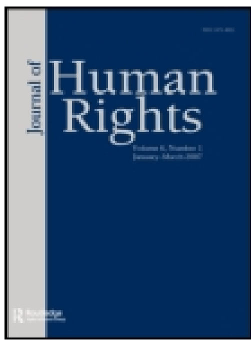

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Journal of Human Rights

ISSN: 1475-4835 (Print) 1475-4843 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjhr20

The Rites of the Child: Global Discourses of Youth and Reintegrating Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone

Susan Shepler

To cite this article: Susan Shepler (2005) The Rites of the Child: Global Discourses of Youth and Reintegrating Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone, Journal of Human Rights, 4:2, 197-211, DOI: 10.1080/14754830590952143

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14754830590952143

Published online: 16 Aug 2006.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 3344

View related articles

Citing articles: 19 View citing articles

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
http://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=cjhr20

Download by: [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam] **Date:** 07 December 2015, At: 03:43

Journal of Human Rights, 4:197–211, 2005
Copyright © Taylor & Francis Inc.
ISSN: 1475-4835 print / 1475-4843 online
DOI: 10.1080/14754830590952143

ROUTLEDGE Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

The Rites of the Child: Global Discourses of Youth and Reintegrating Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone

SUSAN SHEPLER

Downloaded by [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam] at 03:43 07 December 2015

Abstract. This article describes how the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and other international child rights instruments are implicated in the postwar reintegration of child excombatants in Sierra Leone. Data are based on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork throughout Sierra Leone from 1999 to 2001. Various actors, including children, their families, communities, teachers, nongovernmental organization workers, and the state, use the CRC and the Western construction of childhood as "innocent" and "apolitical" for strategic purposes. Child rights discourse and practice eases the reintegration of child excombatants by buttressing "discourses of abdicated responsibility" in children's narrations of their war experiences, thereby facilitating forgiveness and acceptance. However, this model of innocent child is in conflict with an earlier model of youth as hardworking and humble. In the struggle to reintegrate child soldiers, a new model of youth emerges in Sierra Leone, a model informed by the global human rights regime but created in everyday practice at the intersection of the global and the local.

INTRODUCTION

Sierra Leone, a former British colony, is a small country on the west coast of Africa with great diamond wealth and a postindependence history of political corruption. The civil war in Sierra Leone (1991–2002) is familiar to Western observers for the media portrayals of terror tactics carried out by combatants against a powerless populace. The main fighting factions have been the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels, the Sierra Leone Army portions of which at one point joined the rebels in overthrowing an elected government, the locally organized Civil Defense Force militias—often known as Kamajohs—growing out of traditional secret hunting societies, and the international peacekeepers, first of the regional West African coalition and then of the United Nations. The course of the war was confusing, with coups and countercoups and shifting alliances. In addition to murder, rape, and looting, amputations by machete were carried out by youth recruited for just such acts. By the end of the conflict, a full 75 percent of the Sierra Leone population reported being displaced at least once during the war (Abdalla *et al*. 2002). Today, according to the most recent Human Development Report by the United National Development Program, Sierra Leone is the country with the lowest quality of life in the world (2003: 334).

The conflict in Sierra Leone, one of many seemingly similar conflicts in the region, is a battle over resources within the context of a postcolonial "weak state" (Reno 1997a, 1997b). Some have pointed to the international trade in diamonds and weapons as the most important element to understanding the war (Smillie *et al.* 2000). However, the underlying issues are both local and international in character. In terms of local factors, many observers have understood the war in Sierra Leone as a crisis of youth, arguing that a lack of opportunities for education or any kind of future made legions of disaffected youth ripe for recruitment (Richards 1995, 1996; O'Brien 1996; Abdullah *et al.* 1997).

Now that the decade long civil war in Sierra Leone has come to an end, international and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are actively at work there to "detraumatize" and reintegrate into society an estimated 7,000 former child combatants through a system of demobilization, interim care, family tracing, and reunification. Coming to terms with the participation of child soldiers, simultaneously perpetrators and innocents, is key to postwar reconciliation and peace building. In fact, the very first testimony before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission concerned the culpability of children.[1] Although the war is officially over, many of the conditions precipitating the war still exist, and—despite a general conviction that war must never happen again—there is also widespread fear that violence may erupt again given the right circumstances.

This article describes how the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child[2] (CRC) and other international child rights instruments and discourses are implicated in the process of postwar reintegration of child excombatants. Politically and materially, the identity "child soldier" carries a range of meanings and implications and serves as a site, both discursively and in the bodies of the children themselves, for reform of Sierra Leonean national culture. Rather than seeing this purely as an imposition, however, I focus on the ways power is reconfigured locally as former child soldiers and village communities use the imported discourses of the rights of the child for their own purposes. On the basis of 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork[3] throughout Sierra Leone from 1999 to 2001, I show how Sierra Leoneans strategically use the CRC—in particular its construction of childhood as innocent and apolitical—in contradictory ways. For the rest of this article I focus on the issues of postconflict reconciliation and reintegration of young excombatants into society, particularly with respect to the tensions around different versions of childhood and how power is implicated in those struggles. In the struggle to reintegrate child soldiers, new meanings of youth emerge in Sierra Leone, meanings informed by global human rights discourse but created in rites of everyday practice at the intersection of the global human rights regime and local everyday rites.

