connecting with the sacrifice and risks the students’ mothers had taken in giving birth to them. Moreover, she was also connecting with the immense pain and agony the mothers must have felt during the trial and conviction of their sons, and what they would have had to endure had the students been put to death.

The ability of thousands of mothers to connect with the mothers of the students, based on their commonality of motherhood, would have almost certainly led to massive protests by the women had the students been executed.

Liberia is not the only country where solidarity has been forged among women based on motherhood. For example, *Mothers of the Revolution* provides the life stories of thirty Zimbabwean women’s experiences during their country’s struggle for independence, beginning in the 1970s. A common thread across their stories is the centrality of motherhood to the involvement of women in the struggle. Staunton explains

that, “For some women, the war was with them for a year or two; for others it lasted much longer. Time was not something measured in weeks-or months, but by the impact of violence or grief or need; and by the rhythms of the seasons of motherhood.”

Zimbabwean women regarded the fighters as their children, everybody’s children, with needs which they, as mothers had a responsibility to meet. Women worked together to raise money for the struggle, provided food, shelter and intelligence to the freedom fighters. In addition, they serve their communities as healers in the absent of clinics and hospitals and offered comfort and support to each other during time of grief. In other parts of the world, including Latin America, motherhood has also been a source of unity among women.

After their release, the students promised to stay out of trouble and to focus on their schoolwork and to encourage other students to do the same. But the relief the PRC may have felt from such promises was short-lived. Barely a week after the release of the student leaders, students from The University of Liberia had a confrontation with the PRC Political and Economic Advisor, Major Bai M. Gbala when he stopped by the office of the Daily Observer to pick up a copy of the paper’s reporting on his prior encounter with student activists on the university campus. According to the paper’s account,

When the Major was about to enter his car, he was confronted by a student recognized as “[o]ne of those who handled him roughly” on the University of Liberia campus the prior Wednesday. The student who showed a bruised hand to him as a result of the beatings given to students who were marching on the Capitol Bypass, wanted to know whether that was the sort of advice he had been giving the PRC.

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202 Ibid., 302-303.
The Major reiterated what the PRC had been saying since it instituted a ban on all campus and public politics that, if students are willing to violate the laws of the PRC, they must be willing to bear the consequences. Within minutes of their encounter, a crowd of students and other individuals had gathered around the Major’s car and began to hurl questions at him. The questions covered a series of issues, and according to the *Daily Observer*,

Some of the students wanted to know how they could themselves practice politics in the future if they were not permitted to start gaining experience. He repeated that 1985 was not far away. He however felt that students should not concern themselves too much with things which may adversely influence political decisions, but they should rather concentrate on things that affect their learning, such as inadequate laboratory facilities, lack of textbooks, poor cafeteria facilities, etc.204

The persistent emphasis on students’ focusing on their schoolwork, instead of engaging in politics demonstrates the failure on the part of the government to realize and recognize that the quest for democracy, by students, was based on their keen awareness that their future success and the progress of the country hinged on democratization. It was the students’ understanding of the significance of democracy that propelled them to call on the military to return to their barracks and to turn power over to civilian rule, within a month after the coup. After a three-hour long conversation, the Major got in his car and drove off without incident. However, it would not be long before the government would carry out the deadliest assault on students in the country’s history.

Who’s the Boss? The 1984 Incident at the University of Liberia

204 Ibid.
Regardless of the amount of governmental repression against them and other citizens, student activists remained committed to the struggle for democracy and continued their demand for the return to civilian rule. In July of 1984, the lifting of the ban on politics was to help the country prepare for the first multi-party elections in the country’s history. Many Liberians, including Dr. Amos Sawyer, Dean of the College of Social Sciences and Humanities at the University of Liberia, and chairman of the Constitutional Commission took the opportunity to engage in politics openly. In newspaper interviews, he openly criticized the President for not resigning, while campaigning for president in the upcoming elections, as he had required of all government employees interested in running for elections and forming new parties. Not surprisingly, the decision by Sawyer to exercise this right, did not sit well with Doe.

He ordered the arrest of Dr. Sawyer and other faculty members from the University on charges that they were “plotting” a coup against his government. Like the convicted students, the accused were to stand trial before The Special Military Tribunal, where Doe pledged they would be afforded a ‘fair’ and ‘speedy’ trial. According to Liebenow,

The reaction of the students was predictable. Dr. Sawyer’s open lifestyle and his longstanding commitment to democratic, nonviolent processes made a mockery of the Doe charges… At the start of the week students marched in town carrying a coffin labeled “Liberia’s rights and liberties and placards reading “Doe, Go in peace,” and Rescind Decree 88 A.

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207 Ibid.
The symbolic use of death was meant to provoke a sense of urgency among the people as to why democratization was the only hope for the Liberian people. Furthermore, the carrying of a coffin by students could easily be understood by the people that something tragic had happened, whether they could read the writings on the coffin or not. Their demand for the rescinding of Decree 88A was just as important as their critique of Doe’s assault on their rights and liberties, since it gave the PRC the legal authority to arrest and detain citizens without trial until the return to civilian rule, whenever that would be.

Doe became infuriated with the actions of the students, and on August 22, 1984, he commanded his riot troops to clear the campus of the University of Liberia. The brutality of the troops exercised on professors, staff, and students in particular, was intense. Below are two interview reports of the incident as recounted to the author during her field research in Monrovia from 2009 to 2010. The interview reports provide personal accounts, one by a female staff member from the University, and the other by a former student from the University about what transpired on that day. The staff member, whom I will refer to as Musu, recounted this to me:

We were all at our desks and out of nowhere, we saw armed soldiers rushing into the office. They were yelling at us to “Get down,”! Get down”! Before anyone could get down, they began to beat us viciously with their batons and gun butts. I was seven months pregnant with my second child at the time and feared for my baby’s life. During the entire attack on us, I kept kneeling down over my stomach to protect my baby as much as possible, so my back was exposed to the soldiers the entire time and received almost all the beatings. Look at my back; I do not need to say anything. We were all yelling and screaming for our lives; it was really bad. From where I was on the ground, I could see that many of the soldiers were ripping off the clothes of the women, while they were beating them. I knew right away what was about to happen. I started to cry and scream even louder, saying I was seven months pregnant and did not want to be raped. I do not know why I said that, because what woman would want to be raped? I was never raped, but they beat me until I fainted!

When I regained consciousness, the soldiers had all left and everything was quiet. As I crawled my way to the bathroom, I saw blood- stained women’s underwear lying about the floor. There were bloody shoe prints all about the hall. I do not remember how long I had been in the stall when a soldier came and pushed the door open! I said to myself, I am dead! I was really
sacred. But, he surprised me when he said my name and said he remembered me from his old community; I did not remember him. He informed me that two military trucks were outside collecting the injured to take them to the ‘hospital’ and that I should remain in here until he came back to get me. He said he would inform the other soldiers that our floor was clear and that he did not find anyone injured or dead. Later, he came and got me and took me to the hospital.  

The second informant was a 22-year-old male sophomore, majoring in finance at the time of the incident. His account of the attack shed light on the perspectives of students about what happened that day and why it did:

I was in English class and all of a sudden, we heard very loud noises and screams in the building. Before the instructor could step outside the classroom to investigate what was happening, armed military soldiers burst into the classroom and began attacking us. Our instructor was the first one to be attacked. As they were beating us they kept saying “Since you do not want to learn, we will teach you a lesson”!! I could not tell you how I made it out of the classroom, but I did. The hall was so chaotic, with students, professors and staff all running for their lives! I could see that many of them were wounded, some more than others due to the amount of blood on their clothing. There was blood in the hallway and on the steps, so a lot of people kept slipping and falling, which made things even worse. As I was running, I could see a group of soldiers through the window heading for the girls’ dormitory and my heart just sunk. So many girls were viciously attacked and raped that after the incidents, the University shut down the girls’ dormitory permanently, in fear of future atrocities against them, and it has not reopened since.

I knew who was behind it all; Doe was retaliating for our recent protest in town. I was an active participant in the students’ protest that had occurred in town, demanding the release of Dr. Sawyer and the other faculty members who had been arrested and detained on charges of “plotting” a coup against him. We were aware that Doe would most likely retaliate against us, but we had no idea he would attack the University. We had had enough with Doe and his “People Redemptive Council”! The country kept getting worse and worse and we were determined to change it for the better, even risking our very lives. What lives did we have anyway, we were all walking dead. The PRC had the guns, but the people had the will! It was not until I got outside and off the campus did I realize that I too had been hurt; I suffered a broken arm.

Doe attacked the University as though he was fighting a foreign enemy who had invaded the country. Furthermore, this attack was another betrayal in a series of betrayals by the PRC. It is ironic that the very people the PRC had claimed they had come to liberate from the oppression of the Americo-Liberians, now needed to be liberated from the PRC.
in the truest sense of the word. Moreover, Doe had finally delivered on his promise of severe consequences for students who ignored his warnings to focus on their schoolwork instead of politics. The attack on the University of Liberia must also have reminded the Liberian people, if they had forgotten about the Rice Riot of 1979, when many of the students were beaten, and some killed for protesting a projected increase in the price of rice by the Tolbert administration.

As is common with tyrannical governments, Doe embarked on a cover-up campaign concerning what happened that day. According to Liebenow,

The details of what actually ensued may long be shrouded in secrecy, for the military cordoned off the campus for five days, denying all requests of foreign diplomats and journalists to inspect the premises. Phone contacts between Liberia and the outside world were jammed by the government. The government acknowledged only that 74 persons were wounded but denied that any persons had been killed. Doe proceeded to remove from office all University administrators and appointed new administrators and filled the vacancies on the suspended Board of Trustees. Doe also fired all members of the Faculty Senate. Although the military had offered denials, many reports indicated that faculty and administrators were beaten and the campus was pillaged. Most important, the secrecy of government actions gave rise to unconfirmed reports that a number of students had been killed and their bodies disposed of by riot troops the night of the military assault. That so many students were being reported missing by their parents suggested that the magnitude of the tragedy was staggering.\(^{210}\)

Based on the account provided by Musu of what happened, it is clear that there were casualties, whether or not the government admitted it. She credits her and her baby’s very survivor to the kindness of the soldier who recognized her from the old community he had lived in and who told her to remain in the bathroom until he came and got her, since military trucks were taking the wounded to the hospital. Moreover, if there were no casualties, and only 74 persons had been wounded, the government should have granted the requests by local and international journalists and foreign diplomats to inspect the

campus after the incident. That the government cordoned off the campus for five days demonstrated that it did have something to hide. As a result of the pressure mounted by the public against the August 24, 1984 attack, Doe was forced to release Dr. Sawyer, and other faculty members accused of plotting a coup against him.\(^{211}\)

Several reasons have been given pertaining to how Doe was able to maintain power. Gershoni argues that,

A complementary source of power was the support of the US government…During the Cold War, Liberia became a crucial component in America’s anti-soviet strategy. Several key installations were located in Liberia, including a Voice of America transmitter that broadcast to all of Africa, the Middle East and the southwestern part of the Soviet Union; a telecommunications relay station that transmitted the diplomatic traffic between Washington and almost all American embassies in Sub-Saharan Africa… For Samuel Doe, the significant part of the American support was the military aid, used in order to insure the support of the armed forces. This aid enabled Doe to equip, arm, and train the army and to provide the soldiers with proper accommodation and welfare benefits.\(^{212}\)

It is no secret that the United States is known to support authoritarian governments whenever it is in their best interest, while condemning the actions of others. The centrality of Liberia to the success of the U.S. Cold War mission in Africa was such that the Reagan administration ignored the atrocities Doe was committing against his own people. In fact, during the Reagan administration, Doe was invited twice to the White House.\(^{213}\) Moreover, by providing military aid to Doe, the United States was inadvertently equipping him with the weapons used to terrorize the Liberian people. The financial aid also allowed Doe to adequately compensate the military, thereby solidifying

\(^{211}\) Liebenow, Liberia: The Quest for Democracy, 262.


\(^{213}\) Documentary, Liberia: America’s Stepchild 2002.
their loyalty to him, as he could count on them to carry out whatever attacks he needed them to do.

Like his predecessors, Doe could arrest, and commit acts of violence against student activists and other citizens because he could get away with it. In authoritarian societies like Liberia, accountability is non-existent. Kieh does an excellent job of demonstrating how the Liberian Civil War was the result of the crisis of underdevelopment, instead of ethnicity as the sole cause of the conflict. In his analysis, he identifies a series of values (authoritarian) that have dominated the Liberian state since the Tubman administration, and how these values have contributed significantly to the underdevelopment of the country. Three of the values he discussed that are of particular importance to understanding the constant attacks by the government against pro-democracy students and other activists are:

*Impunity*: state officials are not held responsible for their unsavory behavior-spanning a broad gamut of actions anchored on the abuse of power. *Masochism*: the practice of rewarding those who inflict pain and harm on citizens… *Antisystem*: the abhorrence for established rules and procedures.

Doe’s lack of respect for an acknowledgement of the laws of the country, including the Constitution, enabled him to order the arrest at will, beatings, imprisonment, and killing of civilians for exercising their rights to freedom of speech and protest. That no one was ever arrested and held accountable for the attack on the University campus, or for other previous attacks on civilians, showed that Doe had placed himself above the law. In fact,

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215 Ibid., 57.
he had become the law. Subsequently, the lack of legal actions against government officials only exacerbated the brutality of the state against the people.

Another important factor in the supportive maintenance of Doe’s power was the overall general failure of Liberian churches to critique and condemn the oppressive rule of Doe and the PRC. Based on his extensive research in the country in the 1980s, and utilizing various sources, Paul Gifford argues that the emphasis on “total obedience” to authority promulgated from the pulpits of evangelical churches made it difficult for the churches to condemn the actions of Doe.\[^{216}\] This evangelical theology of “total obedience” to authority was so strong that The Association of Evangelicals of Liberia (AEL) Constitution prohibited members of the Association from becoming members of the World Council of Churches (WCC), member groups or affiliates. According to Gifford, “The General Secretary made it quite clear that the opposition to WCC churches was based on their political stance. ‘The WCC preaches politics from the pulpit. It accuses the government of this and that…Our way would be different… Our preaching is biblical.’\[^{217}\] The apolitical stance of the dominant churches in the country was rooted in the kinds of training leaders received in seminary schools, (mostly in the United States) and how such doctrine influenced their teachings and preaching; one of such leaders was Byang Kato. Gifford states,

Kato’s overriding principle was that the Bible must judge everything, but it is evident from his books that he simply equated the Bible with the idea of the Bible taught at Dallas Theological Seminary. It was from that standpoint that he judged the WCC’s attempt to address the socio-political world as a perverse denial of the Bible; from that

\[^{217}\] Ibid., 99.
standpoint he judged any African contextualization as a betrayal; from that standpoint he argued from Romans 13, 7 that ‘Christians should be the most loyal citizens.\(^\text{218}\)

To put it simply, Kato was an agent of American religious imperialism, which affected all aspects of Liberians’ lives, including their political, economic and social opportunities. The doctrine of *total obedience* Kato had been indoctrinated with at the Dallas Theological Seminary, was not different from the Southern religious teachings in the United States to slaves, that God demanded total obedient to their masters.\(^\text{219}\) Cole argues that this value of absolute obedience was transported from the South into Liberia by freed slaves and became part of the foundation of child rearing practices, which emphasized children’s absolute submission to all authorities, including parents, teachers, pastors, etc, as a direct mandate from God.\(^\text{220}\)

Kato was an agent of American religious imperialism in that he had come to view God and the Bible solely from the fundamentalist perspective as taught at the Dallas Theological Seminary. Upon his return to Liberia, he promoted this view in his teachings and writings. Moreover, that he viewed any African contextualization of the Bible as “blasphemy,” demonstrates his total acceptance of certain American narrow interpretations of the Bible and his rejection of all non-western interpretations, creating the dichotomy of the West as good and Africa as evil. Gifford further argues that the emphasis of Pentecostal churches on faith and wealth, and the belief that only God can change circumstances, caused church leaders to refrain from involving themselves in politics, even as Doe continued his reign of terror. He explains that based on the

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\(^{218}\) Ibid., 99-100.
\(^{220}\) Ibid., 51.
economic collapse of the country, many independent churches came to form affiliations with evangelical and Pentecostal churches, most of which had financial support from U.S.-based churches.\textsuperscript{221} Based on this union, many independent churches adopted the values and characteristics of evangelical and Pentecostal churches, and failed to challenge Doe in his oppression and mismanagement of the country.

\textbf{Reform or Formality? The 1985 Elections}

On the first anniversary of the 1980 coup, Doe announced the creation of a National Constitutional Commission. The Commission would be charged with the responsibility of drafting a new national constitution, which was to replace the 1847 constitution that had been employed by the settlers in their 133-year rule of the country. The drafting of a new constitution was considered by Doe to be the first step towards democratization. Among those selected to the Commission was Dr. Amos Sawyer, of the University of Liberia as Chairman. And of the twenty-five members, only one was a woman.\textsuperscript{222} This underrepresentation of Liberian women in key governmental positions did not begin with Doe. The Americo-Liberian government, over the long duration of their rule was dominated by men, relegating women to the fringes of society.

While Doe emphasized his ‘commitment’ to the democratization of the country, he simultaneously did everything he could to undermine and manipulate the success of the Commission to his political advantage. On July 26, 1984, Doe gave the nation an Independence Day gift when he finally lifted the ban on political discussions - technically. Within a few days of the lifting of the ban, he announced that he would be

\textsuperscript{221} Gifford, \textit{Christianity and Politics in Doe’s Liberia}, 99-202.
\textsuperscript{222} Liebenow, \textit{Liberia: The Quest for Democracy}, 217.
contesting the 1985 elections and had therefore formed a political party—the National Democratic Party of Liberia (NDPL). This allowed a series of banned political leaders, including Gabriel Bacchus Mathews to announce the formation of the United People’s Party (UPP). Dr. Sawyer also announced the formation of the Liberian People’s Party (LPP) to contest the 1985 elections. Others included the Liberian Action Party (LAP), headed by Jackson F. Doe (not related to President Doe) and the Unity Party (UP).

One of the many strategies the President utilized to ensure he remained in power at all cost was his control of the Constitutional Advisory Assembly and the Special Elections Commission. Analyzing the co-optation of many of the fifty-nine members of the CAA by Doe, Sawyer argues that “Not only did it remove from the draft every measure designed to exact greater accountability of public officials, but it altered the draft to suit the specific political ambitions of Doe.” When the President organized the Interim National Assembly in 1984 (a disguise of the PRC), since only civilians could compete in the 1985 national elections, he appointed many members of the Constitutional Advisory Assembly to cabinet positions and some also became members of his newly formed NDPL.

Doe’s control of the Special Elections Commission (SECOM), which was responsible for registering new political parties, voters, and overseeing the 1985 elections ensured that Doe was already the winner of the first supposedly free and fair elections in the country before the elections even took place. Liebenow commented on this:

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223Ibid., 272-274.
225Sawyer, The Emergence of Autocracy in Liberia, 297.
Under the manipulative hands of Harmon—a scion of the old settler elite, and a lawyer with much governmental experience in both the Tubman and Tolbert administrations—SECOM managed to use the tactics of delay and obfuscation to the fullest in preventing a number of parties from being registered. At each stage of the game, only the NDPL went through the hurdles without serious challenge from SECOM. The other parties either failed to qualify as officially registered participants, or, if they did qualify, they could either face the prospects of having that registration taken away from them or be confronted with a multitude of barriers to their functioning effectively in the same fashion as did the NDPL. Instead of SECOM being either a nonpartisan or even a broadly representative body, membership was by appointment of the standard-bearer of one party only—the NDPL.\footnote{Liebenow, \textit{Liberia: The Quest for Democracy}, 282.}

To make the path to political victory wider for the President, SECOM required each political party interested in contesting the elections to put down a cash deposit of US$50,000 plus $100,000 in bonds or property.\footnote{Ibid., 285.} Because of this clause, many newly organized political parties could not register, hence they could not campaign or compete in the general elections.

In conjunction with co-optation, Doe also released a number of student activists and members of his government whom he had detained on charges of plotting against his government. Among the released was Ellen Sirleaf Johnson, his Minister of Finance who had been convicted of sedition in 1984. The President also embarked on a series of charitable projects by donating money to various schools and other programs, to help improve the studies of the children in the schools.\footnote{Ibid., 282.} Based on Doe’s previous actions towards student activists and others who dared criticize his regime, it can be said that such charitable gestures were not genuine efforts of reconciliation and democratization on the part of the President. Rather, such actions were intended to assist him in winning the support of said groups in the elections.

\footnote{Ibid., 282.}
On 15 October, 1985, Liberians took to the polls to cast their ballots in the country’s first supposedly free and fair elections. On 29 October Doe was declared the winner of the elections by the Special Elections Commission, causing many Liberians to become even more discontented, since they believed that the elections was fraudulent and had been rigged in favor of Doe. According to Seyon,

The 1985 election seemed to have been “staged” essentially to provide a much needed cloak of legitimacy for Doe. It was an open secret in Liberia that there could never be a free and fair election, as long as Doe was in the race, and that he could not win in a free and fair election. With Doe and the military determined to remain in power, it was, therefore, predetermined that the election would be unfree, unfair and that Doe would have been declared the winner.

The concerns of the people were well founded, as many reports later confirmed that bogus ballots, issued to Doe earlier by SECOM were swapped with legally cast ballots around the country. But, Doe and his cronies had succeeded in rigging the elections long before October 15, 1985. SECOM had prevailed in blocking many of Doe’s opponents from registering their political parties, which significantly narrowed the number of his competitors. Furthermore, SECOM was so successful in its suppression of the political opposition that on Election Day only three candidates competed against the incumbent.

