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From Bullets to Banners and Back Again? The Ambivalent Role of Ex-combatants in Contested Land Deals in Sierra Leone

Anne Hennings

Abstract

The rise of land deals poses unpredictable risks to war-torn societies, exposing them to the violent folds of the global economy. In Sierra Leone, commercial land leases have perpetuated the chieftaincy monopoly, further curtailed social mobility, and sparked particular resentment among youths and ex-combatants. Drawing on the concept of the "war machine," I analyse how Kamajor militia fighters shape contestation against land deals and explore the attendant risks for remobilisation and conflict transformation. My findings, based on in-depth ethnographic field research, indicate that while aggrieved communities turn to Kamajor-run civil society organisations for support, Kamajor living in precarious conditions largely shy away from open contestation. While the historically close ties between the Kamajor and the chieftaincy have eroded in the wake of commercial land leases, complex patronage networks along with the moral setback encountered from the Special Court proceedings and tight surveillance thwart a more overt response. Yet, the Kamajor's background support remains key to the struggle of anti-plantation and mining activists.

Keywords

Sierra Leone, conflict transformation, liberal peace, remobilisation, post-war identities

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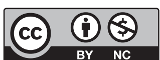

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Introduction

Post-conflict countries are under immense pressure to reconstruct and swiftly reintegrate into global market flows. Accordingly, many of these countries have experienced a sharp rise in land deals in the wake of war. Agricultural investments and mining concessions are eagerly promoted by international organisations, such as the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund, and by governments as a silver bullet for economic rural development and, thus, post-conflict stability. However, large-scale investments may pose unpredictable risks to war-torn societies that are particularly vulnerable to abrupt agrarian transformations. Access to land and natural resources is not only key to economic recovery but also contributes to successful reconciliation and the social (re)integration of former combatants and refugees (UNDP, 2013).

While much has been written on the impact of land deals and the many ways in which they are experienced and contested, the literature on repercussions for post-conflict settings remains largely under-informed (Borras et al., 2011; Deininger and Byerlee, 2011; GRAIN, 2016; Hall et al., 2011; Hall et al., 2015; Ryan, 2017). What is more, although a large number of land grab case studies are located in post-conflict countries in the Global South, scholars have engaged only to a limited extent – if, indeed, at all – with the consequences for societies in transition (but see Millar, 2016; Cavanagh, 2017). I argue that this perspective is of particular importance when analysing agrarian transformation and the mobilisation efforts of affected communities in post-conflict environments.

The conditions to invest in the agricultural and natural resource sectors in post-conflict Sierra Leone were ideal for ex-mercenaries-turned businessmen, speculators, or companies prepared to take advantage of a largely unmonitored market or willing to take on high financial and reputational risks (Hennings, 2018a; Hilton, 2011: 13; World Bank, 2018). Re-strengthened after the war, some paramount chiefs seized the opportunities at hand and likewise capitalised on the post-conflict circumstances and people's hopes for development. Soon, more than 1.5 million hectares – equivalent to 21 per cent of Sierra Leone's entire arable land – were leased to agribusiness investors alone (ALLAT, 2013: 14). Apart from increasing inequality, such commercial land deals have reinforced nepotism and the role of the paramount chiefs – exposing communities to corruption, coercion, and violence. The sudden influx of money has weakened local customs while further increasing class and intergenerational tensions (see also Hennings, 2018a; Millar, 2016, 2018b).

My findings suggest that emerging grievances and growing inequality resulting from commercial land investments resemble the dynamics that spurred the war in Sierra Leone in the first place (Mitton, 2013: 326). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission itself as well as a number of scholars have underlined how tensions over land, deep intergenerational schisms and a disfranchised rural youth, a lack of trust in politicians and customary authorities, widespread corruption, nepotism, and the unequal distribution of wealth were all key drivers that led to the outbreak of war (Fanthorpe and Maconachie, 2010; Mitton, 2009: 462; Mokuwa et al., 2011; Richards, 2005; TRC, 2004a).[1] Accordingly, the land and natural resource sectors remain critical elements of

peacebuilding and recovery in Sierra Leone (Moyo and Foray, 2009: 1; Unruh and Williams, 2013: 536).