REINTEGRATION AS SOCIAL PRACTICE

The child soldiers I met in the course of my research must navigate a tricky social landscape as they move through various intersecting contexts. Among their friends and fellow soldiers, they try to maintain the status that being part of the fighting

Downloaded by [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam] at 03:43 07 December 2015

gives them. They wear combat clothes and sunglasses and brag about firing rocket-propelled grenade launchers. With NGOs they adopt the persona of the traumatized innocent, usually requesting aid in furthering their education. With community members and in school they act like normal kids, never mentioning the past. Thus, their "reintegration" is achieved in social practice across a variety of contexts using a variety of strategically adopted identities.

Some child soldiers utilize what I call "discourses of abdicated responsibility": "I didn't choose to fight, I was forced, I was drugged, I was too young to know any better," they varyingly argue. These claims of innocence ease children's reintegration into their communities and also make it easier for community members to live with former fighters in their midst. Adult combatants use some of the same strategies, of course, but there is something quite specific to the case of children. An excerpt from an interview with Sorie Kamara,[4] a former child combatant, about 16 years of age, will make some of this clear. When I met him in 2001, he was living with a foster family near Freetown to attend school. He told me the story of his abduction and training by the RUF rebels. He did not know what happened to the rest of his family. I questioned him about the reintegration process:

SS: So, for some communities, it might not be easy for them to accept back the excombatants, to say "this is our brother, let's forgive everything." What do you think [NGOs] should do to help those communities?

SK: Well, they should talk to them, and it depends also on the way the child behaves. A child like me, I stay at home. Nobody knows that I fought. Because even if a little child sends me [on an errand], I go. Just so that I can get an education. At the house I don't have a problem with anybody. They all like me there. Even the small child can send me, I get up and go. It's only if you take yourself to be big and say that you've lived in the bush before. That's why it's no good to take those bad bad drugs.

SS: So it's the drugs that make . . . .

SK: . . . them behave bad. At any time, when it comes over them [*I de grap pan dem*]. It can make them behave bad.

SS: So, the communities, maybe they have a right. If somebody comes and behaves badly, he takes himself [to be too] big . . .

SK: Yes, that's true. I wouldn't come, after I've done you bad, and you've forgiven me, I begin to do you bad again. You would feel that I meant it. See? And they're right on that count. When they've forgiven you, you should come and humble yourself and honor them.

SS: So [the NGOs] should tell the community people "Forgive them. They didn't know what they were doing."

SK: Yes. Because some of us, we weren't willing. Because when they caught us . . . when they catch a group of you, maybe they kill three among the group and say "If you don't join us, we'll kill you like how we killed your friends." See? So now there's no other way but to join them. When you join them, if you have a chance you can hide and run away.

Certainly, the wartime experiences of Sorie and thousands of others are horrifying to consider, but we must not see these children as simply victims. During the war, many had to make difficult choices and perform difficult acts to survive. Before the war, the everyday life of Sierra Leonean children was often quite difficult, many laboring to support their families as active participants in social life. On the

Downloaded by [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam] at 03:43 07 December 2015

other hand, during the postwar period some child excombatants exercise agency, paradoxically, through their claims of wartime *nonagency*.[5] Youth in this postwar context are strategic users of different discourses as they move through different contexts.[6] Child rights discourse and practice in some ways ease the reintegration of child excombatants by buttressing these "discourses of abdicated responsibility" in children's narrations of their war experiences, thereby facilitating forgiveness and acceptance.

TRANSNATIONAL INTERVENTIONS AND THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Downloaded by [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam] at 03:43 07 December 2015

International aid in postwar Sierra Leone takes many forms. The United Nations has a large presence with a large peacekeeping force as well as other UN-sponsored agencies, such as the UNHCR (UN High Commissioner for Refugees), UNDP (UN Development Programme), UNICEF (The United Nations Children's Fund), and WFP (UN World Food Programme). There are multilateral and bilateral aid programs from Europe, North America, and Asia administering projects in health, agriculture, education, peace building, and many other development activities. In addition, there are internationally sponsored justice initiatives underway, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (based in part on the celebrated South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission) and the Special Court for Sierra Leone (a hybrid court slightly different from the International Criminal Tribunals for Rwanda and the Former Yugoslavia).[7] Part of the aid coming into postwar Sierra Leone funds human rights education programs. (See Robin DeLugan's contribution to this volume for a discussion of a transnational educational program aimed at social reconstruction in postwar El Salvador.) These educational programs address a full range of human rights in postconflict settings, from the rights of women to the rights of amputees. "Sensitization" is a ubiquitous term in Sierra Leone today and means a range of things in current usage. Robert Krech reported that the term sensitization "is used by most UN, NGO, and government bodies in Sierra Leone and refers to community awareness raising but also implies social marketing" (2003: 125). Take as an example the successful polio vaccination campaigns "Kick Polio Out of West Africa." The organizers use sensitization to let people know about the importance of vaccination and about upcoming vaccination clinics. To publicize their views and activities the educational campaigns use a variety of means, including T-shirts, radio programs, jingles, parades, posters, sign boards and murals, community meetings, school outreach programs, and loudspeakers in cars. This public health model has been expanded in Sierra Leone to the extent that sensitization is proposed as the solution to almost every problem in society. For example, if one asks at a meeting, "What should be done about teachers' late salaries?" one is likely to hear, "We need more sensitization!"

