Chapter 5: Life in Armed Groups

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The violent social terrain in which young soldiers lost, formed, and renegotiated relationships of interdependence with armed groups is important to our understanding of reintegration. Their experiences of incorporation and fighting during the war are the subject of this chapter. It addresses the question of “why do they fight?” and presents my analysis of why that matters. Much of the literature has focused on vertical social transitions toward adulthood or status as big men. In this chapter, I argue that their horizontal transitions from families and communities to armed groups is just as vital to our analysis of their experience as their transitions from boys to men.¹

Various theoretical and empirical accounts of youth involvement highlight certain aspects of conflict participation. I have approached my empirical material and the literature on young soldiers as though it were something of a knot, made up of many strands tangled together and bound up in youth experience. For example, rights-based approaches focus on victimization of young people while anthropologists tend to emphasize youth agency and resilience. Some research presents youth involvement in conflict as a time of increased life chances while others focus on abuse and trauma. The narratives of the young men in this chapter resonate with a number of discursive approaches to the topic. Rather than take aim at one or more of these theoretical strands, all of which have been brought to bear on a highly complex experience, the empirical material often holds competing theoretical
interpretations in tension. I am comfortable with this, as I agree with Shepler (2014) that there is no single, overarching experience of “the war.” The most important point to take away from this chapter is that participation with armed groups meant experiencing a significant rupture from core networks of support in families, kin, and communities. Young recruits became integrated into a new and alternative social context. The more nuanced and analytical our understanding of that experience, the more likely we are to grasp the challenges of “reintegrating” once the war was over.

I begin with the difficult story of Morris, an ex-combatant who served in Charles Taylor’s Anti-Terrorist Unit. I have chosen to begin with Morris’s account of becoming a soldier not to be shocking or sensational, but because his experience demonstrates the means by which armed groups had the power to terrorize civilians, how uncertain and violent the environment could be, and because his choice to fight with Taylor challenges some of the more basic and reductionist interpretations of why young people involve themselves with armed groups.

Morris’s “War Story”

Morris was around the age of fifteen or sixteen when an armed group moved into his region and took over his village. He remembers walking into his community to find a shocking scene.

“They got a big town,” he said. The rebels had moved through a bigger town on their way to where he was. “Yeah, and they catch all the people there. They catch the pastor. They kill the pastor, cut off the pastor’ head. Put the pastor’ head on a [stake] on the car road, so that anyone who come in the car road will see the pastor for the town that they killed. Killed the pastor son too. Kill him and put him by the pastor’s side. Anybody come by that side will see the head.

“I was small at the time. I [was afraid]. Go straight in the bush. I pray. But after when I pray, I start creeping. Start creeping small, see the people digging the hole. I see them putting my people
inside. . . . The rebel came, said ‘we gonna put all of you together.’ They dug a big hole. They put my little sister, my mother and my father inside . . . just waste dirt inside.”

Morris watched from the bushes as everyone died, buried alive in a mass grave they had been forced to dig themselves.

“Not a small thing. I cry, shed tears . . . I run. I run hard. I take off my shirt, put it in my mouth for me not to shout.”

He fled the village, running through the bush on his own, senses heightened for indications of rebel movement. He remembers running for three days. Eventually he came to a river crossing where there was a canoe. He got in and began to make his way across the water. Rebel soldiers spotted him crossing the river.

“The rebel see me, they start firing. That whole canoe, it was torn. During that time I was in water business . . . I swim, swim, swim. I was looking for the shore but I don’t see the shore. . . . But there was a fisherman . . . I see the net. So I hang in his net, just like a fish, start crying, ‘Hey! Somebody help me! Somebody help me!’ Yeah, for that man to help me. The man carry me in the town. The man carry me in the town. He give me food to eat.”

The fisherman quickly became a friend to Morris, a helping hand. He got him medicine. In the violent terrain in which his family had just been ruthlessly murdered, a friend and a supportive figure emerged to rescue him. When they felt it okay to move again, the man took him into the bush.

“During that time, we can’t see war,” Morris noted.

I would like to note that at many points during the research it was difficult to determine the time frames along which memories were strung together in the narratives of my informants. Each memory was also subject to the erosion and re-formation of events, feelings, and meanings, a metamorphosis that occurs over the passage of time, with the tricks of memory, and a past understood through a lens of the present (Schafer 2001). I am not sure how long their reprieve from the violence lasted in the town, or how long they were in the bush. However, it is painfully evident that it ended suddenly.
“The man got killed. They killed that man. Stray bullet kill him. We were not expecting it, nothing. It just bust his whole head. We were not expecting. He just die.”