While there is a remarkable scholarship on the war in Sierra Leone (1991–2002) and, more specifically, on Charles Taylor's Revolutionary United Front (RUF), child soldiers, the illicit exploitation of the country's eastern diamond fields, and interlinkages to the conflict setting of the Mano River region (Abdullah, 1997; Hoffman, 2011; Keen, 2005; Muana, 1997; Reno, 1995; Richards, 1996), the long-term reintegration of ex-combatants in rural areas and of militia fighters in particular remains underexplored (but see Hoffman, 2011; Menzel, 2015b). My emphasis on ex-combatants will serve as a lens through which to uncover the potential risks of land grabbing for peace and stability in Sierra Leone (on the issue of civilian and ex-combatant classification, see Menzel, 2015b: 39). Drawing on assemblage thinking and specifically the concept of the "war machine," I examine the response of the former Mende militia fighters to the growing capitalisation of land, livelihoods, and rural Sierra Leone under the umbrella of liberal peacebuilding. Given the pre- and post-war similarities in exploitive and exclusive conditions, I ponder whether the Kamajor[2] have eventually reassemble in some form.

In contrast to other ex-combatants who mostly settled in urban Freetown, Bo, or Makeni, the Kamajor largely returned to their chiefdoms in southern and eastern Sierra Leone. Initially, the latter mobilised in the form of chiefdom-based defence units, a reconfiguration of the Mende hunter and guardian ethos. Once the Kamajor gained importance, they fought along with northern militias in the Civil Defense Force (CDF) as part of the counter-insurgency. Depending on their (accumulated) prestige and class affiliation, several militia members have benefitted from the recent surge of commercial land deals while low-status Kamajor directly face negative externalities. Moreover, some higher ranking Kamajor lost their war rewards in consequence of criticising the paramount chiefs for selling out their people's land and started taking a more critical stance towards land deals. Since land has been of great importance to the Kamajor from a spiritual, territorial, and livelihood perspective, I analyse whether and to what extent the chiefdom militia fighters shape local resistance against mining and plantation operations in the country's south. Although their discontent is growing, my in-depth ethnographic field research shows that the Kamajor largely shy away from openly supporting their communities' struggle. At the same time, affected community members turn to Kamajor-run civil society organisations (CSOs) for support, including non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society forums, as well as more formalised movements. That said, I explore the strategic use of the variety of militia identities, the constant reinterpretation of Kamajor images, and the prevailing Kamajor ethos upheld by many communities in contesting land deals. Furthermore, I analyse how shifting alliances, loyalties, and waning trust play into the novel configuration of a potentially broader rural resistance movement.

The article is structured as follows. After, first, illustrating the concept of the war machine, I then, second, outline post-war dynamics in Sierra Leone with emphasis on the reintegration of the Kamajor. Third, I discuss the repercussions of large-scale agricultural and mining projects for militia members, illustrate related identity shifts, and trace resemblances to pre-war grievances. Fourth, analysing the Kamajor's agency in contested land deals, I highlight the role of Kamajor-run CSOs and the response of precarious Kamajor,

which is largely thwarted by tight surveillance and repressive chieftaincies. Finally, I explore entailed risks of land investments for remobilisation and conflict transformation.

Methods

This article is based on seven months of in-depth ethnographic field research in Sierra Leone. Between March 2017 and March 2018, I carried out frequent field trips to land conflict-affected areas in nine districts. The researched cases cover different stages of conflict and community mobilisation emerging against projects ranging from recently set up palm oil plantations to explorative or long-established mining operations. I applied the ethnographic peace research approach that entails building up relationships and spending time in ordinary conversations rather than single visits (Hennings, 2018b; Millar, 2018a). Thus, I combined formal interviews, informal conversations with individuals or groups, and long-term participant and spatial observations with a focus on processes of social differentiation and conflict transformation. My emphasis lay on the Kamajor militia and ex-state military personnel in southern Sierra Leone. Moreover, I interviewed community members, activists, labourers, company representatives, CSOs, ministry officials, and town, section, and paramount chiefs while also attending the National Paramount Chief Conference as well as several public and informal community meetings in the provinces and in Freetown. I further reviewed existing studies, media coverage, and community or NGO documentation on the land conflicts.

During the course of my fieldwork, I paid special attention to the challenges and sensitivity of researching ex-combatants in post-war societies, which requires specific considerations and do-no-harm measures (Hennings, 2018b; Wood, 2006: 373). While there are fewer risks involved, in the sense of further stigmatisation or undermining local reconciliation processes, reaching out to the Kamajor in Sierra Leone still requires tact and time; the more so if researching responses to commercial land leases and their propensity to violence. That said, I took a critical stance towards retrospective narrations of ex-combatant identities and verified key findings with other informants or interviewees.