Sensitization with respect to child rights was carried out primarily to ease the reintegration of child excombatants. NGO workers explained to communities that their children were not responsible for their crimes because of their age and that

children had a *right* to be reunified with their family. In regards to the techniques and technologies involved in educating people about the rights of the child, such promotion was typically top-down, the assumption apparently being that Sierra Leoneans were ignorant about child rights and simply needed more knowledge. Local NGOs produced dramas, songs, and T-shirts to promote a universal standard of child rights. International NGOs produced booklets outlining the CRC articles (the right to an education, the right to self-expression, the right to birth registry, the right to family life, and many others), comic books for use in elementary school classrooms, radio programs by and for children, and community sensitization programs held with traditional leaders.

These activities have been successful to some degree, leading to an unprecedented familiarity with the concept of child rights in Sierra Leone in the postwar period. A 2002 study on human rights in Sierra Leone discovered that the CRC was the most familiar of any human rights instrument in Sierra Leone, scoring higher in terms of popular recognition than even the constitution of Sierra Leone (Abdalla *et al*. 2002).

Furthermore, this educational activity and circulation of ideas has led to a new centrality of children's issues at all levels. More and more children and young people are invoking their rights *as children* (rather than, or in addition to, already salient rights as members of ethnic groups or extended family) in a range of settings and circumstances to demand education or claim a role in the nation. In addition, more and more adults talk about addressing the problems of youth as necessary to ensuring a peaceful future.[8] However, it is at the level of everyday practice that these discourses shape new expectations and understandings about children and childhood.

An ethnographic description of one child rights sensitization that took place in a village I call Essex helps to illustrate these techniques in practice. Essex is a small fishing village along the western peninsula of Sierra Leone. It is very close to another village that has an Interim Care Center (ICC) for child excombatants and children separated from their families. The ICC was located in the area without much consultation with the surrounding communities, with resulting tensions. Some people are afraid of having "rebel children" in such close proximity. They are annoyed that the "rebel children" are provided with international aid that supplies them with food and school fees when many of the community members are struggling to get by without such help. The local school is a main issue of contention.

During the 1980s, with money from its lucrative communalized sale of beach sand to the construction industry, community members in Essex built the local school. In addition to serving the local people, the school is now also attended by about 100 child excombatants who live at the nearby ICC. These students are mostly boys, ranging in age from 10 to 20, from Class One (the first grade of primary school) to Form Three (the last grade of Junior Secondary School). The community has mixed feelings about this. They are afraid of the excombatants. They also believe it is not right that former soldiers who inflicted so much suffering

Downloaded by [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam] at 03:43 07 December 2015

on so many innocent people should benefit from the school that the community built.

On the other hand, this new population of child excombatants comes with certain benefits, like the support of their sponsoring NGO and of UNICEF. In particular, the NGO is paying school fees for all the students it is enrolling. UNICEF has recently helped the school build a wall and get a water pump working, solely because the school is enrolling excombatants. Moreover, the principal, vice principal, and a number of teachers are employed at the school only because they were displaced from their own schools by the civil war. Although the community tries to portray itself as the owner of the school, local financial support for the school over the years has been spotty at best.

In 2000, these tensions escalated into violence. Some boys from the center got into an argument with an auto mechanic in town and broke an automobile windscreen. Some members of the community decided they had had enough of this sort of disrespectful behavior and decided to take matters into their own hands. After several days of tension, there were injuries and property damage both at the ICC and in the surrounding community. The word in the city was that the rebel boys "*don baranta*" (had gone wild) and that several people were dead. In fact, no one died as a result of the tension, and more damage had been done by young men in the surrounding community.

After that event, UNICEF and other aid agencies decided there was a need for more sensitization with the surrounding communities to safeguard the work of the ICC.[9] Some supplies donated to the neighboring communities by UNICEF—cooking pots and the like—had helped to mollify some of the community members, but many continued to argue against accepting the former child soldiers in their midst. "How can we be expected to help these children when we cannot even help ourselves?" they asked.

An NGO linked to the ICC was conducting sensitizations in refugee camps and Internally Displaced Persons camps around Freetown on posttraumatic stress syndrome and on the rights of the child. In the aftermath of the violence, the NGO decided to hold a series of workshops in Essex and other communities surrounding the ICC to calm the residents and to explain they had to accept the former child soldiers "into their hearts." After hearing about the upcoming sensitization meeting during my fieldwork at the ICC, the NGO granted me permission to attend as an observer. The NGO staff was proud of the work they were doing with communities, so they were happy for me to attend.