Morris could not cope with the insecurity and uncertainty of the violence any longer. He went straight to Charles Taylor’s forces and volunteered to join. He referred to himself at that time as a “frustration child,” an angry young man in Taylor’s Anti-Terrorist Unit.

Motivations to Fight

Morris’s experience leading up to joining Taylor’s army illustrates two important themes common to most young men’s stories. First, there was a degree of uncertainty and insecurity in the environment. One could never be sure when violence would occur or how it might manifest. Young people who joined would have the inside knowledge that might be helpful to their families, or so they hoped.

“The kids were keen about how they joined these guys [armed groups],” Peter remembered. An elderly gentleman, Peter’s countenance was that of a man who had seen a great deal, and yet retained the spark and softness of a person who enjoyed life. He was involved in the rehabilitation and reintegration portion of the national DDRR process, and worked in a residential program with young ex-combatants who disarmed and demobilized. “They were keen in the sense that people were always asking them question. Many times they were asked that question, ‘Why did you join these people?’ They had their different stories. From angle to angle, they all had their stories about how they joined these guys. Some of their reasons were really life saving. They wanted to save their lives. Some of them would say ‘when I got into the army I was able to rescue my family.’ . . . So that why, you know, I’m stressin’ how keen they were; because they felt that it helped them to save their families as well.”

Humanitarian discourse about young fighters tends to coagulate around categories of recruitment such as “forced,” “coerced,”
or “voluntary” (see Machel 2001; UN 2016b). The juxtaposition of “forced” recruitment next to “voluntary” can make it deceptively easy to slip into the notion that young people make decisions to join from within a vacuum, unprompted and of their own accord. Yet as Morris’s experience demonstrates, in a habitus of war nearly everyone’s daily lives were directly affected in some way by the presence of armed groups waging war in the country. No matter how much young people agreed with the “revolutionary” motivations pronounced by an armed group (Richards 1996), or believed that fighting might confer status that much of their generation lacked (Utas 2008), decisions to “volunteer” could not be made as “free choices.” They were decisions taken in an environment charged with violence and exploitation that produced a pervasive sense of insecurity and uncertainty.

There are several dominant tropes regarding youth participation in armed conflict (see Murphy 2003). The rights-based discourse portrays young recruits as “coerced victims,” forced into participation through abuse and manipulation by brutal abductors. A report from the war in Liberia refers to child soldiers in the title as “Easy Prey” (Human Rights Watch 1994). Some young people in this research were unwilling even to broach the subject of why they joined. Those who did share their experiences were usually abducted or intimidated, pressured into acquiescing to the demands of an armed group. Hurting family members was a common method of pushing them to join the ranks. This is a tactic that has been used in conflicts across the continent (see Marks 2013, 113), and it usually works.

“Yeah, because once you a soldier, nobody can embarrass you,” Boima explained. A former driver for Taylor’s forces, he was articulate and reasoned about the constraints of the environment during the civil war. “They can’t embarrass your family. But if you not a soldier, they will embarrass you and they will embarrass your family. They will continue to use you and your family. So you will look at that and say, ‘No, I won’t sit there and let this man who will know that I can do more than he to come and use me and
my family.’ So it would be better that I what? That I go and join to protect me and my family. So that what encourage more child soldier to go and join the revolution.”

Scholars have challenged the rights-based discourse of youth as “easy prey,” arguing that representations of children and youth who are “used” by others, without attention to their own decision making, political worldviews, or structural positions, denies their agency in the situation (see Boyden 2007; Hart 2008; Honwana 2005). The UN (2016b) takes the position that the distinction between voluntary and forced recruitment is meaningless, because all participation is the result of a desperate attempt to survive. This appears overreaching. I would argue that while no one of any age makes a “free choice” to fight in wars (see Rosen 2007), there are certainly degrees of agency applied by actors who take up arms. The response to the rights-based approach builds from a body of work in the critical sociology of childhood, in which theorists challenge the discourse on the “rights of a child” in developing countries as a misappropriation of Western norms and values about childhood as a time of innocence and immaturity (see James and Prout 1990). They argue that such representations lead to constructions of children and young people as passive receptacles for input from adults and society. Within the context of armed conflict, Hart (2008) insists that children are acutely aware of their sociopolitical circumstances, that they exercise their own agency within war zones, and that they are much more than mere victims of circumstance or coercion.