The War Machine, the State, and the Chieftaincy

With its emphasis on relationality, contingency, and transformation, assemblage thinking is well suited to grasp the agency of ex-combatants in land deal contestation and processes of change therein. Especially, urban movement scholars have recently combined assemblage thinking and its notion of change with contentious politics (McFarlane, 2011; Rankin and Delaney, 2011). Unlike the rich literature on social movement theories that focuses primarily on opportunity structures (Tarrow, 1996; Tilly, 1978), framing (Benford and Snow, 2000), or the role of emotions (Goodwin et al., 2001), assemblage thinking offers a more holistic approach to the understanding of social movements. Notably, it refrains from seeing them as a coherent actor with a shared collective identity and a set of common beliefs and norms (see also, Tilly and Tarrow, 2006). That said, this perspective goes beyond simply examining resistance along its manifestations in official politics, everyday resistance, or more overt advocacy politics

(Kerkvliet, 2009; Scott, 1985). Assemblage theory engages much more with the emergence and potential of “contesting forces [that] are confronting, colliding, intersecting and transforming” (Hawes, 2015: 15). Moreover, it allows an innovative perspective to be taken on questions of trust and loyalty.

From an assemblage point of view, land investments affect not only communities and the environment but also modes of production and living, the physical structure of villages, farms, ritual places, and forests, power dynamics, as well as spaces of agency (Hennings, 2018a). Regarding the term territory Deleuze and Guattari distinguish between three social dimensions that organise flows of power: the war machine, the state, and the people who actually inhabit and govern the territory, including customary authorities (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 411). Following Hoffman, I define state not as an “entity up there” but as “a hierarchical mode of organizing power” (2011: 8–9). The war machine stands in sharp contrast to the state that territorialises, for example, through capitalising on natural resources, or by expanding “property rights over people” (Ferme, 2018: 159; Vandergeest and Peluso, 1995: 394). In a similar vein, chieftaincies territorialise local residents and resources and, like the state, “distinguish the legal from the illegal” (Hoffman, 2011:8), think along established principles, and aim to maintain stability and order. In Sierra Leone, deeply rooted customary governance structures and patronage networks evolve around elders, family headmen, the council, town, section, and paramount chiefs, as well as land-holding lineages.[3]

Exclusive and top-down in nature, state or customary modes of power are met everywhere with resistance. From an assemblage point of view, resistance expresses itself in lines of flight that represent new ways of thinking or political realities different from the established ones, such as shifting alliances, dissolving trust in authorities, and betrayals of loyalty (Hawes, 2015: 32; Parr, 2011: 147). As I highlight elsewhere (Hennings, 2018a), in Sierra Leone, these can take shape, for example, as heretofore unusual alliances between land-holding and using families or emerging trans-chiefdom networks. Once these lines of flight gain strength and eventually transform the contested status quo, a war machine has emerged. Often mistaken to be violent and destructive, war machines are in fact more likely to take shape as non-violent movements than on the field of battle. Their revolutionary potential roots much more in the unheard of or unthinkable connections that collectively aim to overcome existing grievances or injustices. For instance, Hawes (2015) describes both the Interahamwe, a Rwandan militia group that played a key role during the country’s genocide, and the Gaçaça courts dealing with its perpetrators as war machines. Conceptually, the war machine allows different takes on resistance; in so doing, it bridges social movement studies and the war studies literature.

The metaphor of speed bumps and potholes helps to illustrate the emergence of a war machine or its forerunner, the lines of flight, respectively. While speed bumps are legal state interventions to regulate traffic, spontaneously emerging potholes undermine or even caricature those (Höhne and Umlauf, 2018: 203). In contrast to evenly built speed bumps, potholes are caused by erosion and emerge almost unnoticed on the edge or on the most used stretches of a road. Similarly, embedded in the local cultural landscape, various grass-root civil defence units – the majority of them Kamajor – emerged organically in response to the influx of RUF fighters from Liberia in the early 1990s. Unlike

the RUF rebels who fought against the customary authorities, the Kamajor were selected via chieftaincy patronage networks vouching for the recruits' trustworthiness and loyalty (Hoffman, 2011: 74; Humphrey and Weinstein, 2004; on militia–local elite linkages, see Schneckener, 2017: 799). Starting out as small emerging potholes as an antipode to the rebel movement, the Kamajor became complicit with the state after 1995. Under the umbrella of the CDF, the militias became part of the state's counter-insurgent strategy when the war dynamics shifted.