The meeting took place in the Essex Community Centre, a two-story cement block building with a skills training center downstairs and a meeting hall upstairs. In the meeting hall, a wooden table was set up in front with a white cloth banner on the wall behind that read "Restore Dignity to Children." The banner included a painting of a boy in a mortarboard and necktie and a girl in a nurse's uniform. Things started late, as usual, so I spent my time talking to a young local man who made a living shoveling sand from the beach into big dump trucks ("tippers") for use in cement in the massive construction going on in nearby Freetown. Curious,

Downloaded by [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam] at 03:43 07 December 2015

I asked him about this local industry and how it operates. He told me it is hard work, but it is steady and pays relatively well (about four dollars a day.) His labor union had given him time off to come to this sensitization. Eventually, three Sierra Leonean men, well dressed in Western style clothes, drove up in a nice white vehicle with the name of the NGO painted on the side.[10] About 18 people, women and men of different ages, attended and sat on long wooden benches. After greeting the dignitaries in attendance, the men explained to the assembly that they were from the NGO and were here to talk about the problems of children in this community. The meeting went according to a standard program: Muslim and Christian prayers, introductions, speeches, and a vote of thanks.[11]

The first speaker explained that this was a *reintegration meeting*, not the one where they go over the CRC article by article. He said, "The CRC, some of you won't know it, but we will come back and share with you all the rights of children." This knowledge was portrayed as a scarce resource he was generously willing to share with the community. This echoes the work of Murphy (1980) and Bledsoe (1992) on the commodification of knowledge in Sierra Leone. There is knowledge/power at work in this social event. The outsiders know how to speak the language of human rights "the right way," which is the power of language the community will also need to tap into if they are to become the recipients of child protection aid.

The first speaker went on to say, "The time is now to let us come together and build our country." He explained that they are the "psycho-social team" (using the English words). He said, "Psycho-social is for *den poil at man den*"[12] (literally, "for those whose hearts are spoiled or broken"). "Everything that has happened creates *trauma*," again using the English word.

The words he spoke regarding children would sound familiar to a Western audience: "Children are the future leaders. We and the community are partners in child protection." He gave more culturally specific advice about how to deal with children affected by war:

> You should say to the children "we accept you, but we won't tolerate certain behaviors (like drug use)." They're used to jungle justice. If they meet a disciplined community, their tempers will calm down. The best thing to do is call them by their real names, not their bush names. Don't call them "Killer" or "Sergeant Blood." When they say "we're raw!" say, "we're not raw, we're dry."[13]

In explaining the children's experiences as former combatants, he said, "They capture them. They give them drugs. The girls, they misuse them. Some of them come back pregnant. We need to call them near to us. We need to help the children to develop their potential to help develop this country. Children are the most important human resource. Let us first disarm ourselves mentally. When you want to put out a fire, you begin at the bottom, not at the top." Here, the reintegration of children is explicitly linked to the nation, to national identity and to economic development. Not only are the young excombatants being reconfigured in this postwar process of reintegration, but community members who are persuaded to forgive, accept, and support the child soldiers are transformed as well. This process is meant to take place through the reconfiguring of attitudes, behaviors, and ultimately of selves.

Downloaded by [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam] at 03:43 07 December 2015

In a brainstorming activity, the NGO workers asked the attendees what specifically they believe should be done to develop Essex. The answers from the community members were health centers, good roads, good schools, electricity, and peace and love. The NGO workers steered the discussion toward the problems of children in the community; to me they seemed to have specific answers already in mind. They were looking for the answers that will lead to the sort of programs their NGO funds. It seemed to me the NGO representatives were not really listening to what people were saying, because most of what they were saying had little to do with children. When someone brought up a problem, the NGO men said, "well, that's interesting, but there's not really anything we can do about that." People in the community used this as an opportunity to try to figure out what is appropriate in such a setting, how they were to phrase their situation to make it a solvable problem.

One man said, "Some of us have become traumatized" (the right answer). Another suggested, "Ask the NGOs to help the teachers." "It doesn't have aid priority right now," the NGO man responded, signaling a wrong answer.

One educated man from the community got up and parroted their vocabulary back to them and they smiled (here is someone they can work with.) One woman said, "Our own children are suffering. We have children in this community without a mother or father, what can you do for them?" "We don't have that kind of program now. Maybe some other group will cater to that," was the unsatisfactory answer. The NGO promised to come back and do a big training on the CRC.

At the end of the meeting, there was the usual "vote of thanks." I was asked to get up and say something as the only white person in attendance. (I realized I played into the NGO's program; the presence of a white person makes them more legitimate.) I found myself using the expected language, "Thank you all for caring about the children and the future of Sierra Leone." Food was prepared for everyone. Now people were more jolly, and things seemed to me to return to normal; I sensed the performance was over.