I am inclined to agree with Jeffrey (2012) that we are now well accustomed to the notion that young people “have agency.” It is the extent to which they are able to exercise choice, and to take action, that interests me in this work. Morris’s experience of losing his family, running from the soldiers, and eventually joining Taylor’s forces demonstrates how constrained any sense of control could become in a habitus of war. Most of the young men in this study were acting from positions of very limited agentive capacity. Their options were few, and the implications of their choices were
enormous, often fatal. It seems more helpful to me to think about coercive methods and forced recruitment in terms of power to versus power over. These young men were faced with armed groups who had power over them. They came in uninvited and held the means to life and death. Youth had power to choose fates that were imposed upon them. If they joined they believed that they would no longer be in a position where their lives could be placed in these dominated positions. Joining a group and holding a gun would give them both power to act in a less constrained scope of possibilities and power over others through their possession of weaponry and their incorporation with a mobilized group.

In Sierra Leone, Richards (1996) has argued that young people fought consciously, out of convictions that the dominant political regime had restricted their life chances. This echoes Hart’s (2008) assertions earlier. In Liberia, though some ex-combatants occasionally referred to “the revolution,” and to fighting in order to make things better in the country, there is no evidence of any substantial, ideological foundation that guided the politics of warring factions, not least of which was the National Patriotic Front of Liberia, which was responsible for the inception of war.

Even in Sierra Leone, where the use of the Muammar Gaddafi’s political philosophy espoused in the Green Book was incorporated into the rhetoric of the military campaign of the Revolutionary United Front, scholars have held serious objections to Richard’s assertions that youth conscientiously participated for political reasons. The included authors insist that Richards overstepped his ability to understand the context for war in Sierra Leone. They portray youth as relatively delinquent, and Richards as attempting to apply logic and reason to what was, in Abdullah’s (1997) frank assessment, senseless and irrational violence. There are certainly reports of marginalized youth from the streets who took the opportunity to fight with armed groups in wars like those in Sierra Leone and Liberia (Cohn and Goodwin-Gill 1994; Zack-Williams 2001). There is no doubt that some marginalized youth found a support system and a purpose in armed groups. It seems
quite likely that they were easy to recruit, though we should be careful not to extrapolate this idea of “delinquent youth” as alienated opportunists. Most of the ex-combatants in this research were not on the street waiting for something better to do. They were not “idle” and vulnerable to conscription by promises of material wealth or increased social status. They were like Morris. They lived with families and within communities. They were pressed to join out of fear for their lives and those of the ones they loved. This pattern of joining is reflected in more representative, and quantitative, data with ex-combatants in Liberia (see Pugel 2007), which finds that the majority of recruits joined out of fear or as a means to protect loved ones.

All of this said, I assert that the distinction between voluntary and forced recruitment is absolutely meaningful. All agents operate within structural parameters, the vast majority of which are not under their direct control. Their choices and their actions within those boundaries have much to tell us about power and possibility. There is a significant difference between Boima’s description of choosing to fight to preserve the family from embarrassment, and having the opportunity to choose that path taken away by a soldier at the tip of a gun barrel or the edge of a machete. In the first instance, a decision is made and acted on, and there is ownership of a choice. In the latter there is helplessness. They are not the same. Though the degree of choice between these two examples may appear small, even minute, in such violently charged arenas, to conflate one with the other is to suggest that all young people are mere victims of circumstance, that adults (persons eighteen years of age and older) are not, and that only the decisions of adults are of consequence. In fact, many young people around the world take risks and make decisions that have enormous impacts on their lives and those of others. Surely their action under such immense pressure is worthy of a meaningful distinction between voluntary enlistment and absolute, victimizing force.
Initiation and Inoculation

Armed groups became the relational and institutional supports that in many ways replaced families, kin, and communities. This is not to say that young people were always cut off from families. However, it is evident that their incorporation into armed groups required that they realign their allegiance to hierarchical networks of comrades and commanders. Much has been written and speculated about the rituals and training practices that are used to turn young people into soldiers, especially those practices that have spiritual and secret elements to them. While media coverage of wars like those in Liberia and Sierra Leone put the exotic and bizarre on display, anthropologists have responded with interpretations that are primarily concerned with grounding initiations in context. They inquire and make arguments about the extent to which initiation practices are new, or renewed from long-standing cultural processes and beliefs, and seek to interpret what they really mean or symbolize. In the following discussion, I have tried to offer a thoughtful contribution to this literature from the narratives of the ex-combatants in my work. What is apparent to me is that there is a great deal that we simply cannot know about rites of passage in war. What we can be sure of is that they signal transitions into a violent community, and a violent way of life.