War machines spread quickly and in a non-linear manner until they "operate under [their] own steam, beyond the control of the state" or customary state-like hierarchies (Hoffman, 2011: 11). In other words, they de-territorialise by counteracting "state logic, lines of kinship, [and] village association" (Hoffman, 2011: 13). Like unattended potholes, war machines increasingly disrupt the smooth flow of activities and interactions and turn existing orders upside down but are, nevertheless, always eventually captured by the state or local state-like hierarchies, such as governments that do repair the potholes. After the militias were captured by the state, they were driven rather by the "state logic of profiteering" than by safeguarding their people (Ferme, 2018: 115; Hoffman, 2011: 243). As such, the CDF became increasingly institutionalised although its units retained a certain degree of independence, steered by the local elite.

However, two interesting lines of flight emerged. First, some Kamajor units sympathised with the peasant insurgency side of the RUF and partly rose up against their own chiefs even despite the CDF's strong anti-RUF identity (Hoffman, 2011: 69; Mokuwa et al., 2011). This dynamic was closely related to the early years of war, when many chiefs in Kailahun and Pujehun Districts sent their youth to support the RUF. As an elder explained to me:

First, we sent our youth to Liberia to join the RUF. Then all the atrocities happened, and we established the militias. Our youngsters were integrated into the communities again but had to live up to the Kamajor slogan "never turn back."

Nevertheless, some Kamajor did maintain close relationships to their former RUF comrades and even collaborated at times. The second line of flight emerged in the late war landscape, when the CDF partly turned against the Sierra Leone Army (SLA) demanding a democratic government instead of the "contemporary postcolony" (Hoffman, 2011: 79). Yet, the Kamajor's general loyalty towards their chieftaincies and their communities of origin, as well as the general state capture of the civil defence units thwarted these lines of flight and undermined the emergence of a fully fledged war machine during war years.

The Kamajor's Reintegration into Rural Post-War Sierra Leone

Considering the length of the war and the comparatively low fatal casualty rate, the violence involved left behind a society of witnesses and survivors. In this vein, it is striking that the collective trauma and mistrust, although existent, resurface mostly during elections, as recently in 2018. To be sure, places and images are still linked to war events and their disruptions, which left traces in social relations and agrarian practices, for example. However, I do not see contemporary Sierra Leone as a warscape or would

not speak of blurred boundaries between war and peace (Ferme, 2018: 12). That most Sierra Leoneans have moved on is owed to the "reconciliatory attitude" of civilians and ex-combatants who not only wanted to put the conflict behind them and focus on the future but who often shared the grievances that led to war in the first place (Mitton, 2009: 463). Reconciliation and healing have, moreover, been largely determined by the "art of forgetting" rather than memorising (Millar, 2016: 572; Shaw, 2007: 184). In this spirit, Kamajor-community relations were remade and, like many Liberian refugees, the militia fighters "became part and parcel of the communities" in the south (interview with the coordinator of ALLAT, an NGO, Freetown, 10 March 2017). This stands in stark contrast to the reintegration of ex-RUF fighters, who were generally perceived as more violent and at "odds with the gerontocratic social order that politicians and elders scrambled to reassert in the wake of the war" (Bolten, 2012: 497) and who hence settled rather in urban areas. In the following, I show that the reintegration of the Kamajor was highly determined by their pre-war status and illustrate how patron–client networks helped them to navigate the post-war environment.

The reintegration of the Kamajor went relatively smooth, as most had maintained close ties to their networks and families (Humphrey and Weinstein, 2004: 2). They were not only welcomed back by their communities but also by the local elite (on the bottom-up and top-down legitimacy of militias, see Schneckener, 2017). About 75 per cent returned to their communities – often along with fellow comrades – and many benefitted from the country's disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) programme (Humphrey and Weinstein, 2004: 31). Most of my interlocutors still see the Kamajor as heroes who are "honest, disciplined, patriotic, and care about their people" (see also, Hoffman, 2011; Menzel, 2015b: 238–241; TRC, 2004b: 76–80). This is not self-evident considering the militias were supposed to protect civilians from RUF and SLA attacks while at the same time accounting for 2 per cent of war crimes. In interviews, only a handful of civilians took a more critical stance and spoke about worried communities reluctant to welcome teachers back who fought for any side in this "ruthless war" (former councillor, Daru, Kailahun, 17 March 2018).