This sensitization process was pedagogic in perhaps unintended ways. Some people were learning the right vocabulary, and learning what sorts of programs were likely to receive funding. They were learning how to portray themselves to get access to material resources. How are we to understand this event? It was supposed to be about children, but there were no children present. It was supposed to be about community involvement, but the answers seemed to come from the top down. This sensitization seemed to be all about power, rhetoric, and pedagogy, and the players all seemed to know their roles quite well. It was, we might say, purely performative. This is only one example of sensitization, but it is fairly representative of the dozens of similar events I witnessed during my research.[14]

RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES—CONTESTED CONSTRUCTS

The international human rights regime, and in particular the CRC, is often in conflict with local understandings. My goal here is not to detail the preexisting models of youth in Sierra Leone, nor to give a critique of the CRC from a Sierra Leonean

Downloaded by [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam] at 03:43 07 December 2015

perspective. There is already a substantial literature in anthropology that critiques the CRC as naturalizing a Western version of childhood (Boyden 1994, 1997; Burman 1994; Nieuwenhuys 2001; Pupavac 2001). My intent is to show how the CRC is used in forging *new* spaces of contestation.

The issue of children's responsibility for their actions during the war has been at the forefront of discussions around the administration of transitional justice and has brought the issue of juvenile justice new prominence in Sierra Leone.[15] The newly imported idea that anyone under 18 years is to be considered a child and therefore not to be held accountable allows whole groups of young people to be forgiven by their communities in a new way. This obviously helps the young people who are struggling to reintegrate; it also helps the communities into which they are moving.

In their critiques of the CRC, Sierra Leoneans emphasize the need to put rights together with responsibilities as a way of making the message locally palatable. It is not new to argue that one should take care of children, but it is new to say that children have a *right* to be treated well, regardless of their circumstance or behavior. There are concerns about children getting uppity or *fit yai* (disrespectful) if they are made to know their rights. Children might start demanding, for example, education, without any of the requisite responsibilities to the parents and the rest of the family. There is a sense that children having rights inverts the social hierarchy in some ways similar to the ways in which child soldiers dramatically inverted the social hierarchy during the war.

A Sierra Leonean NGO worker I met while visiting an ICC in the Southern Province told me that the real tragedy of the child soldiers is that they did not know their place. "They have carried guns and terrorized people, they have experiences past their age. They think like older people, they act like older people." He characterized the work of the NGO as bringing children back to their own appropriate place at the bottom of the social hierarchy. This goal corresponds to local understandings of the problems of youth ("uppityness") but contradicts some of the core tenets of the CRC, in particular the need for children to stand up for themselves and make their voices heard.

The Sierra Leonean core value of humility was invoked in Sorie's interview above when he said he was easily reintegrated because even the smallest child could "send him"; in other words, he made himself humble. Compare that sense of humility with the right to self-expression in the CRC. At various meetings I attended, UNICEF staff would often make sure a few children were present to speak for themselves, representing UNICEF's dedication to the CRC and to respecting the voices of children. However, the children I saw in these situations were always overawed by the company and, moreover, knew that it was culturally inappropriate for them to speak out in front of powerful adults.

The notion of innocence that forms the basis of Western constructions of youth ought to make it easier for Sierra Leoneans to forgive children for their crimes during wartime. However, in some ways child rights discourse and the practices of the child protection NGOs make reintegration more difficult. For many

Downloaded by [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam] at 03:43 07 December 2015

Sierra Leoneans, what is needed is for child participants in violence to become mute and return to their place at the bottom of the social hierarchy rather than to make new claims on resources. In addition, some NGO practices harden the child soldier identity through labeling and list making and provoke community anger at the inequitable distribution of benefits to child excombatants to the exclusion of other war-affected youth.

Finally, the Western model depoliticizes youth, and this is a change from a previous model in which youth, and the potential of youth revolt at inequity in the patrimonial system, served as a check on abuses. So, by accepting the Western model of youth, Sierra Leonean youth gain something—ease of reintegration and forgiveness—but they lose something as well, namely a kind of political agency that is absent from Western youth. Sierra Leoneans see the CRC as inverting hierarchies by giving children too much power, but by taking on the modern notion of youth, are young people gaining some power and losing some other power? What is the difference between the power of holding a gun and other types of power? Children are moving from a blunt kind of power to a power legitimated through international structures, one that requires them to take on certain (other) identities. The construction of children as innocent can make them silent and apolitical and about potential (children are the future) rather than actuality.