That so many Liberians were unhappy with the election results meant that Doe lacked the legitimacy to rule the country. He took advantage of any foreign recognition of the election results to help legitimate his government. Congratulatory letters from African and European heads of state and, particularly from President Ronald Reagan,

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230 Ibid., 220.
231 Ibid., 224.
were read on national radio.\textsuperscript{232} The pseudo-legitimacy that the United States afforded Doe was not enough for him to win the support of his people; he therefore relied on the power of the gun - not the consent of the electorate. Seyon comments on the impact of the United States’ military aid to Doe on the Liberian people:

\begin{quote}
[O]n the altar of American ‘significant national interests’ and maintaining American ‘influence’ in Liberia, the legitimate and just rights of the Liberian people to choose their own leaders were sacrificed; made possible with American guns supplied to Samuel Doe. But more fundamentally, a double standard was laid down for democracy by the United States: a higher standard practiced in New England, which represents the United States, and a lower standard practiced in the bulk of the rest of the world. The Liberians were told they were not entitled to the higher standard of democracy practiced in the United States, and were thereby condemned to Doe’s repression, oppression, violence and brutality…unabated and without respite under American ‘influence.’\textsuperscript{233}
\end{quote}

Regardless of American support for Doe, opposition to him in the post-election period increased, even as he continuously utilized the military to suppress the people. It was within this oppositional framework that Thomas Quiwonkpa, one of the key players of the PRC that overthrew President Tolbert in 1980, staged a coup to oust Doe from power. On the morning of November 12, 1985, the former Army General announced over national radio that “patriotic forces under his command had taken control of the government and ousted Samuel Doe to liberate Liberia!!.” The people welcomed the news and thousands across the country took to the streets in celebration.\textsuperscript{234} However, Doe later announced on national air that the coup against him had failed and that he was still president of Liberia and emphasized that he had been democratically elected by the

\textsuperscript{232}Ibid., 230.
\textsuperscript{233}Ibid., 231.
people to rule. Quiwonkpa and many of his supporters were brutally murdered on the orders of Doe.

The failed coup only exacerbated the President’s paranoid hysteria. Ellen Sirleaf Johnson and many others were arrested and imprisoned on charges that they had supported the coup against him. Doe charged that Johnson, his former Finance Minister, had personally raised the funds for the coup. Doe not only arrested, tortured and killed government officials and military officers he suspected of being part of the coup, but also thousands of Liberians around the country faced the same fate. That Quiwonkpa was from the Gio and Mano ethnic groups made them the prime targets of Doe’s revenge.

Liebenow remarked, “[t]he coup gave Doe the excuse to unleash his undisciplined troops upon the Gio and Mano villagers in the hinterland, since they were the primary bases of support for both Jackson Doe and Thomas Quiwonkpa. The loss in lives and property are still being reckoned.” It is estimated that over 5,000 civilians including women, and children were slaughtered in Nimba county, the hometown of Quiwonkpa.

Not surprising, students remained the most vocal critics of Doe during and after the elections. They too contended that the elections had been rigged against the will of the people. As he had done since ascending into power in 1980, Doe continued his abuse and distrust of students. Liebenow stated:

It has been the educational community, however, that has been the special target of Doe’s abuse despite the critical role that teachers and students played both in the Rice Demonstration of 1979 and in the quick popular acceptance of the legitimacy of the 1980

235 Ibid., 48-51.
237 Ibid., 243.
238 Ibid., 302.
coup... Continuing criticism by students in the post-election period led Doe’s cohorts in the House of Representatives in March 1987 to pass a bill declaring the Liberian National Student Union (LINSU) an illegal association. The measure failed passage only because wiser heads in the Senate prevailed in scuttling the measure.239

In the midst of Doe’s continuous attacks on civilians the economy continued to decline; unemployment remained at peak levels.240 Liberians were still waiting for Doe to honor the promises he made in 1980—that the staged coup was meant to finally address the socio-economic and political marginalization of the vast majority of Liberians.

When Doe assumed power in 1980, the rate of unemployment in the country was 50%; in 1988 the rate was 36%.241 This does not mean that the President had reduced the unemployment rate. Instead, many Liberians had stopped searching for jobs as a result of the continuous economic decline of the country. Moreover, according to Kieh, “[t]he state did not have the financial resources to pay its employees even if it could have created the massive numbers of jobs required to absorb all the unemployed.”242 Although the drop in the demand for rubber and iron ore, the country’s chief exports, is partly to blame for the state’s inability to pay its employed workers, corruption and the uneven distribution of national resources played a more fundamental role.243

The Table shows that in 1980, the lower classes, which constituted 74.2% of the population, received only 23.7% of the national income, while the upper class, which composed about 4% of the total population, received 65% of the national wealth. On the one hand, the same Table shows that by 1985, the percentage of lower class Liberians had risen to 75% of the total population, yet they received a mere 20.2% of national income.

239 Ibid., 251.
242 Ibid., 104.
243 See Kieh Table 5.4 on the distribution of income from 1960-1985
income, a decline of over 3% from 1980. On the other hand, the upper class enjoyed an increase from 65% in 1980 to 68% by 1985.\textsuperscript{244} It was therefore within the context of this continuous deprivation and oppression that Charles Taylor, a descendant of the Americo-Liberians, would wage his war of so-called liberation against Doe, beginning in late 1989.

**He Who Lives by the Sword, will Die by the Sword: the Onset of the Civil War and the Murder of Doe**

In the early morning hours of Christmas Eve 1989, Liberians awoke to the alarming news that a group of over one hundred rebels calling themselves the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) had invaded the country from neighboring Ivory Coast.\textsuperscript{245} The group was headed by Charles Taylor, an Americo-Liberian descendant. Taylor had served as the Director-General of the General Services Agency (GSA) in the country from 1980-1983. Prior to his invasion, in 1984, as Doe’s repressive rule continued, Taylor fled the country and came to the United States. Following his departure, he was accused by the Liberian government of embezzling US$1 million in public funds.\textsuperscript{246} The government issued an arrest warrant for him and began the extradition process with the United States for Taylor to be returned to Liberia to face charges. Taylor was arrested and imprisoned in Boston. As the extradition time approached, in 1985, it was alleged that he had escaped from prison and his whereabouts

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{244} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{246} Kieh, *The First Liberian Civil War: The Crisis of Underdevelopment*, 145.
\end{flushright}
remained unknown until his invasion of the country in 1989. Over the years, many Liberians have questioned how Taylor escaped from an American prison; some believed that he might have been deliberately released from prison by the American government.

After entering the country from the Ivory Coast, the rebels made their way to Nimba County, the home of Thomas Quiwonkpa, whom Doe had murdered, following his failed coup in 1985. They encountered no difficulties in recruiting members from the Gio and Mano ethnic groups to join their cause. The willingness of these two ethnic groups to join the rebels was the result of the atrocities they had suffered under the Doe regime. Thus they sought revenge on Doe and his Krahn group. To gain further trust and support for his cause, Charles Taylor, deceitfully, told the Gios and the Manos that his effort was a continuation of Quiwonkpa’s failed coup in 1985. Adebajo argues that “This manipulation of ethnic differences predictably led to the NPFL attacks on the Krahns and Mandingos in its advance to the Monrovian capital, and many Krahn civilians were killed in the early stages of the war.” By 1990, thousands of Liberians had been killed because of their ethnicity.

The atrocities that many Liberians faced during the early stages of the war were not only experienced at the hands of the rebels; the Armed Forces of Liberia, which consisted of mostly Krahns, were just as guilty as the rebels, since they, too, upon the orders of Doe, embarked on a massacre of the Gios and the Manos and of those who opposed him. Innocent men, women and children were brutally murdered, and entire villages were set ablaze. Equally disturbing were the reports of hundreds of babies and

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249 Adebajo, Building Peace in West Africa: Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea-Bissau, 42.
children that were thrown into wells to drown after their parents had been killed. The senseless massacre of hundreds of innocent Liberians in Nimba County sparked off national and international criticism of the Doe government, and several groups appealed to the government to end the hostilities. Doe continued to stand his ground and refused to resign and threatened that more lives would be destroyed, if the NPFL did not surrender to the government.

By April 1990, the structure of the NPFL was beginning to fracture. Commander Prince Yormie Johnson had split from the NPFL and formed the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL), after Taylor had executed some of his soldiers for their defeat by government forces in Ganta, Nimba County. The split between Taylor and Johnson now created a second war front, as both fought against each other, as well as the government. However, the rebel groups made their way to the capital, Monrovia, and the stranglehold, which Doe had had on the country for years, began to weaken.

On September 9, 1990, as Doe was on his way to a meeting with representatives of the West African peacekeeping forces at the Freeport in Monrovia, Doe was captured by the forces of Prince Johnson. Doe’s ears and penis were cut off, and he was ordered to eat his own parts, all the while with both hands tied tightly behind his back. According to Ellis, “The ordeal was recorded on video, copies of which Johnson took pleasure in showing visitors to his headquarters. Copies went on general sale in cities throughout West Africa, and extracts were even broadcast on British Television news.” The barbaric and savage murder of Doe did not end the war, as many Liberians expected.

251 Ibid., 168.
252 Ibid.
Rather, his death only exacerbated the conflicts, as many rebel groups sprang up, all fighting to control the Executive Mansion. What ensued in the period from 1990 to 2003 were unspeakable bloodshed and the destruction of the country – especially the economy.

**Conclusion**

This chapter examined the ten-year military regime of Samuel Doe, beginning in 1980 and ending in 1990. On April 12th, 1980, he led a bloody coup that ended the Presidency of William R. Tolbert and subsequently, settler rule (1847-1980) in the country. As the first indigenous president of the country, he misused and abused his authority and lost the opportunity to move the country in the direction of genuine economic, social, and political reforms. As demonstrated throughout the chapter, contrary to his promise of returning the country to civilian rule after the coup, Doe did everything possible to remain in power. Instead of democracy, authoritarianism was his style of governance. Military decrees were the laws by which everyday citizens were judged and punished for ‘crimes’ against the state, which meant Doe.

Instead of fulfilling his promises of democratization, Doe focused on enriching himself and planned to remain president for life - a key feature of dictatorship, not on improving the lives of the Liberian people. The ban on all politics and political organizations, the arrests, beatings, and imprisonment of political activists, the suspension of the Liberian Constitution, and the rigged presidential elections of 1985, all demonstrated Doe’s desire and intention to remain president till death. Also, under his rule, the vast majority of the Liberian people remained impoverished. His lack of commitment to socio-economic and political reforms was such that the disparities between the rich and the poor became the widest in the country’s history, wider than
under any settler president. Not surprisingly, Doe’s government was plagued with nepotism and widespread corruption. As citizens continued to endure the realities of a tyrannical government, Doe and his cronies continued to amass great personal wealth. By the end of his rule in 1990, the fragile low socio-economic and political status of the Liberian people had only been exacerbated.

However, in the midst of Doe’s repression, students remained a committed force for change. Thus, a major focus of this chapter has been their continuous criticism and opposition to his regime. Throughout his presidency, he had a tumultuous relationship with them. Like his predecessors, students were the primary target of his regime and paid the highest price, both in arrests, imprisonment and in blood. Based on childrearing practices of absolute obedience and adult authority, he too saw student activists as children who needed to focus on their schoolwork instead of politicking. The permanent childlike state to which students and the youth in general have been consigned by adults has been one of the major obstacles to the fostering of democracy in the country, since their skills and ideas are ignored and remained unharnessed.

Doe justified his brutality against students on the basis that by participating in politics, they were entering into the world of adults, which was a violation of the moral order and therefore, they needed to be disciplined, which consisted of sentencing five student activists to death by firing squad after they had released a public statement questioning his ban on politics in schools, although they were granted executive clemency hours before their execution. Another major disciplinary action of Doe against students was the 1984 military attack on the University of Liberia campus, which resulted in the brutal rape of female students and staff, causing the permanent closure of female
housing on campus. Many students were beaten, injured and killed, while others remained missing, even though the government denied all claims of brutality. However, the accounts of two survivors discussed earlier in the chapter, and the analyses of scholars\textsuperscript{255} including about the incident all contradict the government’s denial of that day’s atrocity.

In addition to analyzing the oppressive policies of Doe, the chapter analyzed what I deemed to be among the major factors that allowed Doe to maintain power for a decade. Among them were the overall failures of Liberian churches to critique and condemn Doe’s regime. Rooted in the Evangelical theology of total obedience, promulgated from pulpits across the country each Sunday, churchgoers were instructed to refrain from participating in politics and were encouraged to focus on God. Therefore, to question authority, including the President’s, was seen as direct disobedience to God and therefore justified whatever disciplinary actions taken against the disobedient. The permanent childlike state to which Evangelical churches had assigned their congregations promulgated the culture of being \textit{apolitical}-what Doe had hoped all Liberians would become.

Another major source of Doe’s power was the continuous financial support and military aid he received from the United States. Liberia was an important ally in the U.S. fight against communism during the Cold War in Africa; the Reagan administration simply turned a blind eye to the atrocities of Doe. Simply put, America’s national interest took precedence over the freedom and liberty of the Liberian people. The weapons and military training he received from the United States were not used to protect Liberians against foreign enemies, but rather to maintain his reign of terror against the

very people he had promised to liberate. The lack of accountability and respect for the law also allowed Doe to brutalize and kill innocent Liberians, including students. In Doe’s Liberia, Doe was the law.

In 1989, Charles Taylor invaded the country from neighboring Ivory Coast. With the invasion, he also claimed that he had come to liberate the Liberian people from the authoritarian and oppressive regime of President Doe. He, however, succeeded only in the total destruction of the country’s already weakened economic, social and political infrastructure. Taylor’s invasion marked the beginning of a bloody fourteen-year civil war that resulted in the deaths of over three hundred thousand Liberians, including tens of thousands of women and children, and led to the displacement and destitution of over one million Liberians. In addition to such losses, the Liberian civil war ushered in a new form of devaluation and exploitation of Liberian youth: the use of children as child soldiers and the sexual exploitation of girls.

CHAPTER: 3

When Doe Died, the War Should have Ended.

In the previous chapter, I discussed the circumstances that brought Samuel Doe to power and how his policies further polarized the Liberian society. I examined further how this deeper polarization and the failure of his regime to provide political and economic stabilities led the country into one of the bloodiest civil wars in the history of the West African sub-region. Doe, who came to power by overthrowing the Americo-Liberian regime in a bloody coup d’état, also succumbed to a violent end. The beginning of his regime in 1980 therefore launched Liberia on the path of violence that intensified even after his demise.

Most Liberians expected the murder of Doe on 10 September 1990 would end the war and bring peace to Liberia. However, his death took the conflict to new heights. In conjunction with the AFL, NPFL, and INPFL, the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO), and the Lofa Defense Force (LDF) entered the war. This new warring faction consisted of rebels, mostly ethnically Krahn or Mandingo. The Krahn branch of the group was called ULIMO-J, and was headed by Roosevelt Johnson, while the Mandingo sector was led by Alhaji Kromah. The creation of ULIMO was a direct response to the targeted killings of Mandingos and Krahns by the NPFL, which

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was dominated by members from the Gio and Mano ethnic groups.\textsuperscript{259} As discussed in chapter two, the Gio and Mano ethnic groups largely supported Charles Taylor because they saw the NPFL as an opportunity for them to avenge the 1985 failed coup that killed Thomas Quiwonkpa, and thousands of other Gio and Mano people by Doe. Moreover, the Gio and Mano ethnic groups largely opposed the Mandingos because during his rule Doe had formed an alliance with the Mandingo community and granted them certain commercial privileges. This is a very important shift in the relationship between the Liberian government and Mandingos. Historically the Mandingos have not been considered to be ‘real’ Liberians because most of them immigrated to the country from Guinea, and as Muslims, they tended to live in separate communities.\textsuperscript{260} This isolation, and the perception that they are outsiders, made them a prime target for murder in the war. Therefore, what had begun as a war to ‘liberate’ the Liberian people from the “chains” of Doe had turned into a full-fledged civil war, where innocent civilians were targeted for elimination either because of their ethnic backgrounds or their affiliations with a particular warring faction. Taylor and Johnson, the two major warlords, continued to fight each other in a bloody competition for the presidency.\textsuperscript{261} As the conflict escalated, so too did the death of civilians.

The Liberian conflict and its escalation were ignored by the international community, including the United States and the United Nations.\textsuperscript{262} While the United States and the United Nations ignored the people of Liberian and concentrated their

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\textsuperscript{259} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{261} Guannu, “The Political History of Liberia and the Civil War,” 3.
\textsuperscript{262} Davis Francis J, \textit{The Politics of Economic Regionalism: Sierra Leone in ECOWAS}. (Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2001), 41-42.
political energy on mobilizing the international community to liberate Kuwait from Iraq in what is now described as the “First Gulf War,” Nigeria organized the Economic Cooperation of West African States (ECOWAS) to intervene in the Liberian crises. This intervention will mark the beginning of regional peacekeeping initiatives in the history of West Africa, one that the international community recognized not only crucial and timely, but also a new model for regional peacekeeping activities.

**ECOWAS Peacekeeping Mission in Liberia (1990-1999)**

ECOWAS was founded in 1975 to promote regional economic cooperation among its member states. Although military intervention in member states’ internal conflicts was not part of the organization’s mandate, a decision was made by member states to intervene to save Liberian civilians and to bring an end to a war that had the potentials to destabilize the region, especially neighboring Sierra Leone, Guinea and the Ivory Coast. According to Wippman:

> By all accounts, the loss of life in Liberia had reached near genocidal proportions; mass starvation and widespread diseases were imminent. The continued fighting posed a clear danger to the peace and security of the region, both through the creation of an enormous refugee population in countries ill-equipped to handle such an influx and through the potential (soon realized) for direct spillover of fighting from Liberia into neighbor states.

Failure to intervene in the Liberian civil war was therefore not an option for the Organization, since the cost was simply far too great. On August 24, 1990, the

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263 Ibid., 101.
ECOWAS Cease-Fire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) arrived in Liberia to help restore and enforce peace agreements among warlords in the country.265

While countries, including Ghana, Sierra Leone, Gabon and Nigeria contributed troops to the peacekeeping initiative, francophone member states such as the Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso and Togo refused to contribute troops to the joint effort, and questioned the legality of an ECOWAS intervention in the conflict.266 It appears that the issue of legality raised by opponents was a facade. Blaise Compaore, President of Burkina Faso was a supporter of Charles Taylor and had assisted him with his 1989 invasion.267 The Ivory Coast also supported Taylor’s invasion of Liberia and served as a “[s]afe haven, launching pad and re-supply route.”268 Nigeria was accused of leading the charge for an ECOWAS intervention because of the personal friendship between President Abraham Babangida and Doe. More importantly, the Ivory Coast objected to ECOMOG’s intervention in Liberia because it viewed the mission as an attempt by Nigeria to assert its hegemonic influence across the region.269 This concern however, proved to be untrue.

Not surprisingly, Taylor also opposed the involvement of ECOWAS in the conflict, arguing that it “violated” the sovereignty of Liberia. However, it was evident that his personal ambition of becoming president at any cost drove Taylor’s opposition against the intervention. Thus, according to Ohanwe,

265 Ibid., 167.
269 Ibid.
Two factors may have been responsible for Taylor’s intransigence towards the ECOWAS Peace Plan. First, Taylor perceived ECOWAS as a ‘spoiler.’ In his calculation ECOWAS had stalled his presidential ambition through its intervention and peace plan. One could not expect an ambitious man who has pummeled and pounded his way across the country, and who by now controlled 95 percent of Liberian territory, with Monrovia, his ultimate prize in full view, to now risk losing all by complying with the ECOWAS Plan. Specifically, a peaceful resolution of the conflict would have a negative effect on him because he knew his personal record would make it impossible for him to win an election. Atrocities committed by his forces exceeded those of Doe…Against this background; the only way left to Taylor to fulfill his presidential ambition was through the barrel of the gun.270

Interestingly, in Liberia only Taylor and his supporters opposed ECOMOG’s mission. There was not a single reported case of Liberians demonstrating against ECOWAS intervention into the conflict. To the contrary, Liberians overwhelmingly welcomed ECOMOG and were grateful for their intervention. They sang songs of praise when they heard of the peacekeeping mission and many believed God had finally heard the prayers of the Liberian people. Also, the headline story for May 24-27, 1991 of The New Listener read: “Thank God for ECOMOG,” in which a reporter praised the initiatives taken by ECOMOG to foster a non-antagonistic relationship with the Liberian press, and for recognizing the role the media had in disseminating the goals and agenda of ECOMOG to the Liberian people.

Liberians in the diaspora also showed their appreciation for the mission. Ohanwe observed:

Liberians in the US on 11 July 1992 hosted an elaborate appreciation dinner and dance in New York City to express their profound gratitude to ECOWAS member states, especially the eight states whose soldiers comprised the ECOWAS Cease-fire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG). Many distinguished speakers at the party gave testimonies as why Liberians should be grateful to ECOMOG. The Rev. Bishop Enoch C. Naklem of the United Christian Church of God described ECOMOG as the ‘Good Samaritan.’ The keynote speaker Dr. Abraham James, a Liberian with the University of Pennsylvania, 270 Ohanwe, Post-Cold War Conflicts in Africa: Case Studies of Liberia and Somalia, 94.
said the best measurement of the good job that ECOMOG had done for Liberians was to consider Liberia without ECOMOG.\textsuperscript{271}

Clearly, ECOMOG was considered by the Liberian people to be a friend, not a foe. Literally, ECOMOG’s intervention was needed to save Liberians from themselves, if there was to be a Liberian state after the war.

Throughout the early 1990s, a series of peace talks ended in agreements in various ECOWAS states, including the 28 November, 1990, Bamako Peace Talk Agreement, at which warring factions agreed to a cease-fire. Also, on 21 December 1990, the warlords met in Banjul and agreed to allow the organization of an All-Liberian Conference, to be held in Monrovia to discuss the formation of a future interim government. Between November of 1990 and August of 1996, over fifteen Peace Talk Agreements, under the auspices of ECOWAS were reached by rebel leaders.\textsuperscript{272}

**Achievements of ECOMOG**

The presence and operations of ECOMOG made it possible for international humanitarian organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Swedish Relief Agency, UN Food Program and others to provide food and medical care to many Liberians, who were on the verge of starvation.\textsuperscript{273} One of the major achievements of ECOMOG in Liberia was that they prevented the slaughter of thousands of more innocent Liberians. The brutality and carnage of the civil war was unimaginable. In July of 1990, a group of AFL soldiers committed one of the most horrific massacres of

\textsuperscript{271} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{272} Ibid., 116-118.
\textsuperscript{273} Ibid., 128-129.
the war. A group of 600 civilians displaced due to fighting in Monrovia sought refuge in the Lutheran Church in Sinkor, a suburb of the capital. Unarmed women, men and children asleep in the church were viciously attacked and murdered by government troops. Doe had ordered the massacre because it was alleged that Taylor’s father was seeking refuge there.\textsuperscript{274} There were no survivors. Such senseless killings and the lack of respect for human life, and the destruction of property all pointed to the immediate need for foreign intervention.