Becoming a member of an armed group meant entering a new social entity. Young soldiers were trained through boot camps in some instances, and apprenticeship under comrades in others. My data cannot support a substantive analysis of training practices, as I spoke with ex-combatants from a number of factions who had participated at different points in the war. The extent to which there was a training regime commonly used among factions is unclear. Certainly, rebel groups have used training protocols that reflect much more order than the rag-tag stereotype that has been applied to armed groups in Africa (see Marks 2013). Some of my informants who joined early in the 1990s recalled boot-camp-like experiences that varied in detail, while others who joined later
remembered much more informal mentorship under seasoned fighters.

Much of the interest in initiation, rites of passage, and preparation to fight has been concerned with social transitions within West African civil wars. For instance, Ellis (2003, 2) suggests that forms of initiation into armed groups resemble traditional initiation rituals “used to manage transformation of children into adults.” I am cautious about this assertion on two counts. I am cautious of what has become a relatively standard “boys to men” narrative that links youth initiation with a rather instantaneous transformation to “adulthood.” I am also cautious concerning inferences made about how ritual practice was locally understood in the context of armed groups.

Moran (2006) jabs at anthropologists for their “obsession” with secret hierarchies in West Africa, where secret societies and their occult practices have been a source of deep intrigue for scholars. She believes that the focus on secret rituals has distracted theorists from other interpretations that are pertinent to an understanding of the structural environment. The fascination is understandable. “Bush schools” in Poro secret societies (hierarchical leadership councils within and across ethnic groups throughout West Africa), are rich with exhibitions of high drama, intrigue, and identity exploration. The sensational displays of costume, kidnapping, and training recounted by ethnographers like Bellman (1984) are unquestionably exciting. During bush school, Poro elders were given complete oversight of youth. Young men were kidnapped by their elders and taken into the bush behind an enclosed space. They were symbolically “eaten” by a spirit in the forest and given cuts that would scar, marking them as members of the Poro. They were not allowed to leave, nor was there any visitation by their families. When they were returned, they had been taught how to survive in the bush, to hunt and fish. They were taught the secrets of the Poro tradition and a devout respect for the community of elders. This was an education that took two to three years in the bush, if not longer in the days before modernization crept into
rural communities and infused its social and political structures with a value for formal (Western) schooling (Little 1965). When young men were returned to their communities and their families they had been given a new name. They were to be treated differently by their mothers. They were no longer “small boys.”

There are clear similarities between some of the primary rituals used to prepare youth for life in rural society and those used by rebel groups like the Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone and the NPFL in Liberia (Ellis 2003; Richards 1996, Shepler 2005, 2014). Young men were commonly abducted and taken into the bush. They were cut to create scars marking them as members of their units. They were given medicines to inoculate them from enemy fire, and trained to fight and to respect the social hierarchies of the group. If there is a tendency toward fascination with bush school in its original form, it certainly has not lost its cultural interest once armed rebel movements adopt aspects of those ritual practices. The emphasis on rituals that “transform” youth into adults places the majority of attention on the ritual itself, and on rituals as spiritual practices that move young people from one social category to another (see Bragg 2006; Ellis 2003). The extent to which these ceremonial elements of initiation transitioned them from young boys or “youth” into adults seems an exercise in speculation. It is possible that young people felt themselves given a new charge, a purpose, and a responsibility that reflected a more mature social status. Yet initiation practices and trainings in armed groups did not last for nearly the length of time that traditional bush schools had. My informants remembered time scales that varied from a few weeks to a few months. This seems to have been dictated at least in part by the manpower needs of the armed group, and the manpower availability to formally train new recruits as the war progressed. My conversations with young men indicated that higher social status as adults and even as “big men” was achieved through performance as soldiers, and acquired over time. They came to feel “big” through executing orders, running missions, and achieving recognition for victories and successes that were important within
the context of their military unit. In short, achieving higher social status occurred more through performance and experience over time than through ritual and symbolic initiation.