It is not only individual children who are strategically deploying these youth discourses. Communities organize their self-presentation around the idea of "war-affected youth" to gain access to a certain amount of international aid: money from UNICEF to rebuild schools that register child excombatants and micro–credit loans from the Catholic Church for families that foster child excombatants. Referring back to the Essex sensitization meeting, communities learn to "talk the talk" of child rights and cast their problems as problems of youth. Communities fight over how many ex–child soldiers they have, and they try to get more young people signed up. One activity repeated in many communities was the creation of a list of child soldiers, so as to be ready in case an NGO with ready funds for reintegration programs came around.[16] The lists were generally drawn up by the headman of a village with the help of the local school headmaster, sometimes formalized as the "village child protection committee." In one case, it was the local Civil Defense Force commander who decided who should be put on the list. The lists they came up with generally did not match what I knew about the actual participation of children in fighting. The chief's son, the imam's son, and those who were currently attending school appeared on the list—youth who were not former combatants. Inclusion on the list was based on connections or on who could best use the aid, not necessarily on who had actually participated in fighting.[17]

This kind of manipulation of official lists for political and economic reasons is not new in Sierra Leone. These manipulations of the category "child soldier" are as much reconfiguring old circuits of power as they are bringing into being new forms of power. Mariane Ferme wrote about various counting exercises carried out by the state—censuses, taxes, elections—in areas of Southern Sierra Leone and concluded:

Downloaded by [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam] at 03:43 07 December 2015

> Given the ambiguity of the state's use of numbers—sometimes to benefit, other times to benefit *from* its citizens—many rural Sierra Leoneans saw counting and defining as contentious issues. To them, these were not technical procedures for neutrally recording statistical information to be used by a bureaucratic apparatus, but rather political acts aimed at exposing and controlling people (Ferme 1998: 160).

The provision of aid for former child soldiers is an example of how humanitarian aid can buttress patrimonialism in local communities. As Steven Archibald and Paul Richards pointed out, "far from 'teaching' people their rights (as has been alleged) humanitarian activity (our data suggest) provided the resources for a modest renewal of patrimonialism" (Archibald and Richards 2002: 358).

So the question becomes, how are child rights different from other individual rights? That is, if we start from the thesis that individual rights challenge patrimonialism and the political control of the elders, do child rights do the same thing? It certainly seems at face value they should. The promotion of child rights is meant, after all, to improve the social position of children, but in fact it may do just the opposite. One way is the distribution of humanitarian aid that goes through already existing village structures, a mechanism already discussed by Archibald and Richards. But there is another way, namely child rights discourse advocates for a Western style childhood or a childhood dependent on adults. Erica Burman (1994) asked what do children give up by accepting modern childhoods, what forms of political participation are they denied? Vanessa Pupavac (2001) went further and claimed that child rights can be seen as misanthropic and pathologizing of Southern (i.e., non-European or non-North American) childhoods.

CONCLUSION

This article has described various ways that child rights discourse is taken up and used strategically in postwar Sierra Leone, at the level of individual child soldiers and their communities. New meanings of youth are emerging in Sierra Leone, meanings influenced by international discourse but resulting from the actions and agency of local community members and child soldiers who engage with the process of national reconstruction.

The work of NGOs with child soldiers in Sierra Leone can be understood as an example of what Foucault called governmentality. The term refers to the process through which the state stakes out a target population and classifies and categorizes it. In doing so, the state in some ways creates that population (Foucault 1991). The category "child soldier" is supported by techniques that take child soldiers as their objects. These techniques are primarily from the fields of education, psychology, and social welfare, themselves understood as governmentalizing disciplines.

In West Africa and in other so-called weak states, NGOs are clearly better funded and more present than the state in many cases.[18] We can understand the social interactions that surround the reintegration of child soldiers in terms of a new mode of governmentality, one characterized by the relative unimportance of the state

Downloaded by [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam] at 03:43 07 December 2015

and the relative ascendance of NGOs. This new mode of governmentality, what James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta (2002) called "transnational governmentality," is associated with the neoliberal era.

> Although (the) move to neo-liberalism has often been understood . . . as a "retreat" or "rolling back" of the state, . . . it has, rather, entailed a transfer of the operations of government (in Foucault's extended sense) to non-state entities. . . . But this is not a matter of less government, as the usual ideological formulations would have it. Rather, it indicates a new modality of government, which works by creating mechanisms that work "all by themselves" to bring about governmental results. . . . The outsourcing of the functions of the state to NGOs and other ostensibly non-state agencies . . . is a key feature, not only of the operation of national states, but of an emerging system of transnational governmentality (Ferguson and Gupta 2002: 989).

Governmentality is never solely about imposition but is always also about how power/knowledge is taken up and used strategically by the targets it seeks to govern. In this case, how do former child soldiers and the communities into which they are being reintegrated understand and use the child rights discourse to serve their own motives? Struggles over childhood and child rights in postwar Sierra Leone are *productive* sites in that they become the locus for all kinds of political struggles.

Clearly, more research is needed on how global discourses such as "the rights of the child" are worked out in local practice. In her groundbreaking work on children and the politics of culture, Sharon Stephens said,

> The crucial task for researchers now . . . is to develop more powerful understandings of the role of the child in structures of modernity. The historical processes by which these once localized western constructions have been exported around the world and the global political, economic, and cultural transformations that are currently rendering childhood so dangerous, contested, and pivotal in the formation of new sorts of social persons, groups, and institutions (Stephens 1995: 14).