The significance of ECOMOG’s mission in Liberia cannot be overstated. Thousands of Liberians credit ECOMOG for their survival during the conflict. A forty-year-old former government employee, married with three children in 1990, illustrates the centrality of their mission in preventing the loss of more lives:

Thank God for ECOMOG! Their arrival was a blessing! Had it not been for them, my family and our entire community and thousands more would have simply perished. There was so much suffering everywhere, nowhere was safe. The AFL soldiers were going around raping girls and women, arresting, beating and killing fathers and young men on charges that they were supporters of Charles Taylor or Prince Johnson. They killed three young men from our community. I knew them very well, they were not rebels or sympathizers; they were college students. Sad, just sad. Food was very scarce; my entire family was malnourished. We went for days without food and my kids would tell me that their stomachs were hurting. All I could say to them is that I know. My husband felt totally helpless about the situation. Many times, we were so desperate for food that some of the women and I would risk being raped or killed to walk several hours in search of food. Sometimes, on our way back, the AFL soldiers, or rebels would harass us and take our food.

When ECOMOG arrived, power and running water were restored to Monrovia. They distributed food from their military post across Monrovia and offered some medical services. My neighbors and I no longer had to risk our lives in search of food for our families. The market women were selling again, and we could travel safely to the market without being harassed to purchase fresh produce. Things improved a lot, although there was still a war going on. ECOWAS came to our rescue when the world abandoned and left us to die. But, you can’t blame them; we did it to ourselves.\textsuperscript{275}

\textsuperscript{274} Francis, \textit{The Politics of Economic Regionalism: Sierra Leone in ECOWAS}, 41.
\textsuperscript{275} Interview with a female survival of the Liberian civil war, Paynesville Red Light, December, 5 2009.
Musu’s story illuminates several important points about women and war. First, the perpetual raping of girls and women posed a serious threat to their health and lives. Second, the responsibility for providing for the family usually fell on the shoulders of women and girls, as it might be too dangerous for men and boys to venture out, as seen above. The task of providing for their families’ sustenance was such that, “At the height of the Liberian war, food shortages became a common denominator in the daily struggles of women. Some ordinary women who were desperate to feed their families participated in atrocities themselves, by joining faction groups.”

Not surprisingly, according to a 1996 United Nations Development Program (UNDP) report, 90 percent of the victims of the Liberian civil war were women and children. Musu’s story also shows the importance of female solidarity. Had the women not collectively acted in defense of their friend, the rebel would have killed her, and eventually all of them; hence their very survival depended upon their cooperation.

ECOWAS peace initiatives and a genuine desire to see a peaceful end to the war led to the formation of the Interim Government of National Unity (IGNU) in 1991. The head of the new government was Dr. Amos Sawyer, Professor and Dean of the College of Liberal Arts at The University of Liberia. According to Ahadzi, “The IGNU rather than ECOMOG was to administer Liberia. ECOMOG’s strategy largely was to employ its military power to cow the belligerents while the IGNU was to address the political differentiations and prepare for democratic elections.”

The establishment of the IGNU created a sense of normalcy for residents of Monrovia, in that ECOMOG enforced the

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278 Ibid., 108.
ceasefire and peace talk agreement that led to the creation of the IGNU. Things appeared to be improving for Monrovians, as people began to trade again, had access to much needed food from the markets and children returning to school. However, the power of the IGNU was limited to Monrovia, since Taylor controlled 90 percent of the nation, over which he declared himself president, calling it “Greater Liberia.” He also did not recognize Sawyer and the IGNU, and continuously came into combat with ECOMOG.

In order for national elections to be held, all thirteen counties, (now sixteen), had to participate and Taylor had no desire in seeing that happen, as nothing short of the presidency would do for him.

Another significant success of ECOMOG’s mission in Liberia was that it played an integral role in the holding of presidential elections in 1997, in which Taylor emerged the victor. The July presidential elections had come about after intense negotiations among various warring factions at the Abuja Accord in August of 1996. Taylor’s victory, in part, was due to the fact that some Liberians liked him, regardless of the atrocities his war committed against them. However, it will be inaccurate to assume that all Liberians who voted for him liked him and believed he was the right choice. According to Nass, “There was the undercurrent of fear that if he lost the elections, he could go back to the bush to continue his guerrilla warfare. Voting for him meant voting for an end to the crisis.” Subsequently, the desire for peace and to see an end to the carnage was a major factor in Liberians’ decision to elect Taylor president. Amidst many

280 Miller, 95.
281 Ohanwe, Post-Cold War Conflicts in Africa: Case Studies of Liberia and Somalia, 94.
283 Ibid., 177.
obstacles, ECOMOG had achieved what it set out to do: end the war and stabilize Liberia.

My assertion on the overall success of the ECOWAS mission should not imply that there were no shortcomings of the peace initiative. Ohanwe does an excellent job detailing the pitfalls of ECOMOG’s mission in Liberia, including the violation of human rights. As he put it, “ECOMOG therefore, pursued peace without recognizing the importance of human rights.”

The innocent killings of civilians and the raping of women and the failure of the Monitoring Group to investigate these incidents were among the major shortcomings of ECOMOG in Liberia. The looting of property by troops was also a problem. Musu, whose story of survival is told above, not only praised ECOWAS’ intervention in the conflict, but also pointed out some of its weaknesses:

Some of them did the same things the rebels were doing; looting property and other materials, which they shipped to their home countries. I know this because my husband was working at Free Port in 1990 and at the time, had been working there for twenty years. He used to come home and say, “Man, nothing will be left in this country when the war ends.” He said they were loading everything from refrigerators to generators, televisions, mattresses, tires, even furniture. Besides, this is common news in Liberia; we all know they stole. There are also many fatherless children in Liberia today, who were conceived during ECOMOG’s mission in the country. When they left, they forgot about their children. I know some of these young people, and they are catching hell-financially struggling.

The issue of what I call peace babies- children fathered by ECOMOG peacekeepers between the years 1990 and 1999, has yet to make its way into the literature, because scholars have ignored this issue, since there is no statistical data or research to show what percentage of children, some of whom are now adults, were fathered by peacekeepers.

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284 Ohanwe, Post-Cold War Conflicts in Africa: Case Studies of Liberia and Somalia, 129.
285 Interview with female survival of the civil war, Paynesville Red Light, December 5, 2009.
However, given the fact that many Liberian women and girls entered into relationships with peacekeepers as a survival strategy, indicates that there exists a large enough sample of such individuals to conduct research.

Acknowledging the shortcomings of the ECOWAS mission in Liberia does not negate that thousands of lives were saved from death and starvation by their presence, including the fortunate girls and women who were spared the torture of rape and other sexual abuses by rebel forces. Since this was the first regional peacekeeping mission carried out by ECOWAS, one may expect that mistakes would be made, and indeed, mistakes were made.286 However, historians should not lose sight of the lessons learned as well. The lessons from the mistakes of ECOMOG’s peacekeeping in Liberia should alert ECOWAS to include a mandate on human rights protection as part of their peacekeeping initiatives in a member state. What ECOWAS did in Liberia was remarkable and indicates that Africans care about human rights and the success and stability of the continent. Moreover, according to Ohanwe, “ECOWAS demonstrated that Africa does have a capacity to find solutions to its own problems where there is a will to find them.”287 Without the intervention of ECOWAS, the outcome of the Liberian civil war would have been far more tragic than it was.

286 During other wars, soldiers of seasoned armies belonging to such powers as the United States and Great Britain have also committed atrocities against civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan. The most infamous violations of human rights that made its way into mainstream news and received national and international attention was the torture and abuse of prisoners by U.S. soldiers in 2004 at the Abu Ghraib Prison in Iraq, and the 2006 prison abuse scandal at Guantanamo Bay. More recently, a U.S. Army Sergeant murdered 16 Afghan civilians asleep in their beds. The escalation of the violation of human rights during wars unfortunately, is a common phenomenon and often, the guilty go unpunished. The U.S. insists on U.S. trials for their military murderers, but at least they commit themselves to trials, which the Liberian leadership did not do; in part because President Taylor was himself guilty of committing atrocities against civilians during his tenure as a rebel leader.

287 Ohanwe, Post-Cold War Conflicts in Africa: Case Studies of Liberia and Somalia, 128.
The Youth and the Liberian Civil War

The issue of the youth caught up in civil wars should not only be of concern to Liberia, but all of Africa. Pertaining to African youth, De Boeck and Honwana argue that,

In Africa, young people constitute the majority of the population and are at the center of societal interactions and transformations. Yet, children and youth are often placed at the margins of the public sphere and major political, socio-economic, and cultural processes. The challenging situation on the continent today makes young people particularly vulnerable. Many have little access to education, employment and livelihoods, health care and basic nutrition.  

The causes of these stressors for youth, they explain, are due to factors such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic, political instability, and armed conflicts.

The use of child soldiers and youth in the Liberian civil war meant that children and teenagers, committed unimaginable atrocities. The number of youth who fought in the war is estimated to be between 40,000 and 70,000. Identifying the socio-economic, family structure or the lack thereof, and education level, of youth recruited prior to the start of the conflict not just in Liberia, but also during the civil wars in Sierra Leone, Mozambique, Uganda, and others across the continent is very important. Exploring such questions allows us to see that the vast majority of youth recruited for African civil wars come from low socio-economic backgrounds. The need to belong to a family and the prospects for upward mobility were key reasons for the involvement of youth in the Sierra Leonean Civil War.

Similarly, Moran states that “When the young, rurally recruited fighters of Charles Taylor’s NPFL entered Monrovia in the summer of 1990, it was the first time that many of them had seen their capital city.”\textsuperscript{291} Most of these youth had not previously travelled to Monrovia because of the sharp socio-economic divide between urban and rural areas that exists in the country, beginning in 1822. With the Americo-Liberian domination, the interior of Liberia was a reservoir of forced and cheap labor (see chapter one). Consequently, development was limited to Monrovia, while rural areas were abandoned and cut off from benefiting from the national wealth. Seeing Monrovia for the first time would have felt like they were entering a different world.

However, Moran contends that, “What is lost in this dichotomous construction of rural and urban is the fact that neither modernity nor the moral values of the village are exclusively located in either the city or the country side.”\textsuperscript{292} Moran is right. While many recruits came from the countryside, warlords also recruited child soldiers from among the urban poor. The account provided by informant twelve during fieldwork in 2009 further illustrates this point:

I spent my whole life in West Point, Monrovia. Most people never came there because they said we were all criminals. Yeah, life was very tough! Man could not even go to school. My ma and pa never step foot in class before, and I don’t think anyone in the community went to school before. So, when one of my friends told me his brother joined Taylor and came back with plenty money, I told him to tell his brother I wanted to join too. I had never been outside my neighborhood before, even though I lived in Monrovia. This was in 1991 and I was thirteen years old at the time. After I joined, I was able to help my family.\textsuperscript{293}

\textsuperscript{292}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{293}Interview with former child soldier, Paynesville Red Light, October 7, 2009.
In order to adequately understand the motives for the involvement of youth in civil conflicts, it is necessary to focus on their relationship to the state prior to the onset of the conflict, instead of simply emphasizing their geographical location. Such analysis allows us to move beyond the urban/rural dichotomy for a more in depth analysis of youth involvement in social conflicts. Utas argues that the marginalization of young people was the main factor for their enlistment into rebel groups. However, he takes youth agency too far when he argues that,

Even where forced recruitment took place, most of the young people still joined voluntarily, making Liberia rather different in its recruitment of children into rebel armies, than others such as the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) of Sierra Leone and the Lords Resistance Movement/Army of Northern Uganda. If it had not been for the willingness of youth to take up arms voluntarily in this way, the Liberian civil war would never have escalated to the extent it did.294

The assertion that the Liberian civil war would not have lasted as long as it did without the “willingness” of the youth to fight ignores the profitability of the war for Charles Taylor and his business associates, which promulgated the war.

In a comparative study of warlords’ economies in Liberia and Sierra Leone, Reno argues that,

Taylor quickly discovered that he could resume some corporate connections that combined fiscal and military tasks that Doe had pioneered. These connections, so long as they lasted, gave Taylor access to cash with which he could buy arms and munitions and attract clients… An American rubber company for example, continued to export rubber after signing agreements with Taylor in 1991 and 1992. Taylor also allegedly received payments from iron ore mining firms anxious to curry favor with him in anticipation that he would become the next Liberian president.295

294 Utas, Sweet Battlefields: Youth and the Liberian Civil War, 9.
Taylor’s control over national resources and the eagerness with which international corporations did business with him financed the war. With a constant flow of revenue, he was able to purchase the arms and munitions he needed to continue his fight for the presidency. During the period of 1990 to 1992, the reported personal income of Taylor was respectively U.S$182.million, US$180.3m, and US$182m.296 Like Taylor, Foday Sankor of the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone, relied on the sale of diamonds in the RUF-controlled territories to support his war. To this end, Reno asserts, “Together, renegade strongmen and the RUF controlled about a quarter billion dollars in diamond trade and successfully cut the regime off from its major independent source of revenues.”297 While warlords and their cronies amassed wealth, young fighters were excluded from the accumulation of wealth while provided with arms and munitions.

There is no question that the carrying of arms afforded the youth the power and status they previously lacked. According to Utas,

Many young ex-combatants 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 assignment; and payoffs from protecting locals and the acquisition of power in local communities. The leap from a powerless young boy, under the authority of parents and elders, to being a commander with a gun is momentous… 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.”298

296 Ibid., 24.
297 Ibid., 20.
The basic need for personal and familial survival and the autonomous power from parental control if any existed were major incentives for young boys to join various warring faction. However, this should not imply that youth participation in the war was entirely voluntary.

**Women and Girls in the Liberian Civil War**

As victims, women and girls were subjected to rape, sexual slavery and other forms of sexual violence during the Liberian civil war. Utas argues that,

> The war years were a constant battle for protection- under the wing of the right commando, young women in the war zone had no choice but to cling to a fighter with enough power to protect them. Without such protection, they were running the very real risk of being forced into sexual services, or undergoing rape, forced labor and abduction…Having a relationship with at least one fighter was crucial for the survival of not only the woman herself but her entire family.\(^{299}\)

Therefore, the need for protection played a significant role in young women’s decision to join or associate with a rebel group. However, this did not always ensure their safety; girlfriends and female fighters were sometimes subjected to the humiliation of sexual violence and death at the hands of their lovers. The story about the death of Nancy, provided by her father illuminates this reality:

> My daughter Mary was a sweet girl. She and her older sister never gave me any problems. You see, their mother died in 1982 from breast cancer and I was left to raise them. When Taylor’s boys entered Pittsburg in 1990, we thought they would not commit any acts of violence since it was his hometown. We were wrong, we were wrong. Those boys did a lot here! When they came, they raided homes and took all of the valuables and cars they came across. They drove around in our cars and wore our things without a care in the world; it was like they had won the lottery. Some neighbors had tried to hide their cars in the bush, but they always got it. Some members of the community quickly associated with the rebels and were giving them

information about their neighbors. People were killed because of this. Also, all of the boys wanted a woman, even the ones that the gun they were carrying was bigger than they were. None of our daughters were safe. They would just come to your house and sexually harass your daughters, saying all kinds of dirty sexual things, and if they wanted to, they ordered the girl at gunpoint to follow them. They raped a lot of women.

From the first day they entered Pittsburg, their head commander kept coming to our house to talk to Mary. I was very scared and worried about what he was going to do to her, but he never said anything nasty to her or ordered her to follow him. He told all his boys to stay away from our house and soon he and Mary became a couple. Problems started right away; he was a womanizer. When Mary would say something about the other girlfriends he had, he would beat her. I felt so helpless and told her not to say anything about his affairs and she agreed. But he always found something to beat her about. He accused her of loving her childhood friend Flomo, and ended up killing him. He killed that boy for nothing. When he decided to move his boys somewhere else, he took Mary with him and some of the other boys also took their girlfriends with them. Something inside of me just knew I would never see my daughter alive again; it was November 11, 1990.

It was almost six years before I heard anything about my daughter. One of my friends came from Monrovia and said he saw Mary at the market in Duala with Prince, the commander and from what he could tell, he was still abusing her. I later came to Duala to see if I could find her, but it was hard. So, I just kept going around for weeks asking everyone in the area if they knew her and finally, I got lucky. We were reunited and she told me everything. She told me that he told her if she ever tries to leave him again, like she had done a year earlier, he would kill her. She said she was going to take things easy since she was five months pregnant. Three months later, she was dead. On April 6th, 1996, two of her friends came running to where I was staying. They were yelling, crying and calling my name. I came running outside and they told me that Prince had beaten Mary to death and that her body was lying in the yard. We ran back to their house and it was true, my daughter was dead. Her entire body was covered with bruises. And nothing came of it. What could we have done? The man had the gun. We buried her next to her mother. This is the liberation Charles Taylor brought us. You see, when Doe died, the war should have ended.300

Mary’s story illuminates the complexities of female experiences and survival strategies during the war. While her relationship with a commander ensured the safety of her family, provided for them, and protected her and other female relatives from random sexual violence during his control of the area, the immense violence she simultaneously experienced at his hands, which ultimately resulted in her death, shows the multiplicity and fluidity of female experiences during the war, and helps to deconstruct the dichotomy of victim/perpetrator.

300 Interview with a father who daughter was beaten to death by her rebel boyfriend, Paynesville Red Light, October 7, 2009.
The vast majority of rape and other forms of sexual violence were committed against civilian women and girls.\footnote{Utas, “Agency of Victims: Young Women in the Liberian Civil War,” 66.} While young girls were targeted, women of all ages were raped during the war. Most of the women interviewed during fieldwork for this project stated that the fear of rape and sexual assault was one of their primary concerns during the Civil War. The most in-depth research study to date about the impact of sexual violence against women and girls during the Liberian civil war was published in 2008. The project was undertaken by Isis-Women’s International Cross Cultural Exchange (Isis-WICCE) in collaboration with the Liberian Ministry of Gender and Development, and the Liberian chapters of West Africa Network for Peace Building (WANEP) and Women in Peace building Network (WIPNET). At the end of civil conflicts, women and girls suffer from an array of psychological problems such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, insomnia, etc. According to the Isis-WICCE report, 93% of the respondents reported having suffered at least one psychological symptom.\footnote{A Situation Analysis of the Women Survivors of the 1989-2003 Armed Conflict in Liberia. A Research Report by Isis-Women’s International Cross Cultural Exchange in Collaboration with the Ministry of Gender and Development, Liberia and Women in Peace building Network, Liberia. (2008), 76.} Survivals of sexual violence also endure a host of gynecological problems during and post-conflict. For example, an Isis-WICCE study among 267 women in Southern Sudan, found that 16.1% of the women reported experiencing chronic lower abdominal pain, 7.9% genital sores, 6.4% abnormal vaginal bleeding, 5.2% swelling in their abdomen and 4.5% abnormal vaginal discharge.\footnote{Ibid.}

Like the Liberian and the Sierra Leonean civil wars, women and young girls in other armed conflicts have also been subjected to rape and other sexual abuses.
Analyzing the experiences of girls in Teso, Uganda during the civil war from 1987 to 1992, de Berry argues that,

For adolescent girls in the camps there was a particular threat: rape and sexual abuse at the hands of government soldiers. An unknown but significant number of young girls experienced the humiliation, terror and suffering of sexual violence at the hands of army personnel. Some were taken directly by the soldiers; others became victims of organized networks of traffickers amongst the Iteso in the camps who provided sexual companions for the military.  

The experiences of adolescent girls in Teso points to an important aspect of wars that warrants further investigation: the profiting from wars by some civilians. The extant literature overwhelmingly constructs civilians as always innocent and victims of wars, just as it has historically constructed children and youth and women to be simply victims of wars.

In wars, acts of rape and sexual violence against women and girls are not always random, or solely for sexual gratification, but can be “[a] deliberate form of torture, a tactic to humiliate and terrorize a perceived enemy.” In the case of Rwanda, Hutu men raped and impregnated Tutsi women as a direct attack on Tutsi hegemony. Also, the mass rape of Bosnian women by Serbs in the former Yugoslavia was a strategy to “[d]estroy community identity in the name of ethnic and religious purity: Defiling women was a way of violating and demoralizing Bosnian men- rape was often committed in front of family and community.” The intent impact was to emasculate of men during war by demonstrating their inability to protect their families from rape and other violence. This

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305 Ibid.
306 Ibid., 47.
phenomenon was a common experience of my male and female informants between the ages of 48 and 65 years old. For instance, in his account of his daughter’s death, Mary’s father expressed feeling helpless to protect his daughter from the abuse of Prince or to seek justice for her death because “The man had a gun.” For Sinoe, being raped in front of her husband tied up in a chair was so hard for him to bear that he later suffered a stroke and remains disabled today.

**Beyond Victimhood: Women and Girls During the Liberian Civil War**

During the Liberian civil war, teenage girls and women actively participated in combat on behalf of various rebel groups. Aning writes that,

> The INPFL was also one of the groups which had an independently established women’s wing of combatants with a fearsome reputation for efficiency and brutality…Militarily, there were 750 women in a specially-established Women’s Auxiliary Corps armed mainly with AK47s and other defensive weapons. Fifty of the most toughened fighters formed a special bodyguard detail for the leader of the INPFL.307

Based on interview reports, women and girls also committed heinous crimes against civilians. Below, is an eyewitness account of such atrocities, provided by informant 122, who was twenty-one years old in 1991 when the incident described took place. She explains:

> It happened in Gbanga; that was the first time I ever saw somebody get killed. We were running away, Taylor and Johnson were fighting and it was really bad. We just took whatever we could take and started walking in the opposite direction from the shooting. Hundreds of people, young, old, everybody was walking; no one knew where he was going. We just kept walking. When we got to one of the NPFL checkpoints, one girl was standing there with a gun across her shoulder and had a long knife on her side. On the other side of the checkpoint, a boy, no more than thirteen or fourteen was standing there with the same weapons the girl had.