One of the most prolific parts of the initiation and preparation of new recruits was a bulletproofing ritual, which was practiced by most factions, and has been observed throughout West Africa (see Hamer 2011; Hoffman 2011b; Marks 2013). A young man named Sekou remembered his bulletproofing experience with the NPFL as follows:

They force you to go to the medicine man. They do different, different things to you. It is to help make you to be brave. . . .

The medicine man marks you, he gives you medicine. You have to take the medicine. Then they stand you up against a palm tree. You know Arnold? You see Terminator? They stand you up. They fire automatic weapons at you [he motioned to indicate big guns like AK-47s]. It’s just like Arnold. The bullets do not penetrate. It feels like someone is chunking small rocks at you, or like rain hitting you. The bullets cannot hurt you. It makes you brave.”

In his detailed and attentive account of bulletproofing among the Kamajor fighters in Sierra Leone, Hoffman (2011b) describes bulletproofing practices as military innovations, as new spiritual protections designed in response to modern weaponry wielded during the civil war. Though the actual rituals and medicines themselves may have been new recipes and practices created to protect the Kamajors in their current situation, the actual act of spiritually imbuing fighters with invincibility is not a new innovation within the region at all. In Liberia, there is a long tradition of using medicine for protection during warfare. Individual warriors could have medicine prepared by a Zo (also known as a medicine man) in the form of various objects such as skins, teeth, beaks, and so forth, to ward off blows, to cause invisibility and invincibility to arrows and gunfire (Schwab 1947). It is an old ritual practice applied to current warfare where modern, automatic weapons would test its strength.
Analytical attendance to a site of new innovation or continuity of tradition is important. It demonstrates a critical and careful treatment of another culture, one that avoids the pitfalls of exoticizing narratives to which this region is no stranger. In our attempts to accurately situate what is “new” or “old,” which phenomena presents a break with norms or a pattern continued, it is also important that we do not miss the functionality of these events in our quest to understand the symbolism and cultural relevance. Young men, and more than a few young women, were being equipped to handle new responsibilities, ones that could be quite deadly. The act of bulletproofing was described by soldiers and their initiators as a ceremony of high drama. As Sekou related, young men were literally fired upon in front of their comrades as a demonstration of the power of their newly applied protection. This ceremony also signified a dramatic transition into a violent life, one that was quite removed in most respects from the lives they had lived in their home communities and with their families.

Fighters used other forms of medicines and drugs in addition to bulletproofing. “Medicine” as it was commonly used referred to conjured spiritual powers that were housed in objects that could be worn, or in substances used to provide protections of specific kinds. Sekou had a valuable ring that he wore when he was a general for the NPFL. The ring warned him when danger was coming. He explained how it would begin to hurt his finger, signaling the approach of something bad. If food was offered to him under these circumstances he knew to abstain, as it might be laced with poison. If it was hurting him while with his men, he knew it was time to pack up, and he would order them to break camp and leave. A variety of charms, rings, and necklaces made of teeth or other materials were worn or carried by soldiers to protect them from harm.

If medicine could prepare soldiers to face the guns, drugs helped to empower them to use guns of their own. Drugs were a powerful source of mental separation from conscience and emotion.

“Anybody can understand why they did what they did,” Michael observed of his ex-combatant peers. “In order to numb
their fear, in order to do what they did, you get what I’m saying? The humiliation—they must take something to remove that sense of normalcy, that sense of consciousness.”

Substance use among soldiers enabled them to distance themselves from the emotional response that would ordinarily occur in strenuous and violent situations where their lives could be taken from them and where they were under orders to take the lives of others. Because drugs chemically modify a sense of reality, the lived experience of fighting was literally changed, and became a less emotional or familiar human experience.

Thomas, a former NPFL soldier, had access to cocaine during the war. “When I was given gun, I take drugs. I take cocaine . . . real cocaine, that if I see you, I see you like an animal. I shoot you good. I kill you, and I don’t think, because I was in drug . . . I was addicted to drugs. If I don’t take drug, I won’t eat, I won’t do anything. [They] give it to the child soldiers to make the brain brave for us to do things.”

Rampant use of hard drugs like cocaine is a staple component of the human-rights-based objections to youth participation in war (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 2008; Human Rights Watch 2004). Though there are former fighters like Thomas who recall being given drugs by commanders, the extent to which this was formal military procedure is not clear. Some of the ex-combatants in my work remembered using cocaine, which they obtained through commanders, others remember smoking marijuana, but were not exposed to cocaine, opiates, or other stronger substances.

