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Book Review: *Childhood Deployed: Remaking Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone* by Susan Shepler

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BOOK REVIEW

CHILDHOOD DEPLOYED: REMAKING CHILD SOLDIERS IN SIERRA LEONE

BY SUSAN SHEPLER

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2014. XIV + 223 PAGES

\$89 (HARDCOVER), \$26 (PAPER)

ISBN 978-0-8147-7025-2

Childhood Deployed is a well-written and accessible account of a set of highly complicated issues. Based on her almost three decades of ethnographic research and other involvements in Sierra Leone, author Susan Shepler analyzes the implications of the participation of minors in Sierra Leone's infamous civil war and the challenges to their postconflict reintegration. Her analysis is presented through everyday encounters with former combatants, child rights practitioners, and a range of adult Sierra Leonean actors who contribute their opinions and implicit assumptions about the challenges of reintegrating child soldiers, and their notions of youth and childhood more generally.

As a deconstruction of the "child soldier" category applied or implied by child-rights-based approaches to postconflict reintegration, *Childhood Deployed* demonstrates how an idealized Western notion of childhood as a time of innocence and passivity may make sense as an advocacy tool, but also that these universalizing treaties on what a child and a childhood should be about would entail fundamental breaks with local norms and cultural standards. As such, *Childhood Deployed* should be of particular interest to anyone interested in understanding the nuance and complexity of the interface between international conventions on the rights of the child and local notions of childhood and youth in a place like Sierra Leone.

The book's introduction outlines the author's overall ambition and describes her own history of involvement with Sierra Leonean children and youth, beginning with her early years as a Peace Corps volunteer and proceeding into the role of ethnographer. Chapter 1 outlines many of the central insights Shepler gained through this ethnography, while chapters 3-5 elaborate on her ideas through detailed empirical examples of her interlocutors' different experiences and outlooks.

Taking her cue from the considerable anthropological scholarship on issues of youth and (post)conflict in the region, Shepler relates the recruitment of minors in Sierra Leone's civil war to the experiences and practices of youth as "a political class" (29). As has been well established in academic research and increasingly in other circles as well, "youth" in Shepler's view is seen less as simply an age cohort and more as a social-class status of relative inferiority and dependency on "elders," in the broad sense of the term as anyone with seniority or influence. The author illustrates how a series of cultural idioms have given shape and context to the recruitment of minors, thereby normalizing military recruitment as akin to other more mundane aspects of child/adult relationships in Sierra Leone. For instance, Shepler discusses cultural standards relating to child labor as "a system in which it made sense for children to work alongside adults" (32), which stands in stark contrast to the criminalizing view of child labor expressed in universal principles of the rights of the child. Shepler also considers how local fosterage practices served as a model for how abducted children were integrated into rebel groups, with male commanders taking on a father role with young recruits and their "bush wives" acting as foster mothers (36).

Shepler also describes how recruitment into both the Revolutionary United Front rebel group and the Sierra Leonean army was perceived as a form of apprenticeship that had cultural precedents in civilian life (40), which included specific expectations of the roles and benefits inherent in such relationships. Moreover, as earlier scholarship has established, military recruitment had many traits in common with cultural initiation practices, including an implicit expectation that it would eventually lead to some form of social progression toward adulthood.

Shepler's discussion of these cultural idioms illustrates her argument for striking a balance between a universalist perception of childhood based on an idealized view of the innocent and unaccountable child in "the West" on the one hand, and, on the other, a relativist and romanticized view of Sierra Leonean culture. Shepler argues consistently that disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs in Sierra Leone generally fail to acknowledge that universalist ideals of childhood have little to offer former combatants or their home communities because their realities and moral expectations differ from this ideal in so many ways. This tension is clearly brought out in chapter 4, where Shepler argues that informal reintegration, whereby former combatants find their own way back into their home communities, tends to be more efficient than institutionalized programs but does little to alter or challenge the traditionally subservient status of children in Sierra Leonean society. Formal reintegration tends to be less efficient, but it does help to change the status and outlook of its beneficiaries. Shepler

manages to take account of the differences and contradictions arising from the interface between these different views of what a childhood is and should be without passing moral judgment. She ends the book with a refreshingly hands-on set of policy recommendations directed at building bridges between these different outlooks.

Childhood Deployed will have value to a variety of audiences, and those interested in the challenges of education in emergencies will surely find it interesting. In the opinion of this reader, who has a strong interest in the book's contribution to the anthropology of youth and childhood in the context of armed conflict, the author could have avoided a few slippery conceptual slopes by committing to a narrower readership of non-anthropologist child rights practitioners or others with an interest in such issues without an academic background in anthropology. The book is at its best when it presents well-established insights from the field of anthropological research on issues of youth in the context of the Mano River wars (and beyond) with unusual simplicity and clarity. In these sections, Shepler demonstrates the value of the discipline and its methodology to understanding the complexities of the lived experiences of former combatants, including the ways in which they manipulate child-rights terminologies and assumptions as part of their everyday struggles for getting ahead and finding a purpose in life postconflict. The book is less convincing when trying to construct a niche, or suggest a research gap, within this vast literature, and when attempting more abstract arguments about key anthropological concepts without seeing such discussions through. For example, and crucially for the focus of the book, it remains unclear throughout how the author distinguishes between the concepts of "child" and "youth," as she sometimes uses these categories interchangeably and at others treats them as objects of theoretical discussion and deconstruction. Overall, though, *Childhood Deployed* is an enjoyable and thought-provoking read that makes a convincing case for how and why anthropology should claim a much more central role in contributing to disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs and other international humanitarian practices.

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