As soon as the boy saw a pregnant woman, he said to the girl, I wonder what child she is having. The girl said it was a boy and the boy said no, da girl. Then he said the thing is simple, let us find out. He pointed to the pregnant woman and told her to get on the ground. The woman started begging, saying, my son, do it for God, please I beg you. She looked at the girl and said my daughter I beg you, please don’t kill me.’ It was like she was talking to a rock. The girl said, ‘shut up, you not the one who born us, you think you in the village?’ They tied her up and just like that he stabbed her in the stomach. He cut her stomach from side to side, it was so bad. The screams from that woman and what they were doing to her made many people faint. Me too, I fainted. Later, my brother told me that after he cut the baby out, he sent it in the air and the girl shot it. The child was a boy my brother said. It was from that day that I knew some girls are more evil than men. For them to do what they did, they must have been on something. I really think so, because their eyes were blood red.308

The use of drugs was a common practice among all rebel groups and significantly influenced their actions and behaviors during the conflict.309

Besides fighting, women served other functions on behalf of the factions they supported such as recruiters, informants, caretakers of wounded fighters, and more. Furthermore, women were among the key fundraising organizers that launched Charles Taylor. It is worth noting that West African History includes that of the “amazon” warriors of Dahomey, some of whom composed an elite troop of soldiers for the militarized state and bodyguard for the king. They had a reputation for ferocity. Madam Moumouna Quattara, former Burkinabe ambassador to Ghana, arranged for Taylor to meet then Vice-President Blaise Compoare in 1987, who in turn, introduced him to the former Libyan dictator Muammar Kaddafi. Subsequently, Taylor and his men spent the next two years training in Libya for his 1989 invasion of the country. Prominent Liberian women, including then former Minister of Finance, Ellen Sirleaf Johnson, contributed and helped raise funds in the U.S. on behalf of the NPFL.310 There were also high-ranking female political operatives such as Grace Minor of the NPFL. Minor “[h]ad been

308 Interview with a survival of the war who witnessed much actrocities, Paynesville Red Light, March 22, 2010.
310 Ibid., 8.
a proponent and active advocate of the selective elimination of indigenous leaders like
Jackson Doe, Cooper Teah, Alfred Flomo, Stephen Daniel and David Toweh, among
others.” Both Minor and Johnson later withdrew their support for Taylor and Johnson
ran against him in the presidential elections of 1997.

Other women engaged in self-help projects and formed groups to assist displaced
women, children and other refugees. One such group was Our Sisters Place. Despite
intimidation from rebels and the real threat to their own lives, they opened and
maintained a home in Monrovia where care was provided for orphaned children and
prostitute girls. The provision of a home and nourishment created a sense of normalcy,
safety and family for those helped. Without the bravery and sacrifice of such women,
many more children and youth would have been lost in the conflict.

Women did more than care for those in need; the survival of most Liberians
literally depended upon their economic activities as well during the war. Based on the
significance of women’s economic activities in Africa, Aning analyzes the involvement
Liberian and Sierra Leonean women in commerce during their countries’ civil wars. The
trading of women across various war zones is known as attack trade. He explains that
“[w]omen have engaged in this sort of activity in an effort to re-create forms of civil
activity in war-destroyed areas as a means, at least, of ensuring the supply of basic
commodities.” The trading activities of women during the war involved major risks.
Many had their goods or money confiscated, and experienced of rape and other sexual
violence. Women in other countries also engaged in attack trade and experienced similar
violence. For example, during the Sierra Leonean civil war, the RUF once murdered

311 Ibid., 9.
312 Ibid., 11.
313 Ibid., 12.
fifteen female traders for engaging in rice trading along the Sierra Leonean and Liberian border.\textsuperscript{314} However, market women were aware of the inherent dangers of wartime trading, but the quests for profits, and the need to keep their communities alive, were worth the risks for \textit{attack traders}.

Finally, as the war progressed, over one million Liberians found themselves internally displaced and destitute, while 850,000 were living as refugees in countries such as Sierra Leone, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Ghana and Nigeria.\textsuperscript{315} With no end to the war in sight, women engaged in and undertook the initiative to labor for peace, which is the final aspect of women’s agency discussed here. According to the African Women Peace Support Group (AWPSP), “There came a time when women decided that relief work and advocacy alone were not enough. They moved to direct political activism. Together, they took to the streets in protest and would soon invade the men’s peace talks.”\textsuperscript{316} In order to make their political activism a success, various women’s groups came together and formed the Liberian Women’s Initiative (LWI). This new peace movement was founded on February 2, 1994 and was headed by Mary Brownell. With the support and solidarity of other civic groups such as the Council of Chiefs, the Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Church, and the Inter-Faith Mediation Council, various women’s groups organized successful ‘stay-home’ days in March of 1995 and early 1996. During these strikes, women refused to sell in the markets, and to go to their jobs in the public and private sectors. Their actions shut down Monrovia each time, as their

\textsuperscript{314} Aning, “Gender and Civil war: The Cases of Liberia and Sierra Leone,” 12.
goal was to draw attention to the urgency for negotiation among rebel groups as a means of bringing a permanent end to the conflict.

Women activists also held rallies and peaceful marches, calling on the various factions to negotiate for peace. They also prayed and fasted for peace and often called on Liberians to participate in praying and fasting. In addition, women also demonstrated to draw international attention to ending the carnage. One method they employed was to picket in front of the American Embassy, U.N. offices, and the embassies of ECOWAS countries. By strategically picketing the U.S. Embassy and U.N. offices, Liberian women were calling on world powers to intervene and end the crisis. Women activists also participated in peace conferences and demanded that their voices, concerns and suggestions be taken seriously. For example, in December of 1994, after their request to ECOWAS to participate in the Accra Clarification Conference was denied, the LWI raised enough funds to send six delegates to Accra, although they were not invited. Determined, the women sat outside the conference hall daily hoping for a chance to lobby delegates. Their efforts and hard work paid off, as their exclusion from the conference gained national and international attention through Ghanaian and international news outlets. Feeling the pressure, ECOWAS, by the third day of the conference, made the women official delegates and they were given a place at the negotiation table. It is important to mention that, although sexism was a major obstacle that Liberian female peace activists had to overcome, many Liberian men were supportive of women’s peace initiatives. They contributed funds to women’s efforts and some worked as aid workers in refugee camps to create awareness of different forms of violence against women,

317 Ibid., 17-18.
318 Liberian Women Peacemakers: Fighting for the Rights to be Seen, Heard and Counted, 24.
including rape and physical violence.\textsuperscript{319} In order to succeed in their quest for peace, Liberian women needed the support of Liberian men.

The success of women’s peace initiatives also required the active participation of rural women. Their centrality to the success of women’s peace efforts is evident in the statement below:

By cooperating on a unified strategy, women’s groups harnessed the power and commitment of many women who were living, surviving and sustaining life at the front lines of the conflict. This power was evident in the strength and success of many of the peace activities where there was true integration or collaboration with rural women in particular.\textsuperscript{320}

It makes perfect sense that rural women’s participation in peace activities would yield results. With the arrival of ECOMOG in late 1990, Monrovia was relatively safe, as most rebel groups fought in the interior. Subsequently, rural women often came into direct contact with various factions and understood firsthand the need for peace. Members of the Rural Women’s Association, including farmers and traders, spread the word for peace. They travelled from village to village encouraging the youth and others to lay down their guns and work towards peace. Bravely, they also arranged and met with rebel leaders such as Taylor and Johnson to inform them that they were tired of the war and wanted it to end.\textsuperscript{321} The July 1996 Abuja Peace Agreement, which led to democratic presidential elections in 1997, would not have been possible without the efforts of women peace activists, who worked tirelessly at the local, national and international levels to find a peaceful solution to the Liberian conflict.\textsuperscript{322} Women were so central to the peace

\begin{footnotes}
\item[319] Ibid., 7.
\item[320] Ibid., 33.
\item[321] Ibid., 34, 82.
\item[322] Ibid., 85.
\end{footnotes}
agreement that Ruth Sandoe Perry was elected Chair of the Transitional Government from 1996 to 1997 when the first presidential election was held and Taylor emerged victorious.

Taylor’s Liberia: 1997-2003

With the winning of the 1997 Presidential elections, Taylor had finally achieved his ultimate goal: becoming President of The Republic of Liberia. Part of his victory came from the massive support he received from the youth, many of whom had fought in the war on his behalf. He also benefited from the support of women, including market women. Being elected President in a free-and-fair election afforded him some form of legitimacy and helped soften the image of the former rebel leader. However, like Doe, President Taylor did not live up to the promises he had made to the Liberian people when he launched the war and ran for president. As they say in Liberia, same taxi, different driver. Instead of democracy and access to equal economic opportunities, according to Alie,

He adopted an autocratic and patrimonial style of leadership, becoming increasingly antagonistic to opposition politicians and then ECOMOG to the extent that ECOMOG had to relocate to Sierra Leone in October 1999. By this date, the Liberian conflict had led to the deaths of over 200,000 people with 1.2 million Liberians displaced out of a pre-war population of about three million…Taylor’s fundamental problem was making the transition from being a rebel leader to that of an elected President and governing according to the rule of law.  

Subsequently, he became a dictator and ruled with an iron fist. To maintain his power and control over Liberians, he relied on his special security force: the Anti-Terrorist Unit (ATU). The ATU, composed of his former top rebel leaders, were as brutal as they had been during the war.\textsuperscript{324} The only difference between Taylor the rebel, and Taylor the President, was a change in attire. In exchange for combat gear and a gun, he now wore designer suits. According to Ahadzi, “Post-war Liberia under President Taylor was marked with repression, political assassinations and acute discrimination against former warlords and members of the Mandingos and the Krahn ethnic groups.” He accused former warlords, including Alhaji Kromah and Roosevelt Johnson and political rival Ellen Sirleaf Johnson of conspiring against his government. The threat was such that many of his rivals fled into exile.\textsuperscript{325}

Along with political rivals, Taylor also had a tumultuous relationship with students, in particular, students at The University of Liberia. The University was raided several times by the police, resulting in the flogging, arrest, and imprisonment of students. A key strategy employed by the government to discourage and limit students’ political activism was the constant closing of the University. For example, the top story of \textit{The Inquirer} for Wednesday, December 22, 1999 read: “UL Will Not Open until Next September. Administration Gives Reasons, but Students Reject.” Shutting down the university worked to an extent in limiting students’ political activism in that, with limited resources, most students could not afford the cost of travelling back and forth to participate in rallies and protests. Students, however, did not become apolitical. A

\textsuperscript{324} Ahadzi, "Failure of Domestic Politics and Civil War in Liberia: Regional Ramifications and ECOWAS Intervention," 70.
\textsuperscript{325} Ibid., 71.
former male student activist from ULSU had this to say about their political activities during school closures:

We knew it would be very difficult to get a large number of students to come to campus when school was not in session, considering how hard things were. Most of us were putting ourselves through school and so you had to be tight with your money. So, once a month, the leaders of LNSU, ULSU, SUP, and others used to meet at one of our houses to discuss things. We worked on pamphlets, discussed strategies for pressuring the government to reopen the university, as well as compiling and articulating clearly a list of students’ grievances and what we hoped the university administration and government should do about them. It was nice getting together once a month. We were very united and the government could not break our unity, although they tried.326

Taylor’s attack on students was a continuation of the disdain and contempt his predecessors had had towards students’ activism. Like his predecessors, he constructed a narrative calling students radicals and communists, who were bent on destroying his administration and therefore had to be dealt with accordingly.327

Government attacks were such that on 1 May 2001, student organizations called on students and faculty to boycott classes and stay home, after the government announced that it had gathered intelligence concerning dissident collaborators on campus. The government’s claim came after the 21 March, 2001, police raid on campus, when armed police and members of the ATU stormed the campus and attacked students as they held a rally to raise money for four journalists who had been arrested and imprisoned. The police were called in by the University President, Dr. Roberts, to stop the rally. After the incident, the Liberian National Police Director, Paul Mulbah denied all claims of police brutality but “[p]romised to redeploy the police at the university again if students

326 Interview with student activist of the University of Liberia, Board Street Monrovia, March 24, 2010. 327 the Inquirer April 19, 2000.
continued to misbehave.”328 The Liberian government, sometimes with the support of the University Administration, has a history of brutalizing students, faculty and staff (see chapter 2), while simultaneously denying the attacks even in the midst of irrefutable evidence.

Ordinary Liberians were also not exempt from Taylor’s brutality. A 54-year-old male informant recounted one such incident:

Taylor and his son Chuckie did a lot here. They were too wicked, especially Chuckie. The man’s own father was afraid of him, so you can just imagine. We were living in hell here. You could find food, but you had no freedom. No one was crazy enough to publicly criticize them; those who did often disappeared. They were above the law. I say, they ran this country like it was their private property. Anytime Taylor or Chuckie was travelling, the roads had to be cleared at least two hours before their departure. That meant no cars on the road and no one walking beside or crossing the streets. If you did and the ATU saw you when the convoy was coming, they could just shoot you or Chuckie himself would stop the car and shoot the person. He killed a taxi driver like that, right in front of his passengers.

I will never forget what he did to that little girl at ELWA junction in 2000. I was on my way to the Red-Light, from my house in ELWA to visit my daughter when it happened. When I got to the junction to take a car, I saw that the entire road was clear and right away I knew the president or Chuckie was travelling. So, I just stopped where everybody was standing to see the convoy. Not long after, we saw it coming. As it approached, a little girl, no more than thirteen selling oranges ran across the street. It happened so quickly that no one could stop her. When they got there, the convoy stopped and Chuckie got out of the car and asked who ran across the street. The girl said it was her and he told her to come to him. She was walking very slowly; you could see she was afraid. He yelled and told her to hurry. When she reached him, he took out his pistol and shot her in the head. She fell to the ground and her oranges went in different directions. Showing no emotion he got back in the car and they drove off. People rushed to help her but she was already dead. Everyone was crying, including grown men. I did not go to the Red Light; instead I went back home and cried the whole night. The only other time I had cried was when my mother died in 1994. And what became of that child’s murder? Nothing.329

The Taylor family was not only above the law; whatever they wanted, they received even if it involved killing.

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328 Emmanuel Mondaye, “Nobody was Brutalized: Police Director Denies Claims, but Students Maintained they were Flogged,” the Inquirer March 23, 2001.
329 Interview with an eyewitness to Chuckie’s murder of a thirteen year old girl, Paynesville Red Light, September 24, 2009.
During fieldwork, I heard many unsolicited accounts about the beatings and murders of several young men by Chuckie because he wanted their girlfriends. Masa, whose nephew and his girlfriend were killed by Chuckie in 1998, discussed her family’s ordeal:

Trent was a very good boy. He was never a troublemaker. My sister and brother-in-law had high hopes for him and all through the war they did their best to keep him safe and as God could have it, he did not become a rebel. In 1998, he was a 23-year-old senior, majoring in Finance and Economics at The University of Liberia. He met his girlfriend Rebecca during their freshman year in Math class. The two of them really liked each other and Trent already told us that he was going to ask her to marry him as soon as they graduated. One day when I went to visit my sister, she told me that Trent came home and told her that when he went to visit Rebecca after her parents’ wedding anniversary that year, she was very upset and told him that while she was at the salon getting her hair done, Chuckie dropped off his sister at the same place to get her hair done and when he saw her he said she was a black beauty, blah, blah and that he wanted her. She told him she had a boyfriend and he said no problem, all she had to do was tell him she found somebody new and that she was done with him. He waited until her hair was done and forced her to let him drive her home. From that day, he kept coming to her house, and going to her campus to look for her. She said he forced her to go out with him, and have sex too. My sister said she told Trent to forget about Rebecca and not to go around her because Chuckie could kill anybody and nothing would come out of it. She said she wanted me to advice him too because her heart was not satisfied when he told her he would not go around Rebecca.

The next time I saw Trent, I talked to him about the issue and told him he had to listen to us and keep away before something bad happens to him. He told me, ‘Aunty, I hear you I will not do it, I promise.’ Just like my sister, my heart was not satisfied with his response. The two of them were too close not to see each other, so we knew they were secretly still together and meeting. But, what could we do other than advise him? What we all feared came to pass three months later. My sister called me around midnight on April 12, 1998 crying. She was crying so hard that I just kept asking her, ‘Deddeh, what happened, what happened?’ She could not talk. Then, my daughter came running to my room crying and saying they killed Trent and Rebecca. My heart cut, I dropped the phone and started crying. It was too painful and it still painful.

Sometimes, my sister will just cry for days. She is still not over it; I feel sorry for her. Later, we learned that Chuckie shot both of them. Those who were there when it happened said that Rebecca and Trent were coming out of a video club in his neighborhood when Chuckie came from nowhere and pulled out a pistol and said to Rebecca, ‘Bitch, you going to die,’ and shot her in the head, and then shot Trent when he tried to run away. They said when he shot them everybody started running away, and Chuckie went and got in a black jeep that was waiting for him. We and Rebecca’s family decided to have their funeral service together. A lot of their friends and even some of their teachers attended the service. My sister wanted to say something about what Chuckie did, but we all told her to leave it to God. We did not want Chuckie to kill any more of our family; that’s why we told her to forget it.\(^{330}\)

\(^{330}\)Interview with a woman whose nephew and girlfriend were killed by Chuckie, Paynesville Red Light, September 24, 2009.
As Taylor and his gang terrorized Liberians, the vast majority of them continued to live in poverty, while he and his cronies amassed wealth from selling the country’s natural resources. With Taylor, the Liberian people had gone from the frying pan straight into the fire. Not content with his rule in Liberia, Taylor looked elsewhere to extend his influence. According to Ahadzi, “Still impassioned with the idea of establishing a network of revolutionary leaders across West Africa, Taylor continued to prop up the RUF rebels in Sierra Leone,” backed a failed incursion into Guinea in 2000, and supported the opposition movement against Ivoirian President Laurent Gbagbo in 2001. Among these the only one for which he will be tried at The Hague will be his involvement in the Sierra Leonean Civil War.

Taylor and the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone

On 23 March 1991, the RUF, led by Foday Sankoh began an attack to oust President Joseph Momoh of the All Peoples’ Congress (APC) in Sierra Leone. Like the NPFL, the RUF attracted the marginalized segment of the Sierra Leonean society including the youth, students, farmers, market women and unemployed intellectuals. Some former fighters of the NPFL were deployed to Sierra Leone by President Taylor to assist the RUF. Although Sankoh had trained in Libya, he and Taylor did not meet until they were introduced to each other in the late 1980s by an NPFL official in Sierra Leone. Thus, according to Abdullah, “By mid-1989 a deal had been struck: Sankoh and his group would help Taylor ‘liberate’ Liberia, after which he would provide them with a

base to launch their armed struggle” and also Taylor’s support for the RUF was in revenge for Sierra Leone’s support of ECOMOG in Liberia and for allowing the group to attack him from their base in Sierra Leone. Whatever the reasons, Taylor’s support of the RUF, both financially and sending fighters to help their cause contributed to the atrocities committed against the Sierra Leonean people.

Contrary to its claims of fighting to ‘liberate’ the masses from the jaws of the ruling elites, the RUF committed heinous crimes against innocent civilians, including the cutting off of limbs. Therefore,

How revolutionary is a revolutionary movement which slaughters and terrorizes the very people it claims to be liberating? …It is not surprising that the only movement with revolutionary pretensions comparable to the RUF was the NPFL: they were products of the same cultural milieu; their membership was recruited from the same social group; and they employed the same tactics-indiscriminate use of drugs, forced induction and violence- to further their goal of capturing power. The torture and eventual murder of Sergeant Doe by the former NPFL commander Prince Yormie Johnson, the mutilation, murder and rape of innocent women and children by the RUF, are acts that are incompatible with a revolutionary project.

The characteristics of the Liberian and Sierra Leonean ‘revolutions’ were such that they were only revolutions in theory and did nothing to ‘liberate’ the people or improve their socio-economic and political status, rather the contrary. As seen in Liberia, during Taylor’s rule, the country remained a police state.

**Taylor: The End of an Era**

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334 Ibid., 222-223.
As Taylor contributed to the destabilization of neighboring countries, discontent with his oppressive rule continued to grow among the Liberian people. The fact that Taylor had failed to engage in genuine reconciliation with former warlords meant that he had many enemies, all of whom wanted to be president. Thus, according to Ahadzi,

In 2002, Liberia soon relapsed into another round of civil war between Taylor’s regime on one side, and two rebel groups, Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL). The two rebel groups were predominantly remnants of Doe’s AFL and ULIMOs. Taylor’s military capability was weakened due to the UNSC’s imposition of an arms embargo on Liberia. Thus with explicit support from Guinea, Cote d’Ivoire and the tacit support of Sierra Leone, Britain and the US, LURD and MODEL replicated the two-front NPFL offensive strategies that eventually compelled President Taylor to agree to attend an ECOWAS-mediated peace talks in Accra. Subsequently, Taylor abdicated in August 2003 into a life in exile in Nigeria.335

The outbreak of the 2002 civil war led to the death of many Liberians, even more to became internally displaced. Based on the carnage, women’s organizations and other civil society groups pressured rebel leaders, President Taylor and the international community to end the conflict.336 The 2008 documentary, Pray the Devil Back to Hell is about the successful 2003 non-violent protests and campaigns of ordinary Liberian women, both Christian and Muslim, that subsequently led to the departure of Taylor, thereby paving the way for peace.

The peace agreement reached by President Taylor and rebel leaders was initiated by ECOWAS, through its Mission in Liberia (ECOMIL) with the support of the U.N. Security Council. In 2005, under the leadership of the U.N. Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), presidential elections were held and Ellen Sirleaf Johnson emerged the victor;

336 Alie, “Conflicts and Interventions in Liberia: The Local, Regional and International Dynamics,” 89-90.
thereby becoming the first female head of state in Africa. In that same year, a warrant was issued for the arrest of Taylor by the Special Court for Sierra Leone set up by the Sierra Leonean government and the United Nations. Taylor was wanted for his role in the atrocities committed against innocent civilians during the Sierra Leonean civil war. After a failed escape from Nigeria, he was arrested and brought back to Liberia, where at the airport President Johnson turned him over to the U.N. to face charges. In 2007, his trial began at The Hague, in the Netherlands. After a trial lasting almost four years, Mr. Taylor is currently awaiting the verdict of the judges. Chuckie, whose official name is Charles McArthur Taylor, was convicted by a federal jury in Miami, Florida in 2008 for the crimes he committed during his father’s administration. As a U.S. citizen, he was tried under a 1994 law that makes it a crime for U.S. citizens to commit torture overseas. In 2009, he was sentenced to ninety-seven years in prison without the possibility of parole.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I showed how the quest for personal power and profit by warlords, not the ‘liberation’ of the Liberian people fueled and perpetuated the Liberian civil war. The carnage was such that without the intervening forces of ECOWAS, the human tragedy would have been far greater than expected. I demonstrated that women and youth were often not mere victims of the civil war, but were also active agents who

developed a series of survival strategies. Contrary to his claims of fighting to ‘liberate’ the Liberian people, Taylor became a dictator and ruled Liberia with an iron fist. The tyranny of his government was such that he and his family (especially Chuckie) were above the law and could kill at will during his rule. Like his predecessors, Taylor was bent on suppressing and destroying all forms of civil society and opposition in the country.