Profoundly weakened during the war, the country's social fabric was quickly rebuilt with a few adjustments with support from the United Kingdom's Department for International Development's "Paramount Chief Restoration Programme" (see also, Ferme, 2018: 162).[4] Despite concerns about perpetuating corruption and exclusive patronage networks concentrated around chiefs and land-owning families – grievances that greatly contributed to the war – customary authorities were re-strengthened and continued to control the definition of social space. What is more, after the war paramount chiefs were re-inscribed as mediators between local, national, and transnational politics and economics, which is part of what Ferme sums up as "the delocalisation process of the chieftaincy" (2018: 150). The return of the Kamajor indirectly added to the re-institutionalisation of the chieftaincy and overall processes of re-territorialisation. The lines of flight that they had embodied were quickly incorporated by the chieftaincy, and most of them were rewarded economically and/or politically for their bravery and sacrifices to protect the chiefdom (and the country).

Almost all Kamajor could improve their social standing compared to pre-war times. Just as kinship loyalties and blood ties determined who was drafted, patron networks and family background were key to securing benefits after the war like monetary compensations, prestige, or political power (Mann, 2006; Schneckener, 2017: 813). Especially higher ranking Kamajor, originating mostly from educated land-owning lineages, became influential community stakeholders. These Kamajor could capitalise on their militia identity and the Kamajor ethos in particular, which attributed them certain leadership qualities. Until today, they have been appointed town and section chiefs, speakers, or police officers. Others were integrated into the Sierra Leone Armed Forces or are preferentially hired to manage and secure medium-scale mining operations. As Amara, a highly respected (and feared) mid-ranking Kamajor, explained:

> The mine owners trust me. They know I played an important role during the war, that I am reliable. For example, if there is a fighting on site I just go there and they would immediately stop. I'm also the chairman of the *okada* [motorbike taxi] association in Zimmi. My past helps when I search for labourers. I know many youths from the war times who I can call. (Zimmi, 9 May 2017)

Rewarding the returning Kamajor was not only a courtesy but also a necessity to maintain local peace after the war. This was well-captured by an anti-mining activist in Bonthe, one of the key Kamajor areas: "Being a warrior means you become a leader. But you have to reward them at the end of the day" (interview, Moriba Town, 11 April 2017). Becoming a Kamajor and participating in the war offered an opportunity to expand and upgrade one's sociopolitical networks and the promise to "transcend peacetime limitations of establishing status" (Hoffman, 2011: 137; see also, Käihkö, 2017). As a matter of fact, these expectations did mostly materialise for those Kamajor who had maintained influential patron–client relations before the war such as Amara, who largely benefitted from his strong land-holding family background.

What it means to be a Kamajor has always varied a great deal and been subject to constant renegotiation since their reintegration. The multifaceted Kamajor identity cannot be limited to binary interpretations, but is rather fluid, contingent, and negotiable by nature. Unlike other armed groups in the Mano River region, the Kamajor fighters were less driven by an "opportunistic discourse of labour" – although a few did later become mercenaries in Ivory Coast or Mali (Käihkö, 2017: 54). Whereas some Kamajor (and/or their families) hoped for material benefits and the accumulation of status, militia membership also provided safety during the war that went beyond the power of guns to other concerns – namely, protecting militia youths from being forcefully recruited by rebel groups. Many Kamajor have taken pride in the responsibility to protect their communities and still link their identity to the hunter and guardian trajectory of the Mende militias. On the other hand, especially younger Kamajor from land-using and lower status families saw the militia rather as a "new youth-led movement" (Hoffman, 2011: 69).

Depending on their networks, status, post-war rewards, and initial intention to join the militia, Kamajor take different stands towards their lifetime initiation today. Particularly for Kamajor who joined for rather pragmatic than idealistic reasons, who were deprived

of post-war rewards, and/or deliberately immersed into civilian life, militia membership does not necessarily constitute the most important part of their identity today.