Studies of child soldiers are most often based on psychologistic or human rights frameworks, and both frameworks risk losing the important aspect of people strategically manipulating those very frameworks.[19] For example, if we see a former child soldier as only traumatized (though he or she may well *be* traumatized), we miss all the other aspects of his or her reintegration, most importantly the social aspects. Stephens directed us to look into the politics at the base of modern models of childhood, and by insisting on a historically and culturally nuanced analysis of practice, we can understand present forms of power. Perhaps we may also better understand the actual life worlds of children and others affected by war.

NOTES

1. 14 April 2003: A farmer whose right hand was hacked off by a child soldier was the first to tell his story publicly before Sierra Leone's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the Associated Press reported. Tamba Finnoh

Downloaded by [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam] at 03:43 07 December 2015

told about 200 observers how he was abducted in 1998 as he searched for food in the countryside. Nine others persons were rounded up with him, and he watched as rebels murdered seven of them. Finnoh was himself attacked by a child fighter with a machete. He awoke in hospital several days later, missing his right hand and two left fingers. "I have put everything behind me and I am ready to forgive," he said. The 37-year-old farmer said he thought one of the adult rebels must have harbored some unknown anger against him and ordered one of the teenaged fighters to attack him. "I believe the children were manipulated by the rebels—and they are good at imitating their elders," he said. (Sierra Leone website, http://www.sierra-leone.org/slnews.html)

2. The UN General Assembly adopted the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989. It was signed and ratified more quickly and by more states than any other UN convention.
3. Fieldwork was generously supported by a grant from the Center for African Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. Dissertation write-up has been funded by the American Association of University Women, the Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation, and the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation.
4. This is a pseudonym, as are all other proper names in this article.
5. This contradiction comes back to the insistence that youth be seen not just as cultural dupes, but as the active creators of their own lives (Boyden 1997; Scheper-Hughes and Sargent 1998).
6. For example, I have often seen child excombatants on their own accord manipulate their image for the media, for example, they run and put on their rebel sunglasses and bandanna (or Kamajoh traditional garb) when a photographer is present.
7. These transitional justice initiatives took place in the absence of any real local demands for justice. At the time of this writing, the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission has completed hearing testimony but has not yet released its report. The Special Court has handed down indictments for former president Charles Taylor of Liberia and others, but the main "rebel" players (Foday Sankoh, Sam "Maskita" Bockarie, and Johnny Paul Koroma) are already dead. The Special Court's mandate is to prosecute those who bear the greatest responsibility for the crimes of the war, and children have not been included among that number.
8. Archibald and Richards reported similar findings: "Youth and women now assert rights as individuals where once they would have been restrained by deference. Elders agree that deference has collapsed. Most informants (even including elders) think new approaches are needed, or war will return" (Archibald and Richards 2002: 345).
9. See Brooks (unpublished report) for details of this event from UNICEF Sierra Leone's perspective.
10. I did not know much about these men, and neither did the community members attending the sensitization. They appeared out of the blue. All we knew was that they represented an NGO and they were probably well educated and well paid.
11. A vote of thanks is a speech given at the end of a meeting usually thanking everyone in attendance for their participation.
12. This meeting took place in Krio, the lingua franca of Sierra Leone. I include the Krio terminology at points where I believe it adds a certain subtlety of meaning.
13. In this context, "raw" means uncivilized or from the bush and "dry" means civilized or from the town.
14. I also witnessed a very different instance of "sensitization" that took place between a child protection officer of a local NGO and the commander of a local militia. The child protection officer asked the commander to register the children under his command so they could have access to benefits. The meeting took place in Temne (a local language) and was more of a meeting of equals.
15. According to Mohamed Fofanah, a Sierra Leonean barrister and juvenile justice expert, the issue of juvenile justice has historically not been that important in Sierra Leone (Fofanah 2004). In his opinion, it is the issue of child soldiers, and particularly the question of how international courts will treat child offenders, that has brought the issue to the fore in Sierra Leonean judicial thought. Historically, the Sierra Leonean version of youth innocence has been much more pliable and contingent than that implicit in the CRC. See also Fofanah (2000).
16. There were similar lists of adult ex-combatants organized to get the most out of adult Demobilization, Disarmament, and Reintegration programming.
17. Whether this identification serves the interests of reintegration is a different question. Perhaps a child would be better off not being made the center of attention. What about the trauma of being abducted, mistreated, and then coming back and having your trauma serve as your family's meal ticket? I am sensitive to the needs of programmers who are trying to target aid to those who need it most, but they must always be cognizant of the unintended consequences of their actions; in this case, the creation of the identity "child soldier."
18. I do not mean to imply that the importance of state forms of power is completely defunct. At another "sensitization" meeting I attended on the CRC, the point was made to the assembled people that because the

Downloaded by [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam] at 03:43 07 December 2015

CRC had been ratified by the state of Sierra Leone (albeit by a government several coups ago) it was now the law of the land, and they must know the law or risk the consequences.