Through the ATU, Taylor intimidated, arrested and murdered political or suspected political opponents, thereby causing many to flee into exile. Attacks on students at the University of Liberia were also common during his rule. Thus, it was Taylor’s own doing- his brutality against Liberians and his unwillingness to seek genuine reforms in the country, and the reconciliation of all Liberians when he became president in 1997 - that led to the outbreak of the 2002 civil war; which ultimately ended with his reluctantly agreeing to go into exile. Finally, it can be concluded that the end of the civil war in 2003 would not have been possible without the activism of Liberian women, including non-elite women. The election of Ellen Sirleaf Johnson put one of their ‘own’ in the Executive Mansion; what would her administration do to unify the country and improve the socio-economic status of Liberians, in particular the youth? The answers to this question are the focus of chapter four.
CHAPTER: 4

Vote for Me: Papa will come Home with Black Plastic Bag

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the impact of the United Nations’ led Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs on the socio-economic status of ex-combatant and non-combatants youth in post-civil war Liberia. The chapter also examines the impact of the economic and political policies of the Sirleaf Administration on ordinary Liberians, including the youth between 2006 and 2010. I argue that despite her promises of creating jobs and opportunities for all Liberians during her campaigns for political office, the vast majority of Liberians continue to live in immense poverty and the youth are the most affected. Against this background, I analyze the various survival strategies the youth of Liberian developed and pursued in order to address their marginalized status and to improve their economic conditions independent of state institutions that had clearly proved ineffective. I begin the discussion with an assessment of the various policies the post-civil war Liberian government and international agencies developed to bring peace and development to Liberia and to facilitate the reintegration of the youths into the postwar society.

I suggest that these policies did not succeed in improving the economic conditions of the youth. As a result, the youth have developed their own strategies of survival in
ways that have been overlooked by social scientists and international agencies. Furthermore, in seeking to explain the situations of Liberian youth, I paid close attention to the historical perception that youth are victims, a perception that ignores, as stated in previous chapters, their agencies. I emphasize that we need to explore how the youth develop complex strategies of survival that challenges our notions of them as victims or immature citizens who must always be guided. Drawing on oral evidence, I illustrate the various ways by which to understand the youth in the contexts of historical transformations, without overlooking their unique historical agencies.

In 2003, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed by the various Liberian warlords in Accra, Ghana thus ending the 14-year-old Liberian civil war. As part of the Agreement, combatants were to be disarmed, demobilized and reintegrated into the Liberian society; the new government was also required to form a Truth and Reconciliation Commission.\(^{340}\) In September of that same year, the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) was created to assist the country in its transition from war to peace.\(^{341}\) A major component of the UNMIL’s mandate was the creation and implementation of DDR programs. The program began in September of 2003 and ended in 2004. Due to the involvement of child soldiers in the civil war, the United Nations International Children’s Educational Fund (UNICEF) was responsible for administering DDR programs for the minors.


\(^{341}\) Stephanie Hanson, “Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) in Africa,” (February 2007): 4.
The United Nations Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Program (DDR) and Liberian Youth

Without the successful disarmament and demobilization of over 100,000 Liberians, it would have been difficult to end the civil war. A significant proportion of these were child soldiers. Discrepancies exist among researchers about the total number of child soldiers who participated in the DDR programs. According to Jaye, of the more than 100,000 combatants who participated in the DDR programs, 22,370 were women, 10,972 were children, including 8,532 boys and 2,440 girls, while according to Foster et al., between 2002 and 2005, UNMIL demobilized 11,780 children, of which twenty-three percent were girls. The inclusion of women and girls in Liberia’s DDR programs was considered a success. Efforts have not always been made to include women, and youth in DDR programs. To this end, Hanson asserts

As recently as Sierra Leone’s DDR program in 2003, in which only seven-thousand of an estimated 48,000 child soldiers were demobilized, DDR interventions practiced a ‘One man, one gun’ policy focused on disarming adult male combatants. Women and children associated with fighting groups were often excluded from the process.

The inclusion of women and youth—both boys and girls in Liberia’s DDR program signifies the beginning of a shift in the dominant discourse about women and children in wars. According to Mckay,

A key aim of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs, reflecting patriarchal funding priorities, is to ‘take away the guns’ and demobilize boys and men who are perceived to be the key actors within a force, despite evidence to the

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344 Hanson, “Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) in Africa,” 4.
contrary. Therefore, as occurred in postwar Mozambique when girls leave a force—whether because the war ends or they are released, captured, or escape—only a small proportion participate in official DDR processes. Few, therefore, received the benefits that accompany DDR assistance. In Sierra Leone, girls and women were overwhelmingly neglected in the DDR process: 92% of those enrolled in DDR were boys and men... The dismal rate for girls reflects the denial of their participation and also the structure of DDR, which privileged boys and men.\(^3\)

The binary construction of victim/perpetrator does not only affect women and girls negatively; but men and boys as well. That boys and men are not generally seen as victims of wars indicate that those who had been raped and sexually assaulted may never receive the necessary help needed to address such experiences. Although the inclusion of women and girls in Liberia’s DDR programs did not negate the fact that gender bias still existed, their inclusion can be considered a success.

Another success of Liberia’s DDR program was the ease with which ex-combatants were able to reintegrate into their communities. Based on a 2006 survey of ex-combatants completed by United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Jaye explains that “About 94 percent of ex-fighters in this survey indicated that they have not had any problems being accepted into their communities.”\(^4\) The general acceptance of ex-combatant youth by their communities is highlighted in several interviews I conducted with former U.N. aid workers in Liberia:

None of the youth we reunited with their families were rejected or sent back to the UNICEF Center I was assigned to for two years; it was amazing to see. Many of us, including top U.N officials were skeptical about the successful return of ex-combatant youth to their communities, although we were hopeful. I believe the overall success of this aspect of the reintegration program had to do with what many of the local female social workers and staff used to tell us when we visited various youth rehabilitation centers.


centers, “In Liberia, we say there is no bad bush to throw a child; Liberians will accept their children.” They said that Liberians believe that parents love and forgiveness will always surpass the wrongs of their children; I think they were right.347

The significance and contribution of local values and beliefs to the successful reintegration of ex-combatant youth into their communities was a common theme among local informants when they discussed the need for Liberians to come together as one people. Blamo, a seventy-three year old father and grandfather had this to say:

The Liberian people have suffered too much; so many of us died during the war and look what happened to our children. Too many of them got involved in the war and did bad things. Sometimes, when you are walking around, going to the market, or somewhere else, it is easy for you to come across some of the youth who terrorized you and your family during the war. In fact, some of them are back in my neighborhood. They move around freely and no one bothers them. What can you do besides accept and forgive them? They are our children, we cannot drive them away.348

While the disarmament and reintegration of ex-combatant youth into their communities were successful, the program encountered some pertinent difficulties.

**Failures**

According to Hanson, “Despite the logistical challenges of disarmament and demobilization, reintegation, the acquisition of civilian status and sustainable employment and income is considered the most difficult phase of any DDR process.”349

As shown, the reintegration of ex-combatant youth into their communities was a success in Liberia. The reintegration phase of Liberia’s DDR programs was completed on 21

347 Interview with former U.N. worker, Broad Street, Monrovia December 10, 2009.
348 Interview with a seventy-three year old father and grandfather, Paynesville, Redlight March 12, 2010.
349 Hanson, “Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) in Africa,” 4.
However, the high rate of unemployment among ex-combatant youth was a major failure of the program. The lack of livelihood opportunities for ex-combatant youth were not due to their lack of skills; as Tamagni and Krafft explain:

Ex-combatants have received training, counseling, and career advice, but livelihood opportunities are scarce in a postwar economy, with a very precarious employment situation (85 percent do not earn enough to lift themselves and their families over the one-dollar-a-day poverty line, according to a 2009 International Labor Organization (ILO) study.351

The impact of the civil war on Liberia’s economy was such that many Liberians remained unemployed. The lack of economic opportunities for ordinary Liberians meant fewer opportunities for ex-combatant youth. It is therefore not surprising that only 8 percent of ex-combatant youth who participated in a 2006 UNDP survey reported an overall increase in their socio-economic status.352

The career skills and training ex-combatant youth received during Liberia’s DDR programs have done little to alleviate their poverty. A careful examination of the program suggests that the failure of the program to assist Liberians stemmed from the structure and nature of DDR programs in general. Like structural adjustment programs, DDR sponsors rely on the importation of foreign ‘experts,’ who, more often than not, have limited knowledge about the societies and people for which they are to give ‘expert’ advice. Consequently, the programs produced are based on western beliefs and values, thereby excluding local knowledge and expertise.353

In Liberia, job training and skills for

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351 Ibid., 13.
ex-combatant youth were premised on the belief that once peace was restored, the economy would flourish and create employment opportunities for the ex-combatant youth. This belief has not materialized, and 85 percent of Liberians remained and still remain unemployed and the percentage for the youth has remained conspicuously higher.\textsuperscript{354} DDR programs were largely ineffective because they were and are being imposed by foreign institutions that have their vested interests to promote.

One of the consequences of the internationalization of DDR programs is that its exclusion of local knowledge and expertise has meant the inability to incorporate local realities into the designs and implementation of the programs. The inclusion of local knowledge and expertise is imperative to the successful economic and social rehabilitation of war affected youth in any country. In the case of Mozambique, Antionette Errante and Boia Efraime Junior discuss the used of indigenous healers to help war affected and militarized youth and their families’ transition to peace.\textsuperscript{355} They argue that “[p]eace education should more broadly be conceived as an approach to post-conflict educational policy making, one that addresses the material, symbolic as well as psychosocial needs of war affected children and youth.”\textsuperscript{356} Although children and youth who participated in Liberia’s DDR programs received some counseling, indigenous healers were not included or considered integral to the healing process. The material realities of the lives of Liberian youth were also ignored by DDR officials. In countries where local expertise had been utilized, such as Burundi, DDR programs were more successful. According to Hanson, “[t]he success of the country’s program was due in

\textsuperscript{354} Tamagni and Krafft, “Strategic Approaches to Reintegration: Lessons Learned from Liberia,” 13.
\textsuperscript{356} Ibid., 104.
part to the ability of Burundian authorities to make their own decisions.”

It makes perfect sense; individuals are best able to articulate their needs, than others can.

However, local models have been criticized. Hanson explains,

Yet these national commissions draw criticism for encouraging corruption and inefficiency. Many point to Congo, where the government commission coordinating DDR, known as ‘CONADER’ has been blamed for long delays in the demobilization process, failures to provide resources to its provincial offices, and a lack of managerial and technical expertise.358

The arguments of massive corruption and “lack of knowledge” have been used as justification for western intervention in African affairs.

The length of the programs and the lack of sufficient funds were also shortcomings of DDR programs in Liberia. In 2004, UN top envoy to the country Jacques Paul Klein stated in a press interview that only 354 million, of the $520 million pledged by top donors have been received by February of that year.359 Ex-combatants who completed the entire DDR programs received a total of $300.00 U.S dollars, a one-month food supply from the World Food Program and transportation back to their communities.360 The amount received by those who did not complete the entire program was less than the aforementioned. Quite clearly, this financial assistance provided only a short-term relief, without providing long-term solutions for creating employment opportunities for ex-combatants. Also, given the length and depth of the civil war and the involvement of children and youth, a year was inadequate to have successfully

357 Hanson, “Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) in Africa,” 3.
358 Ibid.
reintegrated ex-combatant youth, considering the total collapse of Liberia’s economic infrastructure.

The Chance for a New Beginning

The exile of Charles Taylor in 2003 provided the opportunity for Liberians to choose a new path - a path towards democracy. As part of this effort, presidential elections were held in 2005. According to Sawyer,

The 2005 elections were held at a critical historical juncture when, for the first time in a quarter century, Liberia was not dominated by a warlord, or shaken by the threat of being taken over by one, as has been the case subsequently with the alleged Charles Julu plot. It was the first time in more than a hundred years that Liberia’s electoral processes were not under the influences of either the settler oligarchy or the successive dictatorships of Samuel Doe, a military leader, and Charles Taylor, a warlord.361

The ease with which Liberians could now register political parties was such that twenty-two candidates, representing twenty-two parties participated in the elections. With this many candidates, no one received the 51% required by law to be declared the winner. Therefore, a run-off election was scheduled to occur between the two candidates with the highest percentage of votes - Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of the Unity Party (UP) and international football star George Oppong Weah of the newly formed Congress for Democratic Change (CDC). The success of CDC was due to the support it received from the youth and other marginalized Liberians. To this end, Sawyer asserts

George Weah’s campaign became the great mobilizer of the dispossessed of post-conflict Liberia. Weah’s pre-election mass demonstration was the most dramatic manifestation of his appeal. Crowds of between 90,000 and 100,000, teeming with young people, walked 10 or more abreast for several miles in support of Weah’s candidacy. Hundreds were

fanatical supporters who stayed on for days in the campaign headquarters compound. Multitudes of Liberians who have not had much formal schooling and for whom successive governments had offered little hope identified with the success of George Weah who, like them, sprang from humble beginnings and who, with little education, had gained international fame and made his fortune. Weah was their man! Living in a state of frustration and near—hopelessness, they understood Liberia’s problems in terms of a simple dichotomy between the ‘educated’ and the ‘uneducated’—categories which were not their creation but were imposed on the analysis of George Weah’s candidacy by his opponents. Embracing this bifurcation, Weah’s supporters argued that the educated people had failed Liberia; therefore, it was time to give the uneducated a chance to lead. They argued that the educated people were robbing the country; and that George Weah had made his money, and had no cause to steal. He had demonstrated his patriotism over years of support for humanitarian causes and for the Liberian national football team. The situation of the youth in Liberia is potentially explosive and poses a huge challenge for the future. Weah’s campaign succeeded in mobilizing armies of young people who live in near—hopelessness into a popular movement that has the potential of remaining a significant force in Liberian politics for some time to come.

The significance of youth involvement in politics in post-civil war Liberia cannot be overstated.

On November 8, 2005, the run-off elections were held and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf emerged the winner. Sirleaf’s victory was a great source of joy for Liberians, in particular women and for Africa in general. The success of Africa’s first female elected president can be attributed to two important factors: the support she received from reformers in the Liberian society and from women. To this end, Sawyer argues that

Although Unity Party was the legal vehicle of the Sirleaf campaign, the real strength of the campaign was the collection of individuals from other parties, civil society organizations, and elsewhere in Liberian society. There were largely reform-minded professionals, political practitioners and public entrepreneurs from a wide range of social and political backgrounds. They had one thing in common: they saw Ellen Sirleaf as the most appropriate option for Liberia at this time. Sirleaf’s own professional background, competence, international network, and appreciation for discourse made her an attractive candidate.

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362 Ibid., 188
363 Ellen Sirleaf J, This Child Will be Great: Memoir of a Remarkable Life by Africa’s First Woman President. (Harper Perennial, 2010), 263.
Most significant of the support she received came from women with various socio-economic backgrounds. This was not the first time women had supported her; in the 1980s, they protested against her imprisonment by Doe. In her 2010 autobiography *This Child Will Be Great*, she acknowledged their role and contribution to her political success. She explains:

> Perhaps most critically- and without a doubt most movingly to me- the women of Liberia came to my defense. For the first time the country could remember, women’s groups, led by my friend Claire, collected more than 10,000 signatures calling for my release and saying they were prepared to demonstrate. This was the start of a very special relationship between me and my fellow countrywomen, the women of Liberia. Again and again over the years they would rise to support me, and I will always stand to support them.\(^{365}\)

Women overwhelmingly supported Ellen Sirleaf in 2005 for various reasons. For some, it was time for the men to step aside, since they had done nothing meaningful to move the country forward and had been the key instigators of the conflict that destroyed all sectors of Liberia’s infrastructure and caused the deaths of over a quarter million Liberians. Moreover, because Ellen was a mother of four sons as well as a grandmother, many believed that she would be able to bring the people together and help the country heal. As a mother, they also believed she would put the needs of the country first, including creating opportunities for all the children in the country. Based on these expectations, women’s groups, including market women both in Monrovia and in rural areas became key supporters of her campaign. They utilized their trading networks and organizations to galvanize support for her in their various communities.

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\(^{365}\) Sirleaf, *This Child Will be Great: Memoir of a Remarkable Life by Africa’s First Woman President*, 128.
The account provided by Jatu a sixty-year-old female informant in 2009 from Jallah’s Town Market, illustrates the advantage of motherhood as a campaign strategy for Ellen. Jatu explains:

Ma Ellen came to us and said ‘You know I am depending on you all, the market women to help me win this thing.’ She told us she was a mother of four sons so she could understand our desire to want to provide a better life for our children. She told us if we supported her and she won, her government would provide free primary school education, will provide jobs for our husbands. The war destroyed everything; so we wanted a president who was not only smart but someone who could personally connect with the suffering of children. You see, mothers will do anything for their children and so we trusted her more than any other candidate. She is also a very tough woman; that is why we call her Iron Lady. She does not take mess from no one and always stand her ground. I mean, the late Doe knew it. Besides, we believed her government would finally do something to help the women of Liberia, and so we worked really hard for her. We connected with our organizations and groups in all sixteen counties and told them what she was saying and promising. So, when she travelled to campaign in those areas, our groups came out publically to support her.  

Ellen’s promise of creating economic opportunities for Liberians, including the youth was very appealing to Liberian women. Those who listened to and supported her, believed a Sirleaf administration would deliver on its campaign promises.

This expectation is evident in the statement made by Varba, a thirty-six year old cold water and soft drinks seller in 2009:

When Ellen was running for president in 2005, she came to Paynesville several times to campaign and I went to hear her each time. I voted for her because of what she was saying. You know, telling us that if she became president “Everyday, papa will come home with black plastic bag,” and that we will be able to send our children to school and do our business. I believed what she was saying because she said she had international connection and is a mother as well. When she used to be speaking, I used to be thinking about my thirteen year old son future, and so I voted for her.

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366 Interview with a market woman, Paynesville Red Light, January 21, 2010.
367 Interview with a cold water and soft drink seller, Paynesville Red Light, December 11, 2009.
Motherhood therefore afforded Sirleaf a form of credibility that Weah could not match. To reinforce the perception that she was indeed, the mother of the nation, the government produced a postal stamp depicting her holding a baby in her hand with the phrase, “mother of the nation.” Again and again, during fieldwork in Liberia, informants repeatedly referenced Sirleaf’s campaign promise of papa coming home each day with a black plastic bag, as a major factor in their decision to vote for her. In essence, it meant that if elected president her administration would create jobs and that parents will be able to provide for their families. The black plastic bag is symbolic of the provisions (food, clothing, school fees, etc) parents would be able to provide for their children as a result of having a job. The President reiterated her campaign promises in her first inaugural address:

Well, too many times, for too many families, papa comes home with nothing, having to find a job or to get help to feed the hungry children. Imagine then the disappointment and the hurt in the mother and children; the frustration and the loss of self-confidence in the father. Through the message of this story, I want you to know that I understand what you, our ordinary citizens, go through each day to make ends meet for yourselves and for your families. Times were hard before. Times are even harder today. But I make this pledge to you: under my Administration, we will work to change that situation. We will work to ensure that when our children say ‘Papa na come,’ Papa will come home joyfully with something, no matter how meager, to sustain his family. In other words, we will create the jobs for our mothers and fathers to be gainfully employed. We will create the social and economic opportunities that will restore our people’s dignity and self-worth. We will make the children smile again; the thousands of children who could not present their voting cards, but repeatedly told me whenever I met and shook their hands that they voted for me. Indeed, they voted with their hearts. To those children and to all other Liberian children across this nation, I say to you, I love you very, very much. I shall work, beginning today, to give you hope and a better future.  

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368 Sirleaf, *This Child Will be Great: Memoir of a Remarkable Life by Africa’s First Woman President*, 328-329.
The extent to which she successfully delivered on these promises remains to be seen. The purpose of the next section is to examine some of the challenges faced by her administration, and how these challenges impacted the lives of Liberian youth.