“We had marijuana, or grass,” Michael remembered. “There was a big place in Bong County. The grass came from there. There was cocaine, but I didn’t see much of that. In my experience, only the big generals really had that. Most of the soldiers didn’t really see much of it. We had the grass and the cane juice, Talent White, sleeping pills. It would make you to feel drunk. Yeah, real drunk. You take five or ten of those and you feel real drunk. It makes a sort of white saliva around your mouth. Soldiers would be talking real slowly.”
“What was the purpose of wanting to feel drunk like that?”

“It changes the way you see things. If you see a man he will be looking real short, like a small person. He will be looking like an animal, short, you will not be afraid. You don’t feel pain. You’re not afraid.”

“What do you mean you don’t feel pain? You don’t feel pain inflicted upon you, or the pain of inflicting harm on someone else?”

“Both. You won’t feel it as much if you get hurt because of the drugs. But you won’t feel that pain in harming someone else, either. . . . A lot of it too, was to make you look fearful. The drugs would turn your eyes red. People would be afraid when they saw you. There was also a leaf that they would take and squeeze the juice in their eyes. It made them turn red. This was all to make us look fearful.”

It is possible that warlords at the highest levels of authority sanctioned or provided hard drugs such as cocaine, or both, though there is no concrete evidence (as far as I am aware) that warlords like Charles Taylor or Prince Johnson administered these drugs to their troops. This is an important point to raise because it calls the human rights discourse into question. The argument from rights groups is that children were coerced and forced to take addictive substances. Many were drug dependent, though not all, and the extent to which drug use was forced under the duress of abusive commanders is unclear. Most soldiers recalled drugs as merely part of the practice of preparing for combat, as fixtures of the environment more than substances taken under orders or due to addiction.

“Spiritual” medicine and drugs were two of the most highlighted aspects of soldier life that were highlighted in memories shared by the ex-combatants and noncombatants in this study. These substances signified a drastic difference between the soldiers’ experience of the war, and the wartime experiences of others. Young men were participating in a violent way of life, one that was supported by supernatural protection as well as some drug-induced mental and emotional distance from foes and victims. They were usually cited as a primary indicator of the vast difference between
life as a small boy in a town or village, and life as a young fighter in an armed group.

Becoming Men

There is now an established body of work identifying young people’s feelings of prestige during war and the young men in this chapter add to that observation. In this section and the next, I highlight the social relations that were built during the war, and reflect on how these new hierarchical relations were woven over time through reciprocity and how they had important implications for respect. Relationships forged during the conflict are also vital to the analysis presented in the next chapter about ex-combatant reintegration.

There is widespread observation of affectionate relationships of exchange between commanders and their recruits, though some assert that these are still the product of manipulation and coercion (see Boothby, Crawford, and Halperin 2006; Schafer 2004). It is impossible to know how abusive or intimate such relations were without firsthand empirical data. Ex-combatants remembered different experiences of abuse and affection, and the variance is undoubtedly due to particular social and structural relations that were specific to their different units. Morris recounted an incidence of violence dealt to a small boy who disobeyed an order from their commanding officer. His story conveys a tremendous exercise of brutality, similar to violent discipline and abuse that has been reported throughout wars across the continent (see Cheney 2005; Honwana 2005; Machel 2001).

“The general gave us an order to kill our friend.”
“I said ‘I will not do that.’ The general beat me.”
“He beat you?”
“Yeah.”
“He beat you for not killing your friend?”
“Yeah, because I was [looking out] for my little friend. I was too wicked. If anybody will do bad I will kill you. But I decide [not
to do it, not to kill my friend]. So they beat me and all. Then the
general end up killing the man.” Morris’s superior beat him, and
ended up killing his little friend, though in the end, despite his
threats, he spared Morris.

I cannot speak to the extent to which coercion occurred in
the ranks or how brutal and violent the chain of command could
become. However, it was evident that brutality and aggression
were not the only or even the most defining features of hierarchical
relationships in armed groups. Randall, who drove a truck for the
NPFL during the war, spoke confidently and affectionately of his
relationship with his former commander.