Exclusive Land Deals, Patronage Politics, and Growing Disparities

Studies on commercial land deals in Sierra Leone show that most communities face precarious economic situations and perceive these investments as a "disappointing experience" (Menzel, 2015a: 18; See Maconachie and Fortin, 2013; Millar, 2015). Especially land-using families, women, youths, lower status Kamajor, and other community members who lack rich-men networks or who oppose these operations bear the negative externalities (Hennings, 2018a; Ryan, 2017). Unfulfilled development promises add to lost livelihoods, while marketisation increasingly expands into the social spaces of rural Sierra Leone. The Activists for Change chairman summed up the situation at one of the major rutile and bauxite extraction sites in West Africa in a nutshell:

> You see, the same problems that caused the war are still there. The richer get richer and the poorer get poorer. These people suffer! Look at the area, there are so many hazards! There are dangerous gases, the dust causes health issues. The communities are in a fragile situation! Any moment you must expect conflicts. Everyone is disappointed in Rutile [general term for the two extracting companies]. Especially the Kamajor are frustrated. (Interview Bonthe, 12 April 2017)

On the other hand, some paramount chiefs became "lynchpins" inspired by the neoliberal vision of capitalising on the chiefdom's lands (Ferme, 2018: 147). In this process, chieftaincy holders started drawing rather on their international corporate alliances for political legitimacy than on local support.

Turning to the Kamajor, I argue that the militia fighters have different takes on the repercussions of mining or plantation operations. Notably, I found that the Kamajor's different experiences of commercial land investments have added another layer to their multifaceted identity. Considering their family background, the interpretation of their militia membership, and their experience of the capitalisation of their (communities') land, the Kamajor can be roughly categorised into three groups. Certainly, these may overlap at times or intersect with the experiences of other community members.

First, the *co-opted beneficiaries* are higher status Kamajor with influential networks and patron–client relations – what Utas (2012) frames as "bigmanity" – who have capitalised on recent land deals or even enabled those in the first place. These Kamajor have a land-holding family background, feel rewarded appropriately after the war, and have benefitted directly from contemporary land investments in their positions as sub-chiefs, police officers, local politicians, or permanent company employees to name but a few possibilities. It is in their interest to maintain the status quo, and hence further territorialise the chiefdom, namely by suppressing critical voices or setting up speed bumps in a figurative sense.

In sharp contrast to the former stands, second, the *aggrieved precariat*, whose lives have been severely interrupted since the arrival of the companies. These include rather

young Kamajor in their thirties and forties with lacking networks and/or who resumed subsistence farming in the wake of war. Many tended to see the militia as a means to fight the customary authorities, but feel ever more excluded today and perceive peace as an “economic war” without future prospects (Käihkö, 2017: 66). Large-scale land deals offer few or no provisions for these Kamajor, which is being further exaggerated by rural class tensions (Hennings, 2018a). Instead of benefitting from land lease promises, the majority of these Kamajor lost their farm plots, are forced to work for the company as low-paid temporary workers, or as job opportunities evaporated after the preparation phase had no choice but to migrate elsewhere at high social cost to make a living. Excluded from decision-making processes, post-war rewards, and rural development, this group – along with non-combatant youths from land-using families – feels sold out for the sake of elders’ profit. It is important to note that youth is less a question of actual age than socio-economic status in Sierra Leone. Essentially, men are labelled as “youth” up to their fifties, until their fathers and uncles eventually hand over power (see also, Millar, 2016: 578). I show elsewhere how young men in particular are harassed, arrested, and intimidated in the controlled spaces of plantations and mining operations and that especially those with a Kamajor background are closely monitored (Hennings, 2018a: 537). Having said that, the aggrieved precariat not only bears the brunt of the land deals but is also most likely to resist neo-liberal operations and the ruling elite.

Third, the smallest and most diverse group are the potential *game changers*, Kamajor who became relatively influential after the war. Introducing this group, I expand on Millar’s (2014) distinction between elites and non-elites in rural Sierra Leone. The game changers ranges from higher status to mid-ranking well-educated Kamajor with land-owning family backgrounds and influential networks. Many of them lost their war rewards either in consequence of critically addressing the issue of land grabbing or by refusing to sign lease agreements in their positions as family heads of land-holding lineages or sub-chiefs. While most game changers benefitted or even were co-opted at first, only few have been critical towards the negative externalities of the investments from the outset. They tend to take the lifetime initiation and responsibility to take care of their communities seriously, namely through actively engaging in community life or founding CSOs to further rural development, save the environment, or enhance peace. As such, game changers have publicly drawn parallels between the associated grievances of contemporary large-scale land deals and the unfair distribution of development before the war (interviews Bo, 7 April 2017; Pendembu, 17 May 2018). They try to balance the widening gap between the chieftaincy and the co-opted beneficiaries on the one side and the aggrieved precariat including Kamajor and non-combatants on the other. In so doing, they collaborate with the governing elite to maintain their status and networks, which they see as an essential strategy to making a change. Yet, this increases uncertainty and despair on the side of the aggrieved precariat who the game changers can only support covertly.