**First Four Years: the Sirleaf Administration (2006-2010)**

To begin with, the Sirleaf administration faced an uphill battle. Since the 1980s, Liberia’s economy had been in decline. For example, in 1978, revenue from export was reported at $486 million; as a result of the war, the 2004 figure was $10.3 million. This is also indicated by the GDP per capita, which declined from $1,269 in 1980 to $163 in 2005. By mid 2005, the country’s external debt was about $3.7 billion.\(^{369}\) Decades of corruption, coupled by fourteen years of civil war left the Liberian economy in ruins. The President acknowledged the enormity of the task at hand in her first annual address to the legislature on January 23, 2006. She explains:

> The elections and our recent inauguration provided only small steps to national recovery and healing…Creating jobs, building roads, making our youth and children feel appreciated and empowered, establishing and expanding the writ of democracy, and giving life and meaning to our constitution through respect for rule of law and social justice are also critical goals that my administration will pursue… While some successes have been achieved in the reintegration of ex-combatants into normal life, Liberia’s absorptive capacity at this time is limited in this regard. We therefore appeal to the international community to remain engaged with us in addressing this critical aspect of our national recovery program.\(^{370}\)

Due to the devastation of the Liberian economy since the war broke out, the international community played a significant role in the reconstruction of the country. Key donors


including the U.S., U.N and the World Bank created Liberia’s Poverty Reduction Strategy for which the Sirleaf administration was to implement, beginning in 2006. The program centered around four basic pillars; expanding peace and security, revitalizing economic activities, strengthening government and the rule of law, and rebuilding infrastructure and providing basic services. As part of its peace and security initiative, the U.N has since maintained a force of 15,000 peacekeepers in the country.\textsuperscript{371}

**Strengthening Government and the Rule of Law**

One of the major steps undertaken to strengthen the government and the rule of law in Liberia occurred on May 12\textsuperscript{th} 2005, when the National Transitional Legislative Assembly of Liberia passed an act to establish the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The TRC was mandated in part to promote national peace and reconciliation by

a) Investigating gross human rights violations of international humanitarian law as well as abuses that occurred, including massacres, sexual violations, murder, extra-judicial killings and economic crimes, such as the exploitation of natural resources to perpetuate armed conflicts, during the period of January 1979 to October 14, 2003; determining whether these were isolated incidents or part of a systematic pattern; establishing the antecedents, circumstances, factors and context of such violations and abuses; and determining those responsible for the commission of the violations and abuses and their motives as well as their impact on victims…

c) Adopting specific mechanisms and procedures to address the experiences of women, children and vulnerable groups, paying particular attention to gender-based violations, as well as to the issue of child-soldiers, providing opportunities for them to relate their experiences. Addressing concerns and recommending measures to be taken for the rehabilitation of victims of such violations in the spirit of national reconciliation and healing.\textsuperscript{372}


As discussed earlier, the formation of the TRC was part of the 2003 Peace Agreement signed by warlords in Accra, Ghana and was supported by the United Nations and other donors, including the United States. In 2006, the Sirleaf administration appointed ten commissioners to head the initiative. Of the ten members, only three were females namely, Pearl Brown Bull, Henrietta Joy Abena Mansa Bonsu and Massa Washington.\footnote{Republic of Liberia: Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report (June, 2009), 10.} Liberia is not the first country to establish a truth and reconciliation commission. The TRC was a model developed by South Africa at the end of the apartheid regime, to foster reconciliation and national integration. The model was adopted, in modified forms, by other Africans, including Rwanda and Sierra Leone.

As part of the process, former warlords, including Prince Y. Johnson of the INPFL, Sekou Konah of LURD, and many others were called to voluntarily testify before the Commission about their involvement in the civil war. Besides the key players of the war testifying, commanders and financial supporters of various factions also testified before the Commission, including President Sirleaf. Former officials from the Doe regime also participated in the hearings. The hearings were opened to the general public and were also broadcasted on live radio, making it available to many Liberians. At the completion of its work in 2009, the Commission made several recommendations to the Liberian government. Although the Commission had found thirty-six individuals guilty of being perpetrators of violence against their fellow citizens during the war, it did not recommend prosecution because “[t]hey cooperated with the TRC process, admitted to the crimes committed and spoke truthfully before the Commission and expressed remorse for their prior actions during the war.”\footnote{Ibid., 268.} However, eight former rebel leaders who were
found to be responsible perpetrators were recommended for prosecution. Among them were Charles Taylor of the NPFL, Prince Y. Johnson, Sekou D. Konneh, Alhaji G.V. Kromah of ULIMO and ULIMO-K and LPC leader George Boley.

The Commission recommended these persons for prosecution because of the “human rights violation including violations of international humanitarian laws, international human rights laws, war crimes and egregious domestic laws violations of Liberia and economic crimes.” With the exception of Charles Taylor, who at the time was on trial at The Hague for his involvement in the Sierra Leonean civil war, all of the former rebel leaders who testified before the Commission were less than forthcoming about the crimes they and their forces committed during the civil war, although the testimonies provided by the witnesses and the survivors of their brutalities proved contrary to what they were testifying to. The lack of admission of wrong doing by some of these war lords is illustrated by the testimonies of Sekou Konneh. A day after Sekou Konneh testified before the Commission, the top story of the New Democrat read: “More Drama: TRC Hears the Testimony of a Rebel Leader who knew Nothing.” When questioned about the various armed attacks and killings of civilians committed by LURD before and during its final assaults on Monrovia, his general response was he was unaware of such incidents. It would have been impossible for Mr. Konneh not to have been aware of the actions of his forces, considering he was their commander in chief. Such a blatant dishonesty and lack of genuine remorse by war lords, as demonstrated by Mr. Konneh, was quite pervasive. Like Konneh, Senator Prince Johnson also refused to

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375 Ibid.
376 New Democrat August 28, 2008.
admit to any wrong-doing and was evasive in responding to critical questions about his involvement in the deaths of a large number of people, during the hearing.

On 26 August 2008, Mr. Johnson testified before the TRC. During his testimony, the former warlord, now senior senator from Nimba County was defiant, often saying that if he alone was going to be prosecuted or targeted by the government for the atrocities committed during the civil war, “his people” referring to the Gio and Mino ethnic groups were prepared to fight for him. Such insinuation contributed nothing positive to the process and attempts being made by the TRC to bring about national reconciliation and healing. On the issue of accountability, Mr. Johnson’s testimony before the Commission also fell short. For example, in September of 1990, he captured then President Samuel Doe and took him to his military base in Caldwell. There, the President was severely beaten and tortured to death, including the cutting off of his ear and penis. The brutality was videotaped and made its way to the market. When questioned about the incident, Mr. Johnson acknowledged that while he was responsible for the capture of the President, he was not accountable for his death- as he did not participate in the torture and murder. What seemed even bothersome was the way Prince Johnson sought to draw on ethnic differences as leverage in his attempt to avoid persecution. Today, the perpetual politicization of ethnicity in Liberia remains a major obstacle to national unity and development.

Senator Johnson’s lack of accountability during his testimony before the TRC contradicted what he said earlier. In early January 2006, he stated that he was not going to avoid a war crimes tribunal if one was established in the country. This statement was made after several Liberians had called for the creation of a war crimes tribunal, similar
to the one created in Sierra Leone to prosecute those responsible for the atrocities
committed during the civil war. But, according to Daylue Goah of the New Democrat,

Mr. Johnson said the rules for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, with no powers
to probe war crimes, have been laid. He said what was needed now is reconciliation and
accused those probing into calls for war crimes of being ‘Rwandan journalists.’
Journalists in Rwanda were indicted and tried for participating in that country’s genocide
by inciting the people.377

Johnson’s criticism of those wanting justice for the approximately 350,000 Liberians who
perished in the war, not including the over one million displaced by the war, while
simultaneously failing to acknowledge and accept responsibility for his active role in
their deaths and sufferings is disingenuous. Furthermore, he failed to acknowledge that
the reconciliation he said the country needed could not be achieved without culprits
telling the truth about what they did during the civil war, accepting personal
responsibility for their actions and by displaying genuine remorse for what they had done.
Such a blatant disregard for the purpose of the TRC and its potential role in providing the
infrastructure for reconciliation, affected the Commission’s ability to provide some
symbolic justice to those who suffered during and after the war, a symbolic justice that
was crucial for healing the nation.

Along with warlords, the Commission also recommended public sanctions against
“All those associated with former warring factions, their leaders, political decision
makers, financiers, organizers, commanders, and foot soldiers… shall be subject to public
sanctions and specifically barred from holding public offices, elected or appointed for a

377Daylue Goah, “Mr. Johnson said he will not avoid a War Crime Tribunal.” New Democrat, January 11,
2006.
period of thirty (30) years. Among the seventeen individuals listed, was President Sirleaf for her financial contribution and role as fundraiser for Charles Taylor’s NPFL in the late 1980s. Although the President participated in the TRC, she testified behind closed doors and the public did not get the chance to hear her testimony. Publically, she acknowledged that she donated only $10,000 to Taylor’s initiative and that the fund was for educational purposes. Many Liberians did not find her explanation credible and claimed her involvement and financial contribution was much more than she revealed. Many Liberians also criticized President Sirleaf after she announced in 2010 that she was running for a second term as being more interested in self-enrichment and maintaining her political power than in doing what was in the best interest of the nation after she refused to follow the TRC recommendation that she, among others, be banned from holding public office for a period of thirty-years.

**Revitalizing Economic Activity**

According to Radelet, one of the key objectives of the government’s economic revitalization program was to “[q]uickly create as many jobs as possible for ex-combatants, returning refugees and unemployed youth, either through new private sector opportunities or employment program.” Thus far, the Sirleaf administration has failed to create employment for these groups. Moreover, although she appeared to have made some efforts to implement World Bank’s recommendation, these recommendations were not seen to have been designed properly to be able to alleviate poverty in Liberia. Rather, the policies were designed to show statistical figures of poverty reduction without taking

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into account the reality on the ground. One of the first economic initiatives of the government in 2006 was the forced retirement or deactivation of 17,000 members of the Liberian National Police, Armed Forces of Liberia, and the Special Security Service. Additionally, hundreds of other civil servants were laid-off from their jobs or forced to retire. Four hundred employees of the Liberian Petroleum Refining Corporation (LPRC) also “voluntarily” retired after the government initiated a severance program for them.\textsuperscript{380}

It is important to note that the decision by the Sirleaf administration to cut one-third of the public sector employees was a direct result of the World Bank structural adjustment policy in the country; the SAP is notorious for lacking a human or sociological component that pays attention to the negative effects on employment, malnutrition, limited government-sponsored medical assistance, and education for the impoverished.

Although a severance program was created for workers of LPRC, thousands of civil servants were forced to retire without compensation. The impact of this initiative on Liberians is made clear by Kieh when he argues that while the [i]dea of designing a small and efficient public sector is laudable, the policy has several flaws. First, with a national unemployment rate of 85%, and virtually no jobs in the private sector, the retrenchment policy would worsen the unemployment situation. Second, the government is not giving the retrenched workers severance packages that they could use to either start a small business or as a ‘stop gap measure’ while they seek employment elsewhere. Third, given the fact the retrenched workers have families, who are dependent upon them for their livelihood, the loss of income will occasion social and economic hardship for the affected workers and their families, thereby exacerbating the human development crisis.\textsuperscript{381}

The negative impact of the World Bank policies was heavier on Liberian youths. In Liberia, as in most African countries, children and youth are most impacted by the loss of

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{380} Ibid.  \\
\end{flushright}
parental jobs. For many, it meant that they will no longer be able to obtain an education nor have their basic needs met. The situation has also led to the separation of families, as some parents have to make the difficult decision of sending their children to live with relatives, friends, or even strangers with the hope that their basic needs will be provided and that they will have access to schooling. The massive loss of jobs and the lack of minimum economic opportunities caused many Liberians to become discontented with the new administration right from the start.

The story of 56-year-old Arthur, who was one of the victims of the government downsizing program further illustrates the material and social realities of such initiative:

I was a mechanic at JFK (government national hospital) for over twenty-five years and was very proud of my job. One day in April of 2006, someone from the government came and told us that they were laying us off because the government did not have money. When Ellen was running for president, she promised us that the government was going to create jobs for the people and that papa will come home with black plastic bag. Ah, we are still waiting for papa to come. It has been four years, and papa cannot go before I will say he will come. What she has done to us is very bad and a lot of people who supported her, I included in 2005, now support Weah’s CDC. In Liberia, the Unity Party has been stigmatized. Ellen lied to us and if the international community does not cheat for her, there is no way she will be able to win reelection in 2011. I have five children and no means of supporting them. At least when I was working I could help them, but now, I cannot even feed them. Since 2006, none of them have gone to school. When you cannot feed and educate your children, how can you expect them to call you papa? In today’s Liberia, it is very hard for a man to be man. What is keeping us alive is the small goods my wife sells. Every day, she walks around in the hot sun selling soap, candles, matches, tissue, etc.\(^{382}\)

For Arthur and many other unemployed fathers, their manhood is defined by their ability to provide for their families, including educating their children, and not being able to do so emasculates them; as is evident in Arthur’s assertion that in Liberia today “[i]t is very hard for a man to be man” and the question of “When you cannot feed and educate your

\(^{382}\) Interview with unemployed mechanic, Paynesville Red Light, October 24, 2009.
children, how can you expect them to call you papa?” The disappointment that many Liberians have in the Sirleaf administration is also evident in thirty-eight years old Konnah’s reflection on the president’s 2005 campaign:

In 2005, we campaigned so hard for Ma Ellen; rain or shine, we were out there working. I was attending the University of Liberia at the time and really liked what she was saying. She said she was going to provide jobs, fix the roads, build clinics and provide free primary school education. But look at the roads, nothing has been done. No jobs, food is so expensive, no running water or electricity. They say primary school is free, but after paying all the different fees, it can sometimes cost more than the private schools. When they are running for office, they can come to us with sweet talk; once in power, they forget about us. I have an accounting degree and my husband has a degree in biology and we are both unemployed. With two children, we are only surviving by the grace of God and my sister in the U.S sends us money every month.383

For many Liberians, financial support from families and friends living abroad, particularly in the U.S. has become a major source of livelihood in post-civil war Liberia. It is important to note that not all Liberians with relatives residing abroad are fortunate like Konnah to receive financial assistance from them, but those who do often credit such assistance with keeping them from starvation and educating their children.

The economic situation for Liberian youth is worse. The campaign promise and pledge made by Sirleaf to create thousands of jobs for ex-combatants and unemployed youth has not become a reality. Although, according to Munive, “Since 2006, the Liberian government has adopted specific youth policies (for example in the Liberian Emergency Employment Program and the Liberian Employment Action Plan) there is a striking convergence between these policies’ approach to youth and the sketched policy

383 Interview with unemployed female who supported Ellen’s run for President in 2005, Paynesville Red light November 10, 2009.
developed in the international arena.\textsuperscript{384} Also, in her 2006 inaugural day address, she states:

Now, I would like to speak in particular to our youth. You can believe my word that my Administration will do its utmost to respond to your needs. We will build your capacity and empower you to enable you to meaningfully participate in the reconstruction of our country. We shall actively pursue the Kakata Declaration resulting from the National Youth Conference held in 2005 and the implementation of a National Youth Policy and Program.\textsuperscript{385}

The President is yet to develop a National Youth Policy and Program. Regardless of the many promises and pledges she made over the years, her administration has failed to make the advancement and empowerment of Liberian youth a major policy objective and as such, little or nothing has been done to institute programs that would address the needs and concerns of the youth. It can therefore be argued that talks about creating policies pertaining to the youth have more to do with formality than with a genuine effort and desire to improve their wellbeing, since the overwhelming majority of youth continue to exist on the periphery of the Liberian society.

\textbf{Corruption}

The failure of the government to improve the socio-economic status of the Liberian people, including the youth is two-fold and cannot simply be explained away in terms of failed structural adjustment programs. Kieh observes:

\begin{quote}
Significantly, since the ascendancy of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf to the Liberian Presidency on January 16, 2006, the emerging trend suggests that the neo-colonial Liberian State will
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{384} Munive, “The Army of ‘Unemployed’ Young People,” 328.
\textsuperscript{385} Sirleaf, \textit{This Child Will be Great: Memoir of a Remarkable Life by Africa’s First Woman President}, 329.
not be democratically reconstituted. This is because the Sirleaf regime has accepted the neo-colonial construct, which it inherited, in total. Clearly, the regime believes that nothing is wrong with the neo-colonial construct. Instead, what is needed is simply a ‘change of regime.’ So, the regime is trying to institute some reforms in the public sector within the bowels of the neo-colonial Liberia State. Also, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, two imperialist international economic institutions, have re-established their suzerainty over the Liberian political economy.386

One way the Sirleaf administration continues to operate within the confines of the neo-colonial Liberian State is through corruption and nepotism. Since 2006, several of her key cabinet members have been accused of corruption and many Liberians believe that the President has been complacent about the problem and has not implemented the tough approach she promised during the campaign and first inaugural address. Pertaining to eliminating corruption, she states:

Fellow Liberians, we know that if we are to achieve our economic and income distribution goals, we must take on forcibly and effectively the debilitating cancer of corruption. Corruption erodes faith in government because of the mismanagement and misapplication of public resources. It weakens accountability, transparency, and justice. Corruption shortchanges and undermines key decision and policy making processes. It stifles private investments which create jobs and assures support from our partners. Corruption is a national cancer that creates hostility, distrust, and anger. Throughout the campaign, I assured our people that, if elected, we would wage war against corruption regardless of where it exists, or by whom it is practiced. Today, I renew this pledge. Corruption, under my Administration, will be the major public enemy. We will confront it. We will fight it. Any member of my Administration who sees this affirmation as mere posturing, or yet another attempt by yet another Liberian leader to play to the gallery on this grave issue should think twice. Anyone who desires to challenge us in this regard will do so at his or her personal disadvantage. In this respect, I will lead by example. I will expect and demand that everyone serving in my Administration leads by example.387

The general perception among Liberians was that the President had done little or nothing to fulfill the pledge of making corruption a major public enemy during her administration. “Women Warn Ellen: Varbah or Us in 2011,” was the leading story of

386 Kieh, “The Human Development Crisis in Liberia,” 82.
387 Sirleaf, This Child Will be Great: Memoir of a Remarkable Life by Africa’s First Woman President, 329.
the New Democrat on Tuesday, 12 January 2010. A day before the story, members from ECOWAS Civil Society Women Fighting against Corruption in Liberia, held a peaceful protest at the Capitol Building, demanding that the President fire Gender and Development Minister, Varbah K. Gayflor for corruption or risk losing their vote in the 2011 presidential election. This came after the Liberian Anti-Corruption Commission (LAC) had conducted an investigation and concluded that the Minister was guilty of theft, abuse of power and exploitation, for slashing the allowances of employees for her personal use. The allowance, which had been donated to the ministry for the staff, was only one of the several charges the LAC brought against Minister Gayflor; they also accused her of embezzling developmental projects funds. Although the President had been aware of the LAC findings, the administration remained silent about the matter. President Sirleaf did not call for the resignation of Min. Gayflor nor did she dismiss her. 

Besides Minister Gayflor, other key members of the Sirleaf administration who had been found guilty of corruption have also gone without impunity. In 2008, the international firm, Ernst and Young was asked by the government to audit the Liberian Petroleum Refining Corporation (LPRC). Based on the audit, the firm concluded that over $500,000 could not be accounted for. Moreover, auditors found that hundreds of thousands of dollars were being spent without justification. Mr. Harry Greaves, head of the Cooperation could not account for the missing funds. However, like Gayflor, he kept his job, since the government did not pursue the issue.388

Similarly, in 2008, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Honorable Johnnie N. Lewis, was accused of embezzling one million U.S. dollars during a trip to the United States. While the accusation was discussed on several national radio talk shows and was

388 New Democrat February 4, 2008.
also covered by newspapers such as *The Analyst, Daily Observer*, and *New Democrat*, the
government did not make any inquires about the issue nor did it launch an investigation
to see whether or not the claim of corruption could be substantiated. The lack of
commitment on the part of the President to combat corruption, which she called a
“national cancer” in her inaugural address, was contrary to her promises. She stated:
“Corruption erodes faith in government because of the mismanagement and
misapplication of public resources” and it “[w]eakens accountability, transparency, and
justice.”389 The aforementioned cases are just a few of the many accounts of corruption
by the Sirleaf administration. The large number of individuals in the government who
were accused of corruption demonstrates the administration’s inability to transform
Liberian political culture, a political culture that was and apparently is, too porous to
allow corruption and nepotism to go unchallenged or unchecked.

The policies and practices of the President over the years have not been in line
with her sworn commitment to economic justice and equal opportunities for all Liberians.
In 2006, she instituted a new salary structure for the public sector. The monthly salary of
the president was stated as $6,000, vice-president $5,000 and cabinet members $1,500
each, excluding their allowances, which amount remained a secret, while the monthly
salary for a civil servant was $26.00, with no allowances.390 The income disparity
between the President, Vice-President, cabinet members, and civil servants was such that
Kieh concludes, “In effect, with a monthly salary of $26.00 for civil servants, they remain
in the category of the ‘working poor.’”391 The plight of civil servants was such that their

389 Sirleaf, *This Child Will be Great: Memoir of a Remarkable Life by Africa’s First Woman President*, 329.
390 Kieh, “The Human Development Crisis in Liberia,” 90.
391 Ibid.
monthly salaries were insufficient to purchase a 100 pound bag of the country’s staple food - rice.

However, among the perks that government officials receive each month includes hundreds of gallons of “free” gas and the private use of government issued vehicles. For example, for its Tuesday, 12 January, 2010, “This Too, is Liberia” segment, the New Democrat featured two vehicles being used by a government official, with a price tag of $45,000 a piece, for a total of $90,000. The caption below the cars read: “Are we that poor? Not really. One of our officials uses these just for escort pilot. It’s probably time for donors to leave. This, too, is Liberia.” The sarcasm of the writer is clear, a country that has a massive unemployment rate, 85% to be exact, and with the average family living on less than a dollar per day^{392} would not be spending the people’s money so wastefully, if it was committed to improving their socio-economic status.

The income disparities between government officials - and civil servants, have exacerbated corruption in all sectors of government, including the national police force, whose corruptive activities affect children and youth who were (still are) struggling to survive by engaging in petty-trading. In an interview with a police officer, I asked him about the common complaints made by petty goods sellers I had interviewed who charged that uniformed police officers were confiscating their goods and demanding a bribe for selling in a no sale zone. He responded:

Yes, we do seize goods from sellers and demand money for their return. The government has designated certain areas as no selling zones, so when they sell there, we take their things. The government informed us that violators are to be sent to the Ministry of Finance to pay a fine of twenty-five USD before they would be able to retrieve their goods. The vast majority of sellers are very poor and do not have that kind of money to

^{392} Ibid., 83
pay. We ask for bribes because we are poorly paid. Look at my check, ninety-one dollars (USD) a month; it has gone up. When I started in 2006, I was making less than thirty dollars (USD) a month. I have three children and a wife to support. By taking little fifty dollars (Liberian) here and there, I am helping them and they are helping me. The government often complains that the police force is not generating revenue for the country… How can we send sellers to the Ministry of Finance when we are so poorly paid? Look at the big cars government officials are riding and the kind of money they are making and stealing? They are enjoying whilst the rest of us are suffering. The police are not the problem; the government is. 393

The designated “No Selling Zone” the officer discussed is arbitrary, since there were no posted signs anywhere in the Paynesville area denoting no sale zone. Without such demarcation, police officers routinely justified the harassment of sellers, and taxi drivers for money. The fifty Liberian dollars, the officer said he collected “here and there from sellers,” which was approximately seventy-five cents (USD) may not seem like a lot, but in a place like Liberia where the majority of the people are living in extreme poverty, losing seventy-five cents a day to a cop most likely means a major loss of profit or principle, thereby further decreasing an already low standard of living.