“We been together during the crisis,” he remembered.
“During the crisis we were friends. He can’t leave me. When I in
problem, he in problem. So he was more like a brother. We were
all together. We move like that, like a brother. Yeah, that how we
live together . . . serving each other’ life. . . . [It was] the same
man (commanding officer) that been with every one of us. . . .
He brought us up during the crisis. We work for him. He like a
godfather for us. That the man that take care of us, do everything
for us.”

Armed groups were a new social platform in which young peo-
ple’s life chances continued to be supported through interdepen-
dent and intergenerational relationships. From his work in Sierra
Leone, Hoffman (2011b, 133) relates:

As a patron, a “commander” would be responsible for his “clients”
in ways not defined by military necessity or protocol. In addition
to providing food, shelter, weapons and ammunition, a patron-
commander would be a resource in family emergencies or an
arbiter for disputes among equals. He would be expected to stand
for those beneath him in cases where allegations were made by
local authorities or others within the movement. In return, the
patron-commander’s dependents would be expected to offer
security for the “big man,” share a portion of whatever wealth
they might accumulate, and tend to his needs as necessary.
Participation with armed groups meant establishing new wealth in people. Survival, security, and status were embedded in relationships within the ranks. That is not to say that no one had patronage with families or kin outside of armed groups. However, their loyalty and allegiance was to armed groups first, and it was within that social order that some young men developed relationships that would sustain their lives and increase their status.

The gun gave young people the capacity to control others like they had never done before. Recalling his training with the NPFL, Michael explained, “They would say to us, ‘the gun is your mama and your papa.’ It meant that the gun could give you everything you need. If you have the gun, it can give you the money you need, the power you need, the car you need.”

Guns gave young men positions of dominance. They did not have to ask parents to buy them things. They could take them from unarmed civilians, or scavenge through the spoils of a new territory. “A soldier man have authority,” David recalled. “He violate at any time against the civilian. You understand? He do his will at any time. A soldier man can choose, because he with gun. You know, what he want [he get] because he got gun against the civilian, so that he got authority. Civilian are much afraid.”

Podder (2011) argues that the gerontocratic and patrimonial nature of Liberian society underwent a reversal during the war. She notes that “violence and symbolic power of the gun became a source of power and authority over parents and elders, often at the behest of obedience, compliance and respect which for generations had been inculcated into youth to perpetuate a gerontocratic hierarchy” (59). This was true to the experience of many encounters between civilians and combatants. Armed with weapons and the support of a military force, very young boys were allowed to demand material goods and services from very elderly unarmed civilians who were no longer in positions of authority over them, to whom their allegiance was no longer attached.

During a focus group in West Point, an elderly gentleman named Elijah remembered encountering young fighters. “I walk
by small child, like my grandchild, holding arm [gun]. They killed fifty-seven people. But the day before they killed sixty people. They ‘pop-pop-pop-pop!’,” he related, making the sound of gunfire, his eyes wide. “Papé, you will move!,” he remembered being ordered.

Rather than a total reversal of gerontocratic norms, young fighters experienced a more fundamental break with social life outside of their factions. Age hierarchies appear to have persisted within the ranks. Taylor’s forces were known for having “small boy” units. Young ones were put in their own unit, with their own set of military responsibilities, much like children were set apart for particular household tasks within the home. Prior to the war, young people would not have been able to speak to Elijah as they do in the above quote. With their guns and with their position in an armed faction, young men were given dominance over unarmed elders. In short, there was a sharper break with society outside of armed groups, rather than a universal inversion of gerontocracy.

Earlier I argued that while it is difficult to know how much status was conferred through ritual initiation, it is evident that young people achieved benchmarks of social status through performance of roles and responsibilities (see Utas 2003). Armed groups offered a helping hand that accelerated socioeconomic mobility during the war. At a very basic level, being part of a faction meant that the daily necessities of life as well as additional material possessions were readily available. Rations like rice, cassava, and liquor were provided on a regular basis.

“As a soldier I eat on time,” Nathaniel commented.

It was a stark contrast to his postwar situation and that of many of his friends. But as a soldier in the NPFL his needs had been taken care of. In addition to basic provisions, anything that could be taken from civilians or from the front lines as spoils of war would add to a soldier’s wealth.

“Some people love the operation,” Michael reflected, “where they go on attack. When you go on attack, and your enemy retreat, whatsoever in that environment comes to you: looted materials, arms, you know whatsoever, water, soap, rice, yeah the drinks.”6
“Because of looting properties,” Peter explained, “looting cash, they [young fighters] began to establish families. They began to live on their own, earn money during the war by using gun during the war to earn money. They began to behave like men. They began to behave like a man and take responsibilities.”