19. Some notable exceptions are Green and Honwana (1999), Gibbs (1994), and Boyden (2001).

REFERENCES

ABDALLA, A., HUSSEIN, S. AND SHEPLER, S. (2002) *Human Rights in Sierra Leone, a Research Report to Search for Common Ground* (Washington, DC: Search for Common Ground).

ABDULLAH, I., BANGURA, Y., BLAKE, C., GBERIE, L., JOHNSON, L., KALLON, K., KEMOKAI, S., MUANA, P. K., RASHID, I., AND ZACK-WILLIAMS, A. (1997) Lumpen youth culture and political violence: Sierra Leoneans debate the RUF and the Civil War. *Africa Development*, 22, 171–215.

ARCHIBALD, S., AND RICHARDS, P. (2002) Converts to human rights? Popular debate about war and justice in rural central Sierra Leone. *Africa*, 72, 339–367.

BLEDSOE, C. (1992) The cultural transformation of Western education in Sierra Leone. *Africa*, 62, 182–202.

BOYDEN, J. (1994) Children's experience of conflict related emergencies: Some implications for relief policy and practice. *Disasters*, 18, 254–267.

BOYDEN, J. (1997) Childhood and the policy makers: A comparative perspective on the globalization of childhood. In A. James and A. Prout (eds.) *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood* (London: Falmer Press).

BOYDEN, J. (2001) *Social Healing in War-Affected and Displaced Children* (University of Oxford: Refugee Studies Centre). Available online at http://www2.qeh.ox.ac.uk

BROOKS, A. Unpublished report. Lessons learned in prevention, demobilization, and reintegration of children associated with the fighting forces: A Sierra Leone case study: UNICEF.

BURMAN, E. (1994) Innocents abroad: Western fantasies of childhood and the iconography of emergencies. *Disasters*, 18, 238–253.

FERGUSON, J. AND GUPTA, A. (2002) Spatializing states: Toward an ethnography of neoliberal governmentality. *American Ethnologist*, 29, 981–1002.

FERME, M. (1998) The violence of numbers: Consensus, competition, and the negotiation of disputes in Sierra Leone. *Cahiers d'Etudes Africains*, XXXVII 2–4, 150.

FOFANAH, M. (2000) The challenges to the administration of juvenile justice in Sierra Leone. *Juvenile Justice Worldwide*, Winter 2000/2001, 12–16.

FOFANAH, M. (2004) *Juvenile Justice and Children in Armed Conflict: Facing the Fact and Forging the Future via the Sierra Leone Test*. (Cambridge, MA: LLM, Law, Harvard).

FOUCAULT, M. (1991) Governmentality. In G. Burchell, C. Gordon, and P. Miller (eds.) *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

GIBBS, S. (1994) Post-war social reconstruction in Mozambique: Re-framing children's experience of trauma and healing. *Disasters*, 18, 268–276.

GREEN, E. AND HONWANA, A. (1999) *Indigenous healing of war affected children in Africa*, 10 (World Bank IK Notes). Available online at http://www.worldbank.org/afr/ik/iknotes.htm

KRECH, R. (2003) *The Reintegration of Former Child Combatants: A Case Study of NGO Programming in Sierra Leone*. M.A., Education, University of Toronto, Toronto.

MURPHY, W. (1980) Secret knowledge as property and power in Kpelle society: Elders versus youth. *Africa*, 50, 193–207.

NIEUWENHUYS, O. (2001) By the sweat of their brow? "Street Children," NGOs and children's rights in Addis Ababa. *Africa*, 71, 539–557.

O'BRIEN, D. (1996) A lost generation? Youth identity and state decay in West Africa. In R. Werbner and T. Ranger (eds.) *Postcolonial Identities in Africa* (London: Zed Books).

PUPAVAC, V. (2001) Misanthropy without borders: The International Children's Rights Regime. *Disasters*, 25, 95–112.

RENO, W. (1997a) African weak states and commercial alliances. *African Affairs*, 96, 165–185.

RENO, W. (1997b) War, markets, and the reconfiguration of West Africa's weak states. *Comparative Politics*, 29, 493–510.

RICHARDS, P. (1995) Rebellion in Liberia and Sierra Leone: A crisis of youth? In O. Furley (ed.) *Conflict in Africa* (London: Tauris).

Downloaded by [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam] at 03:43 07 December 2015

RICHARDS, P. (1996) *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, youth, and resources in Sierra Leone*. In A. D. Waal (ed.) *African Issues* (Oxford: James Currey).

SCHEPER-HUGHES, N. AND SARGENT, C. (eds.) (1998) *Small Wars: The Cultural Politics of Childhood* (Berkeley: University of California Press).

SMILLIE, I., GBERIE, L., AND HAZLETON, R. (2000) *The Heart of the Matter: Sierra Leone, Diamonds & Human Security* (Ontario, Canada: Partnership Africa Canada).

STEPHENS, S. (ed.) (1995) *Children and the Politics of Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).

UNITED NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT. (2003) *Millennium Development Goals: A Compact Among Nations to End Human Poverty*. (New York: UNDP).

Downloaded by [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam] at 03:43 07 December 2015