The policy of appeasing political allies persuaded by President Sirleaf is evident in the following newspaper commentary by The Analyst, one of the newspapers in Liberia:

If one puts the question of policy and government performance to supporters of the Sirleaf Administration, one will possibly hear something like this: ‘The President has performed so brilliantly that she needs to seek reelection to complete her dreams, programs, and policy objectives.’ But key opposition figures within the Liberty Party and the Liberian Senate say such response would be insincere. At the worst, they say, the President needs to be impeached; at best, she needs to tailor her policies more towards creating unfettered opportunities for all Liberians rather than pursuing the policy of nepotism, which she introduced last week. 394

393 Interview with a police officer, Paynesville Red Light, October 29, 2009.
This statement was made in reference to the directive issued by the President during a speech at the Unity Party Convention held in early February of 2010, where she publicly called on all officials of her Administration to hire members of the party, probably with or without qualifications. Such display of partisanship caused many Liberians to criticize the President. Some of the criticism against her came from the Association of Liberian Professional Organization (ALPO). In an issued statement they asserted that, “This pronouncement connotes that qualified unemployed Liberians who are not members of any political party are secondary citizens who might eventually be obliged to join the ruling party for jobs. The right to employment should not be tied to political party affiliation.”  

As already shown, the rate of unemployment and poverty in the country is astronomical and such policy only exacerbates the problem.

By explicitly preferring jobs for partisans, the Sirleaf Administration was continuing the politics of exclusion that has plagued the nation since its inception (see chapters one and two). Also, her appointment of family members and friends - including her sons - to key governmental positions is not different from the policies implemented by the settlers’ ruling strata (the Americo-Liberians), and during the regimes of both Samuel Doe and Charles Taylor. Thus, according to Adam Nossiter of *The New York Times*, “President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the Nobel winner, is lionized by the outside world as the woman who calmed a country ravaged by years of brutal civil war. But she is viewed more skeptically at home by a population still mired in poverty and official corruption, and struggling with little electricity”  

Nossiter’s observations are accurate. Today, there is not a single operating traffic light in the entire country, including

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395 Ibid.
Monrovia, compared to the 1960s and late 1980s. Also, in the aftermath of the war, many children and youth have never had the opportunity of drinking clean safe pipe-borne water nor do they have electricity in their homes.

**Youth and the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission**

According to Pigou,

> Children and young people invariably bear the brunt of hostilities and the instruments of repression that typify societies in conflict. Indeed, most of the gross violations of human rights during South Africa’s apartheid period, as later reported to the its Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), were perpetrated against children and young people between the ages of thirteen and twenty-four. Children were both indirect victims and direct targets, as evidenced by the Umtata Raid documented by the TRC.397

However, regardless of the multiplicity of children and youth experiences during the apartheid regime, including their active participation in anti-apartheid struggles, their voices and experiences were largely excluded from the country’s TRC hearings. For example, upon receiving advice from child rights advocates, the Commission decided not to take any statements from anyone below the age of eighteen.398 Thus, the internationalization of the concepts of children and youth as always already victims led to the invisibility of South Africa’s children and youth by failing to acknowledge their agency.

With the lessons learned from the exclusion of children and youth participation in South Africa’s TRC process, the Sierra Leonean Truth and Reconciliation Commission

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398 Ibid., 116-122.
established in 2000, was the first time the experiences and voices of children and youth were made an integral part of a TRC process.  

Like Sierra Leone, during the Liberian civil war, children and youth were heavily recruited as child soldiers. Some of the guidelines implemented for the participation of children and youth in Liberia’s TRC process, was similar to those of Sierra Leone. Among these guiding principles were: children have the right to be heard and that their views should be taken into consideration in decisions affecting them; the participation of children should be voluntary; the names of children who provide statements should not be disclosed or presented as information that might identify a child; and that all testimonies provided by them were to remain confidential.

The active participation of Liberia’s children and youth in the TRC process was not limited to Monrovia; social workers collected statements from both boys and girls in all sixteen counties. Between May and September of 2008, the TRC collected 1000 confidential statements from children and the youth across Liberia. Besides the collection of testimonies, children and youth were encouraged to express their thoughts and feelings about the conflict through their art and words. Subsequently, the TRC, in conjunction with the Ministry of Gender and Development and the Child Protection Network organized an art gallery, which opened on 27 September of 2008 at the City

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400 For Sierra Leone, see for example, Susan McKay and Dyan Mazura, *Where are the Girls? Girls in Fighting Forces in Northern Uganda, Sierra Leone and Mozambique: The Lives During and After War*, (Montreal: Rights and Democracy, International Center for Human Rights and Democratic Development 2004,).


402 TRC Final Report, 46.
Hall, in Monrovia. The works were displayed for several days and was open to the general public.  

The involvement of children and youth in the country’s TRC process was part of the third pillar of the Poverty Reduction Strategy being implemented in the country. It read in part: “In the interest of fostering a more complete society based on wide citizen participation, children and young people will be involved in governance and development planning through the establishment of child-centered bodies such as the Child Parliament, Child Councils, and youth centers at various levels.” Unfortunately, the government of Liberia, along with donor institutions have done little to ensure the empowerment of children and youth since the TRC completed its work in 2009. The Commission was very specific in its reports about the status and predicament of Liberian youth and made specified recommendations for improving their socio-economic status. The TRC finds that:  

The internationally guaranteed rights of Liberia’s children under the age of 18 were grossly and systematically violated and their dignity and welfare disregarded during the period of investigation, in particular during the Liberian wars from 1989 to 1996 and from 1999 to 2003…Thus, abused children found themselves both victims and perpetrators during the war…Liberia as a nation has not invested the necessary resources in its children in many decades. Many children feel that they are inferior citizens. They feel abandoned, betrayed, and abused by adults. The TRC found a clear desire among many children who have been victimized by the war to bring those who caused their suffering to Justice…The TRC finds that the DDRR Program was incomplete especially the most vital components of rehabilitation and reintegration which are very critical to ensuring not only a safe and peaceful society, but that the young people can put to positive use their untapped energy and talents which the nation so desperately needs.  

Based on its findings, the Commission, in part made the following recommendations:  

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403 Sowa, “Children and the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” 244.  
The TRC recommends that because children are neither culpable nor held responsible for their actions during times of war, all children who participated in the armed conflict be protected without limitation from all forms of sanctions including criminal prosecution, civil liability, or public sanctions. The TRC recommends the abolition of all forms of discrimination and violence against children and minority groups in our society. The TRC also recommends that the government develops sound and practicable social welfare programs for children, who if left alone, would be deprived of the opportunities which could make them vulnerable and a liability to society. The TRC further recommends the establishment of rehabilitation and reintegration programs for child soldiers and children associated with armed groups to the extent that they will benefit from free compulsory education up to the secondary level including the opportunities for vocational education. The TRC also recommends that the Government of Liberia takes all legislative, administrative, social welfare and educational measures to protect children from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect and exploitation or maltreatment including sexual abuse by persons or institutions entrusted with their care.406

Besides, the initial implementation of DDR programs discussed earlier, the government and donor nations have not taken the issue of youth empowerment seriously. The government of Liberia has not undertaken any initiatives to create social welfare programs to improve the socio-economic conditions of youth, as recommended by the TRC. Thus, the material and social conditions of most Liberian youth have remained the same – or worse.

Often, when the youth are made part of national discourse by government officials, the narrative is, more often than not, negative. When they attempt to make demands on the state via participating in protests, and even voting, their motives are always questioned by those in authority and in the end the construction and perception of the youth as “lazy trouble-makers” and therefore always “criminals” is reinforced, thereby making it more difficult for the government to make their needs a priority. For

example, during the 2005 Presidential election, candidate Sirleaf and the Unity Party in general constructed and represented the youth, who overwhelmingly supported Weah as mere trouble-makers, prone to violence. When Weah’s camp raised concerns about the elections being rigged in favor of her, she said:

I spoke out forcefully against this kind of talk, which so clearly had the potential of inciting Weah’s many young supporters to violence…Given the lingering tensions in Liberia from so many years of war, and given the rashness and immaturity of his youthful supporters; this was like laying tinder near an open flame.\(^{407}\)

The labeling of youth voters as “rash” and “immature” denied their agency and ignored the fundamental reasons why they overwhelmingly supported Weah for president. Instead of simply being uninformed voters, identity politics was at the center of youth support for the former international football star. Like him, the vast majority of them came from poor families and never finished high school. Weah had not attended college and did so after he ran for the presidency, a factor that his critics including the Liberian intelligentsia had used against him during the 2005 elections. Therefore, for the youth, he represented the common man and they could relate to him in a personal way that they could not to Sirleaf. Consequently, they believed he understood their plight and would work to improve their socio-economic status. Also, as a multi-millionaire and philanthropist, they did not view his motive of wanting to be president as an opportunity for self-enrichment, but rather to help the poor who form the majority of the Liberian population.

\(^{407}\) Sirleaf, *This Child Will be Great: Memoir of a Remarkable Life by Africa’s First Woman President*, 266.
Struggling for Survival: Children and Liberian Youth

As shown, the western construction of children as innocent and vulnerable, which is rooted in western middle class values of childhood, has led to the universalization of a specific definition of childhood: “below the age of eighteen years,” by the U.N. Geneva Convention and by the U.N Convention on the Rights of the Child. Such a definition fails to account for the complexities and diversity of the lived experiences of children and youth around the world and constrains our understanding of the significant role and position they have in the family economy. In Africa, children and teenagers are expected to work and assume social responsibilities at an early age, often blurring the line between childhood and adulthood. A culture-specific conceptualization of childhood therefore enables us to adequately understand the involvement and contributions, as well as the differences between children and youth entrepreneurial contributions to their households in post-civil war Liberia.

In Liberia, as in most developing world, the most important economic contribution children and teenagers make to the survival of their families is through their labor, including, helping on family farms and engaging in various forms of petty businesses. In the urban centers, the predominant contributions of children to household income involve hawking petty goods and foods on the streets. Based on my research, I realized that there is a significant difference between children and youth with regard to their level of autonomy within the family. I discovered that age played a central role in their agency or the lack thereof. For example, on the one hand child food sellers, between the ages of six to twelve years old had little impute in what kind of products they

sold, how many days and hours they worked and always turned over all of the day’s earnings to their parents or the person with whom they were living. Teenagers on the other hand, that is those between ages thirteen to eighteen years old-especially those between fifteen to eighteen years old, enjoyed a high degree of autonomy. This age group has significant autonomy, relative to the younger ones, in deciding what type of products they sold and the vast majority of them did not have to turn over their daily earnings to the family.

The issue of child-labor is not a post war phenomenon in Liberia; since the inception of the country, children have, in one form or another contributed their labor to the economic survival of their families. However, the civil war significantly increased the number of child-laborers. Also, child-labor is not unique to Africa. In 2002, based on the population of children by world region, 28.8% between the ages of five to fourteen were in the labor force in Sub-Saharan Africa; 19.1% in Asia and Pacific, 16.1% in Latin America and the Caribbean. In North Africa and the Middle East, the figure is 15.2%. In developed countries, only 1% of children were part of the labor force.\textsuperscript{409} Poverty therefore is a key factor of child labor. In war affected countries, including Liberia and Sierra Leone, the percentage of children working has increased significantly, compared to the pre-war period. In Liberia, where the average family survives on less than a dollar a day, and unemployment since 2000 has remained at 85\%,\textsuperscript{410} many children have become breadwinners for their families. This problem is acknowledged by the Liberian TRC in its final report:

\textsuperscript{409} Loretta Bass E, \textit{Child Labor in Sub-Saharan Africa}. (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2004), 4-5.
\textsuperscript{410} Kieh, “The Human Development Crisis in Liberia,” 90.
Child labor is a serious problem in Liberia. During anytime of the day or night, children roam the street peddling all varieties of wares, work in markets, shops or garages. The loss of parents and family members or their injury and disability has made children assume the responsibility of breadwinner or heads of household in many cases. For many poorer families, sending children to make money is a matter of survival. However, it means that children are missing out on educational opportunities, which will make them more vulnerable in the future and will prevent them from advancing in the future. Many jobs children do are also physically arduous and harmful to children’s health.411

One of the inherent dangers faced by child laborers in Liberia, especially those who walk the streets selling petty goods such as oranges, candies, cold water, biscuits, plantain chips, gum, bananas, etc. is getting struck by a car or motorcycle. To attract more customers, child sellers do not stay in one spot and are therefore constantly moving, which often involves crossing the streets, without paying close attention to motorists, who were constantly maneuvering around pedestrians and other motorists without following traffic regulations. Without functioning traffic lights in the country, driving in Liberia, especially Monrovia is extremely chaotic and dangerous for pedestrians, including adults. It is common practice for drivers to drive on the shoulders of roads and on the sidewalks, which are often crowded with children and others searching for their daily bread. The Paynesville, Red Light market and business district, has one of the most dangerous and chaotic traffic patterns.412 It is difficult to state how many child sellers are injured and killed each year, since no research and data have been conducted and compiled about the issue.

The story of forty-five year old single mother Rebecca, struggling to support her children further illuminates the assertion made by the TRC that for poor families, sending their children to sell is a matter of survival. She explains:

411 TRC Final Report, 259.
412 I visited this commercial area frequently to observe the survival techniques of child hawkers. To my utmost surprise, I counted twelve accidents involving cars running over these hawkers during a ten months period; nine of these were fatal.
My whole life turned upside down in March of 2002, when my husband became very ill and passed away. When he died, our oldest daughter was twelve, the second seven, and the last was two, we did not have sons. I did my best to keep us going. For two years, I was able to keep the two girls in school, and paid out rent. But, with only one income, things became very tough. We moved to a one bedroom apartment and I stopped sending my nine year old to school because we could not afford it. I promised her that as soon as things improved, she would go back to school. I kept Fatu, who was now fourteen in school and she was a great help. After school, she used to come to the market to help me sell and at home she did all the cooking and washing. She never gave me any problems and never complained about anything, Fatu was just like her father. She was determined to stay in school and help me with her sisters and even used to teach them.

Then in 2007, when she was seventeen she became very sick. Her limbs were all swollen and she could barely walk. Here, you have to have money to go to the hospital. If you cannot pay up front, they will not treat you. I spent all the money I was using for the business to take her to the hospital, but still she died. Yes, my child died. My children lost their second father. I am a Christian and the Bible says that in all things, good or bad we should give thanks and we should not question God when bad things happen, but I want to know why? People are dying here like ants and poverty is everywhere. When Ellen was running, she said she was going to work hard to make things better for us, but nothing. We are worse off today than when Taylor was president.

Today, I have nothing. I do not have the means to sell fish and meat in the market. Now, the only things I can afford to sell are cold water, roasted cassava and plantain with coconut by the roadside. Last year, I sent my second daughter to go and live with a friend, who agreed to send her to school. My nine year old-Musu is with me. She attends the free school at our church and is in the First Grade. Every day, after school, she comes here to help me sell. Sometimes, I place the cooler with cold water bags in it on her head for her to walk around the market area to sell, other times; I gave her a tray of roasted cassava and plantain to sell. She usually sells from 1pm to 6pm, but as soon as she leaves for school at 7:30am, I come and start selling. On Saturdays, we are here by 8am and do not leave until 6:30pm. Sunday is our only day off. In the early 1990s, Liberians started calling rice gold dust- because it is our staple food and it was very hard to find during the war and was also very expensive. Well, for me and Musu and for many Liberians, it is still gold dust- you can find it on the market, but it is expensive. One bag of rice (hundred pounds) is almost $50.00 dollars. Every Saturday, after selling, we go to the market and I buy us two cups $30.00 Liberian dollars (about 50 cents), and I also buy some fish and other little ingredients to cook on Sunday. The cow meat that I once sold, I have not been able to purchase a pound in over seven years-a pound is almost $5.00, that is about a week’s earning for us and our current rent is $10.00 per month.413

In 2006, data collected by the National School Census showed that many children involved in selling were of primary school age, and findings revealed that 85% of children in the first grade were eight to twenty years old. In an effort to scientifically examine the problem, the Ministry of Education hired the Liberia Association of

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413 Interview with a former market woman, Paynesville Red Light, October 29, 2009.
Research Fellows (LARF) to conduct research on children of primary school age selling in Monrovia. The main centers of the study included Duala, Waterside, Somalia Drive, Jallah’s Town, Sinkor, Central Monrovia, the Paynesville Market, the Red light Market and ELWA Junction.\(^{414}\) The sample size consisted of one thousand participants, divided evenly between boys and girls. The definitions and categories employed by researchers were specific and unique to the socio-economic realities of Liberian society. According to the report,

For the purpose of this study, primary school age pupil is defined as a young man or female student between the ages of six and twenty years old. This operational definition is guided by the National School Census (NSC) (2006) which found out that 85 percent of children in first grade were 8-20 years of age. This is also against the backdrop of the Liberian civil war which did not allow a majority of children to attend school for fifteen years.\(^{415}\)

The negative impact of the civil war on all sectors of the Liberian society, not just on education, cannot be overstated.

The findings at the conclusion of the study in 2008 were as follows: unemployed single female headed households constituted the largest number of children selling on the streets. Of the one thousand participants, 488 stated that their families had no money and therefore could not send them to school. 215 reported that they were selling to assist their parents or guardian, while 9.76% said that they lived on their own and were working to support themselves.\(^{416}\) The findings of the study reinforced that Rebecca’s life, her daily struggle for the survival of her nine-year-old daughter is the norm for many youth.

\(^{414}\) Street Children of Primary School Age: A Report Submitted to the Ministry of Education of Liberia by the Liberian Association of Research Fellows (2008): 1,3.
\(^{415}\) Ibid., 2.
\(^{416}\) Ibid.,10.
and their families, and is not the exception to life in post-civil war Liberia. Also, the
issue of youth living on their own and supporting themselves and in some cases, other
siblings and family members is a common occurrence in the country. Below is nineteen-
year-old Zarba’s story:

I have been doing hair for the past two years, but I have been working since I was twelve. My father sent my sister and me to live with a family friend in Monrovia in 2002 because our mother passed away and he was having a hard time providing for us and there was only one school in the village and it only stopped to third grade. I was twelve and my sister was eight. The woman he sent us to be with was not good to us at all. We really suffered there, especially my sister because I later ran away. She did not send us to school like she told our father she would; we were like slaves. Every morning, we had to get up at 5: am to draw water from the well, sweep the yard, wash the dishes, and had to prepare bath water for her, her husband and three children. When the children went to school and her husband to work, we had to go with her to Jallah’s Town Market to sell used clothing. She never gave us anything. Compared with her children, our food was small and we had to eat in the kitchen, we were not allowed at the table with them. In fact, only she and her family ate breakfast every morning. We never said anything, although we were always hungry and did all the work.

When I turned fifteen, I could not take it anymore. One day, when she gave me a sack of clothes to go and sell, I went and never came back. I went and stayed with my friend who was helping her aunty to sell clothes after school. Her aunty was nice and did not mind me staying in her house, but she told me I had to follow the same rules like all the children in the house. I helped with all the housework and we never had any problems. After I sold the sack of clothes I ran away with, I had $15.00 (U.S) and my friend aunty loaned me $20.00. I took the $35.00 dollars and bought a sack of used shoes to sell. I sold shoes for two years and paid my debt back after four months. Selling is not easy; I used to walk all around in the hot sun, mostly nine hours a day. I saved as much as I could and after one year I had $150.00 dollars. I did not forget my sister. I knew she was going to suffer more after I ran away with the clothes, but I had to do it, that was our only chance of making it in Monrovia.

Three months after I ran away, I started meeting up with her behind the old market. I used to buy her food everyday and she used to tell me how the woman was beating and insulting her all the time. I told her to just bear it and as soon as I got on my feet, I was going to take her from that hell hole. I never gave her money, because if that woman saw her with any money, she was going to say my sister was stealing from her. After one year, my sister ran away and we moved here to Paynesville. We live in a one bedroom apartment and I put her in school. The woman never sent her to school and so she is fifteen years old and in the second grade. With the money I made from selling shoes, I opened this small shop. I sell rice by the cup, soap, candles, bread, sardines, corned beef, salt, pepper, sugar, vegetable oil, cold water, soft drink, etc. I also braid and weave hair here too and this has been my business for the last two years. After school, my sister can come here to help me and on the weekend she also braids hair. I am supporting the both of us because I want her to focus on school. For me, I am done with school because I cannot afford two school fees, plus keep a roof over our heads. So, I will just focus on my business. I stopped in the third grade, but my plan is for my sister to graduate from high school.417

417 Interview with a youth entrepreneurial, Paynesville Red Light, November 9, 2009.
The abuse and neglect that Zarba and her sister were subjected to while living with their family friend was a common experience among youth informants who headed their own households. The plight of these youth is such that the TRC, in its final report stated that: “The fostering of children from rural areas and underprivileged families by better off urban relatives or acquaintances has a long tradition in Liberia. However, today, the practice more frequently seems to lead to abuse of the fostered children, which leaves them vulnerable to homelessness and trafficking.”  

Clearly, the socio-economic predicaments of many families have led to an increased in violence against children and youth in the country.

While both boys and girls engage in petty trade as a means of survival, some occupations, in particular the use of motorbikes (pen-pen) for public transportation has become a more lucrative economic enterprise for some teenage boys. The “pen-pen” business in Liberia is the sole domain of teenage boys and young men. Given the scarcity of buses and taxis (the common mode of public transportation in the country until the onset of the conflict in 1989), many Liberians today have come to rely on the pen-pen for getting around, and because it is also affordable. The use of pen-pen for public transportation is clearly, a new phenomenon in Liberia. Although, it was known in some parts of West Africa—Benin, Nigeria, Guinea and Togo, for example—the breakdown of transportation networks along with increasing poverty in post-civil war Liberia, led to the adoption of this mode of less expensive but dangerous form of urban transportation. The pen-pen’s popularity derives from its ability to navigate narrow roads and heavy traffic.