Fighting with armed groups enabled sustainable livelihoods and prospects for starting families, or at least maintaining relationships with girlfriends (see Coulter 2009; Utas 2005b). Young people were able to instruct and demand goods and services from civilians because they were armed. Within the ranks, as new recruits became more seasoned they were given responsibilities over others. All of these markers of greater socioeconomic maturity were associated with adulthood—and all of them were earned over time, and through experience and performance of roles and responsibilities.

**Becoming Big Men**

Recall how the street youth described big men in chapter 3. They ride in cars. They have houses and other people work for them. They hold positions, most of them in the government. And when they come into the community, they want to be popular, and they help people. Some of the ex-combatants in this work were able to take on responsibilities and to act not just in ways that reflected adulthood but that earned them status as bigger men. None of my informants were among the top generals who collaborated with warlords like Charles Taylor, Roosevelt Johnson, or Ahlaji Kromah. However, some of them were given responsibilities that reflected status as bigger men. Sekou’s experience with the NPFL is a case in point.

Sekou was recruited during the earliest months of what became a very long war. When he was twelve or thirteen, he was taken from his school in Nimba County to be initiated and trained to fight with the NPFL. He rose through the ranks and told me stories of operations he led. Once, Charles Taylor personally thanked him for a successful operation he executed to capture a town in a strategic area. Taylor gave
him cash money as a reward for himself and his men. We talked about his role as a leader and his reputation for being impartial—he would punish even his friends if they stepped out of line.

“What do you miss about being a soldier?,“ I asked.

Commanding his men, came the immediate reply. “Telling this one to go there, telling this one to go there,” he motioned.

“You miss being in charge?”

He smiled, and I wondered if I had embarrassed him. “Yeah. Sometimes when we were camped, we get food, and we make it for all the town people. We have musicians come in to entertain us. We’d have enough liquor, beer. Everyone would come. It would be a time of enjoyment. I really miss that.”

“You liked treating people?”

“Yes. It was a part of my job. I would take care of the people.”

He was a general, commanding hundreds of men at points—a significant number of dependents who looked up to him. It was a position that afforded him the prestige that came through victory, and through dominance and displays of largesse. He could prominently and proudly bestow gifts and services on his men and on civilian communities they occupied—garnering greater honor and prestige all along the way.

For a young man not yet in his thirties at that time, this was an inconceivable position to be in outside of the context of the war, both in regards to generation and to class. Big men who had positions in dense networks of wealth in people were well past their early twenties. Most were also strongly attached to the government, and deeply indebted among the ruling class of Americo elites prior to Samuel Doe’s takeover of state power. Young men in rural villages and towns were unlikely to gain the sort of power and prominence of big man status to begin with, and especially at such young ages.

Conclusion

There is much we cannot know about the complexity of the interpersonal and social experiences of becoming young soldiers. The child
soldier phenomenon is well trod with speculation and with accounts that emphasize the sensational and extreme aspects of being young and being soldiers. Such accounts often downplay other structural forces that are enormously important for our understanding of conflict participation and postwar experience. There were two transitions during wartime that provided an essential foundation for ex-combatant’s life chances after war. One was a horizontal transition to a new, hierarchical network of support in armed groups. The primary labor and allegiance of young people shifted from families, kin, and communities to comrades and commanders. They were under new patrons, and became patrons to others in a social system that was supported by engagement in warfare. The other was a vertical transition into higher socioeconomic status on an individual level.

Higher social status achieved over time became a point of interpersonal tension for many in the aftermath of the war. Young men invested years of their lives, their energy, their bodies, and their intellect with armed organizations that recognized their achievements and rewarded their efforts. Noncombatants, most of whom were deeply affected by the violence and exploitation these young soldiers exercised, were unable to appreciate their achievements as soldiers. Those achievements came at the immense, unquantifiable cost of lives, injuries, rape, and destruction of property and livelihoods. Many ex-combatants felt themselves at odds with those who could not recognize their bigger status, achieved through intense and demanding experiences of participation with armed groups. I say this not to sympathize with the aggression and dominance practiced by armed groups but to highlight how the intense experiences of fighters over time could mean a great deal during the war, but lose efficacy when ex-combatants transitioned to social situations beyond the ranks. Their negotiation of these and many other post-war social dynamics are discussed in the following chapter.