[^18]: TRC Final Report, 259.
Children and youths survival strategies can be gleaned from this new mode of transportation in Liberia, and provides a rare window for exploring the impacts of the lack of effective poverty reduction policies on the youth. The following observation also supports my contention that post-war Liberian children and youths were not helpless victims, but also active agents in their modes of survival. Many pen-pen drivers do not own the motorbikes they work with, although many said they were in the process of saving to purchase their own. In most instances, they are driving for someone else, or leased the bikes from a dealer to whom they must pay a daily fee. If driving for a private owner, they must also report a daily agreed amount. The average daily amount my informants paid to private owners or dealers were between eight hundred to one thousand Liberian dollars ($12-15 dollars). Many interviewees stated that they had turn to driving pen-pen because it gives them some economic autonomy because they are able to keep a good portion of their daily earnings, which is often thirty-fifty percent of the earnings, the remaining percentage goes to the owner of the motorbike. As eighteen years old Jerry explains:

Pen-pen has money. Every day, I make about six to eight dollars in profit. In a month, I can make more than a police officer or teacher. Yes, business is good and in about a year, I am going to buy my own bike. I live by myself and do not have any children or other mouths to feed, so I am doing really well. I have also opened a bank account with Echo bank, I am very proud of myself. Some of my friends, they blow their money on girls, but not me. My girlfriend parents have money, so she does not ask me for anything. Look at me do you not see how good I look? I just bought this Nike sneaker. I am not going to school. Going to school right now in Liberia is a waste of time to tell you the truth. When you graduate, the government will not give you job. They gave the jobs to those they know and I do not know anyone in government. Just listen to the radio or read a news paper, you will hear about the corruption going on in Ellen government. 419

419 Interview with youth "pen-pen” driver, Paynesville Red Light, November 9, 2009.
The pessimistic view of government shared by Jerry was a common theme among teenage youth informants and the primary reason given for why many of them were not focusing on attending school, but rather on earning a living. Although driving pen-pen for a living is lucrative for some youth, it is also a very high risk enterprise. Most drivers are trained for only a few hours often by a friend before they get into traffic and as a result crashes are very common, which often result in major injuries and death for the driver and passengers.\textsuperscript{420}

Regardless of the vast and varied entrepreneurial activities Liberian youth engage in daily, the international community and the government of Liberia have failed to acknowledge their endeavors and continue to construct and represent them in ways that deny and ignore their agency. To this end, Munive states:

\begin{quote}
I contend that Liberian youth has been objectified through different policies and documents as idle and unemployed; but how has this image of youth been forged in the specific case of Liberia? Why are young people associated with the static image of ‘unemployment’? The language of the Liberian Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) provides a good starting point to understand how youth has been framed.\textsuperscript{421}
\end{quote}

As long as the international community and the Liberian government continue to ignore the ‘informal’ economic activities of Liberian youth, and their commitment to surviving as imperative to the formation and implementation of developmental policies in the country, they will continue to produce ineffective policies and programs.

\textsuperscript{420} The matter is worsened by the fact that the vast majority of drivers and passengers do not wear helmets, a problem that is in serious need of government attention.
\textsuperscript{421} Munive, “The Army of ‘Unemployed’ Young People,” 328.
CONCLUSION

This chapter began with the examination of the DDR programs implemented by the United Nations and donor nations, beginning in 2003 that were intended to end the civil war and improve the lives of those most affected by the conflict, including ex-combatants youth. The programs succeeded in the disarmament and reintegration of ex-combatants, but fell short in regards to creating sustainable opportunities that were supposed to provide a livelihood for them as an alternative to bearing arms. A major reason for this failure is that local knowledge and expertise were excluded from the design of the programs and those designing the programs knew very little about Liberian society in general. This chapter attempted to explain the historical contexts of the economic and social positions of Liberian youths and teenagers, and how the lack of understanding of the complexity of Liberian youths in relations to household economy, led to the ineffectiveness of the policies developed by UN agencies and the DDR. Most Liberian government prior to the outbreak of the war neglected Liberian youths, as I discussed in chapter one and in other parts of this dissertation. Despite the claims of healing the national wound and implementing policies to alleviate poverty, the youths of Liberia have not seen any significant improvement in their conditions. Rather, they have adopted a series of strategies independent of government initiatives, to improve their conditions.

The Sirleaf’s administration is yet to create a clear and precise national youth policy and has failed to create and implement any of the social programs recommended by the TRC that were meant to address and improve the socio-economic conditions of the youth. Therefore, although the youth constitute over half the Liberian population and are
the poorest among all the social categories, they remain invisible to the government. As I have demonstrated throughout the work, the perceptions and construction of the youth as ‘lazy’ and ‘trouble-makers,’ by older people and, in particular, by those in authority (President Sirleaf included), have historically been used as justification for the maltreatment and exclusion of the youth from benefiting from national wealth. I have also demonstrated that in the midst of tremendous hardships and difficulties the youth have not been mere victims, but also actors, who have and continue to employ a series of strategies, mainly their entrepreneurial skills to live and survive, and in some instances make significant economic progress in a society that continues to ignore their sufferings.

On the issue of accountability and justice, the Sirleaf administration has also fallen short. The formation of the Liberian TRC was intended to bring about national reconciliation and healing, as well as to hold accountable those responsible for the atrocities committed against innocent civilians during the conflict. Although the Commission fulfilled its mission and recommended several individuals responsible for the conflict be prosecuted, none of them have been arrested and prosecuted. In fact, during their testimonies before the Commission, Prince Johnson of the INPFL remained defiant and showed little to no remorse for the carnage he helped create in the country, while Sekou Konneh of the LURD claimed he knew nothing about the atrocities committed by his forces.

The reason why those who were found responsible for wartime offences were not persecuted was perhaps because the international community was not deeply committed to the process of seeking justice for victims and survivors of the Liberian civil war. This is evident when we note that in Sierra Leone, unlike Liberia, the international community
persecuted those who were responsible for war crimes, including Charles Taylor. It is important to note that another fundamental reason for which President Sirleaf could not seek the arrest and prosecution of former warlords and others responsible for the war was due to the fact that she herself was once a financial supporter of Charles Taylor and had been named by the Commission as one of several individuals who should be banned from holding public office for a period of thirty years. In 2010, she ignored the TRC recommendation and announced that she would be seeking a second term. As of 2012, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is in her second term and Prince Johnson continues to serve as senior senator for Nimba County. The unwillingness of Liberian politicians to put aside their selfish needs and interest for the betterment of their country remains a major obstacle to genuine reconciliation and development in the country.

An examination of the post-civil war government suggests that the conditions of Liberian youths are not entirely different from those of the pre-war era. Indeed, one can even argue that the legacy of the Americo-Liberian regime persists even after the war, because political and economic resources remain in the hands of those rooted in the old power structure fostered by the settlers. Similarly, the perception of the position of youths in the society since the establishment of Liberia has not changed. This perception has been reinforced by international agencies in ways that overlook the initiatives and endeavors pursued by youths, especially after the war. The post-war democratic government of Sirleaf is highly praised in the international arena for fostering peace and development, and for providing the infrastructure for reintegrating the youths into Liberian society. The reality is that, the youths of Liberia are yet to experience this success. Rather, realizing that the government is not making concrete progress in
providing them with economic opportunities, they designed their own strategies, which reflect survival techniques of youths in other war torn societies of the West African sub-region. Admittedly, it is too early to expect a success from a government that has to deal with deeply rooted political and economic inequalities, made even more difficult by fourteen years of civil war. Yet, it is also clear that widespread corruption of government officials and the overt favoritism shown to partisans by President Sirleaf, created an atmosphere that has hindered economic development and entrenched the disenfranchisement of the youths, especially those from poor households.
CONCLUSION

Since the late 1990s, sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists have been exploring the causes of the civil wars that erupted or intensified across Africa during the last decade of the twentieth century. Between 1989 and 2002, we observed civil wars in Liberia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (former Zaire), Somalia, Sierra Leone, and Cote d’Ivoire, while older conflicts in Rwanda, Burundi, Ethiopia, Sudan and Angola intensified. While most of these conflicts were brief, others, including that of Liberia, lasted more than a decade. Indeed, by the end of the first decade of the new millennium only a few of these conflicts, for example that of Somalia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, persisted. Although each of these conflicts evolved from locally-specific historical context, many observers had expected the end of the ideologically-driven proxy wars characterized by the Cold War, to bring about political stability throughout the continent. Obviously, latent conflicts that had to be resolved shattered this optimism. Due to the intensity of violence and the destruction of the political and economic infrastructures of these nations during the conflicts, a bulk of the research focuses on identifying ways to rehabilitate former combatants and to persecute war leaders in order to foster a lasting peace. This means other aspects of the history of these conflicts are not fully explored, especially that of Liberia.

Focusing on Liberia, this dissertation locates itself in this new interest in understanding the causes of post-Cold War conflicts in Africa. My research, however,
departs from the dominant literature in two fundamental ways. First, I delved deeper into the history of Liberia in order to highlight how the country’s unique history laid the foundation for a civil war that claimed the lives of over three hundred and fifty thousand Liberians and left hundreds of thousands displaced, and destroyed the country’s fragile economy. As a result of the contemporaneous nature of the subject and the need to provide policy-makers with tangible research findings that would facilitate conflict resolutions and the rehabilitation of combatants, historians have been slow in engaging with this vibrant discourse. I argue, however, that historians can and should contribute to our understanding of the historical origins of the conflict in order to provide greater insights into the debates about post-conflict rehabilitation and economic development. I thus began this project by reading the archival sources in order to historicize the conflict.

As discussed in chapter one, the history of the Liberian civil war can be traced to the historical formation of what would become the Republic of Liberia founded by freed American slaves. Lacking indigenous origins and political legitimacy rooted in the local political structures and traditions, the Americo-Liberian settlers developed a new political system inherited from the United States that allowed them to impose their authorities on the indigenous population. They succeeded in this endeavor not only because of the massive support they received from various political and religious organizations in the United States, but also by perpetuating self-acclaimed notions of cultural superiority relative to the indigenous people. Claiming to be more civilized than the indigenes, the Americo-Liberians justified their exploitation of the local people and worked out ways to maintain their political and economic hegemony. By the 1960s when colonialism and foreign dominations ended in most European colonies in Africa,
the Liberian society had been deeply polarized between the disenfranchised indigenous population on the one hand, and the rich and powerful Americo-Liberians on the other. This polarization and the growing resentment of the Americo-Liberian hegemony reached a threshold in the 1970s, when endemic poverty and high cost of food culminated in the Rice Riot of 1979, which the government of Liberia responded to harshly.

The Rice Riot not only revealed the depth of political and economic inequality in the society that had been consciously fostered by the Americo-Liberian regime for more than a century, but more fundamentally, it also demonstrated the increasing fragility of the settlers’ regime.422 The extent of this fragility and growing public resentments against the settlers became more evident when in 1980, Sergeant Samuel Doe, a young soldier with limited education, led a military coup that violently brought to an end the Americo-Liberian hegemony. Doe’s coup was welcomed by the indigenous population for whom the coup not only marked the end of an exploitative regime, but they were also optimistic that it would provide economic and political opportunities to those who had been disenfranchised for more than a century. This expectation was shuttered when Sergeant Doe also created new ethnic cleavages by empowering his own ethnic group and others who supported his regime. Ultimately, Doe’s regime perpetuated structural inequality, reminiscence of the past. The rampant violence that occurred under Doe’s administration as he resorted to the use of force to maintain power, and the overt discrimination experienced by those outside of the orbit of power he had established to sustain his hold on power, became the final catalyst that steered Liberia into fourteen years of civil war. Arguably, the history of Liberia’s civil strife was identical with other

422 Sawyer, The Emergence of Autocracy in Liberia, 289-290.
settler colonies in Africa, where violence and civil wars became the unfortunate route to political transformation. Nonetheless, the case of Liberia is unique because the settlers were not whites, but people of African descent, and the settlers did not officially create a colony, although quite clearly the political and economic structures of Liberia under the regime of the Americo-Liberians was not very different from most European settler colonies in Africa.

Against this historical context, I moved deftly into another area that I believe is not fully explored by historians—the history of Liberian youth’s political and economic activism before and after the war. Many scholars have analyzed youth’s engagement in the civil war as part of an overall objective to implement effective resettlement of ex-combatants. My work slightly departs from the existing literature by focusing on the youth as one segment of the society. Thus, moving beyond binary divisions of the youth along gender lines—(boys or girls), or involvement in the wars (combatant child soldiers and non-combatant victims), or level of education (university students and non-literate youth)—I carefully analyze the historical engagements of Liberian youth across the spectrum and historical periods in order to bring to the fore their unique agency. I therefore examined the engagements of university and non-university students (the urban poor) in national politics between the 1950s and the aftermath of the civil war. It is important to recognize that without the support and solidarity of the urban poor—wheelbarrow and shoeshine boys, and young girls hawking petty goods on the street, along with market women, student activism in Monrovia would not have been effective.

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Paying close attention to ways to recognize youth historical agency led me to focus a bulk of my field research on observing and analyzing the survival techniques of all youth, including non-combatant urban youth during the post-conflict period. The results of extensive archival research ethnographic fieldwork led me to conclude that we need to go beyond the universal conceptualization of the youth as destitute victims, to explore their active political and economic activism in order to understand why and how they engaged in peaceful and non-peaceful political activism and to further explore the kind of survival strategies they developed in different historical times. By paying attention to non-college youth, who saw the street as the theater of their economic and political activism and considered the need to participate in warfare as part of their social and political obligations or the mechanism for survival, I sought to offer a peculiar insight to contribute to our understanding of the history of Liberian youths in particular, but the history of African youths in general.

Based on my research, I found that the exploitation and oppression of Liberian youth by various warring factions was not a wartime phenomenon, but has historical roots. During the Americo-Liberian rule, it was indigenous labor, in particular young able-bodied youth that was exploited for the gains of the ruling elites and their cronies, as demonstrated in chapter one. I also concluded that Liberian children and youth continue to occupy a marginalized status in their society because historically, their needs and value as citizens have not been made an integral part of the national agenda. This suggests that the historical as well as contemporary exploitation, oppression and exclusion of Liberian youth from participating in the political process are deeply rooted in adult authority. I also found that the permanent childlike-state to which students and
the youth in general have been consigned by adult, especially those in power remains a major obstacle to the fostering of democracy in the country, since their skills and ideas are ignored and remain unharnessed.

Recognizing youth’s agency is crucial for historians interested in the history of African youths. But it is also useful for developing effective policies designed to integrate the youth into the post war society. Issues related to economic inequality, absence of educational opportunities for the youth, massive youth unemployment, youth violence during the war, and youth’s strategies of survival before, during and after the war, cannot be understood outside of the historical context that shaped Liberia’s political culture and economic disenfranchisement. Neither can we understand the complexity of rebuilding Liberia without deeply exploring the global and regional contexts within which concepts of post-conflict national reconstruction are framed (see chapter 4). I therefore, also analyzed the ways international governmental and non-governmental organizations sought to implement policies to address youth’s concerns. For example, at the end of the civil war in 2003, the United Nations implemented a series of programs aimed at rehabilitating, reintegrating and improving the economic status of ex-combatants youth. The programs however, were primarily concerned with combatant youth and therefore non-combatant youth and children who were also greatly affected by the conflict were excluded. In the end, the needs of non-combatant youth were neglected as a result of dividing the youth into binary categories.

Although the DDR programs implemented by the U.N were successful to a degree, especially the inclusion of a large number of women and girls in the disarmament and reintegration processes, overall the programs have failed to improve the socio-
economic status of the youth, as the majority of them remain unemployed and without any hope for future prospects. A major reason for the failure of the DDR programs was that their designs and structures were based on western capitalist perceptions and expertise, which followed the model that when peace was restored, the private sector would flourish and create employment and other opportunities for the citizens. Such a model failed to take local realities into account. Since its inception, Liberia has been a peripheral capitalist society and is yet to develop a viable private sector. Hence, in the absence of this private sector to employ them, the majority of Liberians still looks to, and expects their government to create jobs and opportunities for them. Thus, the importation and privileging of foreign expertise over local knowledge and reality made it difficult for the programs to succeed in providing long term economic opportunities for ex-combatant youth.

After noticing the ineffectiveness of the policies of the international organizations, along with the failure of the postwar Liberian government to address the problems facing the youth as a group, especially urban youth from poor households, I used ethnographic approach to explore the strategies urban youth in particular employed to address the economic crises they were facing. It was these strategies of survival in the aftermath of the civil war and within the contexts of failed public promises of economic development that reveals more profoundly, youth’s agency and encouraged me to assess the extent to which such survival strategies were unique to post-conflict environment or rooted in the history of Liberian youth. I further concluded that youth survival techniques during the postwar era is significantly different from that of the prewar period: after the war, many urban youth, especially the older ones, became more
entrepreneurial and autonomous from household economy as they engaged with activities such as aggressive street hawking and providing cheap and relatively more mobile urban transportation, called pen pen, in order to earn income to sustain themselves (chapter 4).

For the older youth, their earnings from these activities, gave them some autonomy from the control of elders, and in the process transformed them into adults not in terms of age, but in terms of economic self-reliant. In post-civil war Liberia, where the unemployment rate is eighty-five percent and most families have consistently been unable to care for their children, the youth not only cater for themselves, but have also became the bread-winners of their families, thus assuming family responsibilities at a very young age. Obviously, this scenario cannot be explained by Western capitalist notion of childhood or adulthood. Rather, we need to understand the youths in each society within the specific cultural contexts and economic conditions of that society.

It is worth noting that economic independence sought or experienced by Liberian youth also suggests that some have lost interest in acquiring education. At the time of my research, many urban youth were ambivalent about the usefulness of education in providing them with economic sustenance and political powers. During my fieldwork, most of the youth I worked with declared that education had no value for them unless the government developed a new educational infrastructure that would empower them economically and politically. In other words, it was not enough for the government to create less costly educational opportunities for the youths (even if this was possible), but it should also link education with employment opportunities. This demand is obviously universal, although the capacity of the Liberian government to meet this demand remains
to be ascertained despite the support of foreign governmental and non-governmental organizations. Interestingly, a number of the youth entrepreneurs I encountered in Monrovia believed that micro-loans and grants from the government could help them improve on their economic activities and take care of their families. In other words, they were more interested in ways to survive economically than to pursue education that seemed to them to be a dead-end, due to the nepotism of government officials. What are the potential social and political implications of youth’s detachment from education on the future of post-war Liberian society? This question is of profound interest to historians and social scientists, as well as policy-makers.

I found that as Liberia progress and move forward, demands for the respect for law and accountability by civil groups are becoming important for the fostering of lasting peace and stability in the country. In his 1993 book, *Cry, Liberia Cry!* Andrews, the late Liberian lawyer and human rights activist explained:

People are already beginning to talk about the four postwar “Rs”- repatriation, rehabilitation, reconstruction, and reconciliation. Of all four, reconciliation is the most crucial but may, in typical human fashion, receive the least attention. Most who were displaced, robbed of their life’s work, harassed, terrorized, brutalized, or murdered had a family, some of whom are still left. It is human nature to remember and to avenge. This human tendency is partly responsible for the carnage of this war. Much lip service was paid to healing the wounds of the eighties, but very little in terms of concrete action followed….To simply say, ‘Let us forgive the past and start anew,’ is not enough. To forgive, one must know what is to be forgiven. First, we must expose, investigate, and judge that past, as far back as the rice riots of 1979. We must know what really happened in 1980 and who were the principal movers and shakers both up front and behind the scenes. What really happened during those bloody and brutal incidents on the University of Liberia campus? There has never been an investigation and we never knew how many students were raped or beaten and shot to death. We have never known what really happened during the two army forays into Nimba County in the mid-eighties, only reports that hundreds and maybe thousands of innocent people were slaughtered.\(^{424}\)

The lack of accountability and truth-telling continue to be a major roadblock towards genuine reconciliation in the country, and continue to weaken respect for laws. This is evident in the thirty years ban from holding public office, recommended by the TRC in 2009 which was completely ignored by the warlords now serving as senators in the Liberian legislature and, by President Sirleaf.

From this perspective, it is evident that the youths of Liberia have lost confidence in the ability of the government of Liberia to foster a lasting peace. Constant references were made about the ineffectiveness of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to bring about justice, which to them, is the foundation of a permanent peace. Others insisted that the TRC hearings in 2008 were a missed opportunity for Liberians on the path to national reconciliation and healing, especially its failure to bring to justice those responsible for the carnage. Former warlords and supporters were less than forthcoming about what they did during the conflict, and therefore, unlike the TRCs in South Africa and Sierra Leone, that of Liberia offered little comfort to ordinary Liberians who had lost families and suffered so much. What is equally alarming about the problem of accountability in the country is that politicians see and consider themselves to be above the laws of the land and therefore are the laws. It was based on this culture that Doe launched his armed attacks, arrests and imprisoned students and others in the 1980s for protesting against his regime and for demanding a return to civilian rule. It was also based on the culture of impunity that Taylor, through his Anti-terrorist Unit brutalized and killed students’ and many other activists who questioned and protested against his authoritarian government between 1997-2003. It is therefore imperative for the Liberian
leadership, with the support of international agencies to reassess the impacts of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on fostering post-war justice crucial for a lasting peace.

Finally, the ethnographic fieldwork I conducted, along with extensive reading of local newspapers, led me to conclude that the economic policies implemented by President Sirleaf have done very little to improve the economic conditions of the majority of Liberians, especially the youth. The administration’s acceptance of IMF and World Bank programs, in particular the Liberian Poverty Reduction Strategy, which required the laying-off of over seventeen-thousand government employees without any benefits to sustain them and their families exacerbated an already high unemployment and low standard of living experienced by the poor. As a result, most Liberian youths were not only demanding political justice and accountability, but also economic justice and equitable distribution of the nation’s resources. As of the period covered by my research, there is no indication that the government is capable of meeting these demands. In the meantime, the youths have to persist in creating and fostering their strategies.

Conducting research in a postwar environment is obviously a difficult task, especially for a historian seeking to understand the relationship between the past and the present, and trying to understand contemporary issues from a historical perspective. One thing has remained firmly embedded in my understanding of the relationship between the past and the present as I studied the youth: Liberian youths do not wait to be rescued from the socio-economic and political realities surrounding them. This is true for Liberian youths in the distant past, but even more so for contemporary youths who have developed ways to navigate the complexity of Liberia’s political and economic crises in order to cope with and address their marginalized status. Recognizing their agency is thus
important for informed historical analyses and for effective policies aimed at addressing issues related to the youth.
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246


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