Reassembling Forces in Land Deal Contestations

As shown, the Kamajor relate differently to (post-)wartimes and experience the impact of neo-liberal development projects in varying ways. I will highlight how this affects

their agency and how they and deploy their capabilities accordingly. Departing from the severe deprivation of their communities and/or their own families, my findings suggest that some Kamajor increasingly oppose contemporary modes of neo-liberal development and criticise the chieftaincy for withholding benefits. This is a delicate matter, as ex-combatants are closely observed by society and authorities in particular regardless of how well integrated they are (Hennings, 2018b). As such, they walk a tight rope by taking part in public protests or other forms of contestation. In the following, I illustrate how their opposition to exploitative land leases unfolds and, like the potholes on the edge of the road, emerges almost unnoticed. Specifically, I outline how potential game changers skilfully draw on their wartime networks and standing to back up activists and community members and highlight the struggle of the aggrieved precariat.

Agents of Peace: The Power of Ex-Combatant-Run CSOs

Many communities involved in contested land deals turn to CSOs in southern Sierra Leone that are run by Kamajor or ex-SLA soldiers for protection, material support, and legal advice. These game changers feel called upon to monitor and prevent corruption and unequal development and tend to rely more on the protector image part of the Kamajor identity to make their way in the present. In the absence of state recognition, being a protector can furthermore be seen as a strategy of ex-combatants to "create, negotiate and maintain a masculine identity" (Barrett, 1996: 131). This role, moreover, has been seen by many Sierra Leoneans as a way to make amends for war atrocities.

> They killed. But people forgave them. They [the ex-combatants] have to prove that they are sorry. Organising civil society is one way to give back. Most of them have skills and knowledge. [. . .] Some paramount chiefs don't care for their people. Some need to be reminded why they were elected. So, some Kamajor became very strong civil society members. (Interview with Abu Brima, Director of the Network Movement for Justice & Development, Freetown, 4 May 2017)

Besides such altruistic reconciliatory reasons, founding an NGO in the aftermath of war additionally provided a good income opportunity for well-respected and higher status Kamajor, many of them trained teachers. In the late war landscape, some of them used the power of bullets and banners simultaneously, being labelled "revolutionaries" in the army or militias. Hassan, an influential former CDF battalion commander and director of the Peace and Reconciliation Movement in Bo today, illustrated how CDF and SLA members came together to advocate for peace and non-violence as early as 1995: "We gave leaflets with messages to drivers who gave them out to the rebels when they were stopped on the way. That's how we started" (interview, Bo, 7 April 2017).

Twenty years on, when investors came to Hassan's chiefdom of origin in Pujehun District, he organised a delegation of former combatants-now-turned-activists to sensitise the communities about the downsides of commercial land leases. The communities and authorities highly trust and respect Hassan's and his comrades' Kamajor and family background, and eventually the company had to leave before a nursery could be set up. Another well-respected senior CDF commander became an influential radio station

manager in rural Kailahun, where the war initially spilled over from Liberia. Although his area is not directly affected (yet), he critically follows the impact of commercial land deals and related issues of patronage and exploitation. Dedicated to civic education today, he discusses human and land rights or roles and responsibilities of paramount chiefs in his popular broadcasts sensitising communities and raising awareness on challenges related to land leases and land tenure in general. Both Hassan and the radio station manager use their social networks that emerged in wartime and expanded ever since to mobilise around community issues. Their long-standing experience and dedication to advocacy politics, extended horizontal and vertical networks, and the high level of trust community members place in them make them ideal game changers in contested land deals today. Frequent community requests to solve land conflicts and other disputes have largely reframed their post-war identity. This has nurtured their sense of responsibility, even if that was not their main motivation to join the militia in the first place (Maringira, 2015: 78).

In one of the most prominent and contested land deals, the community turned to a former SLA battlefield commander and close Kamajor ally and his local NGO. Emmanuel used to be a teacher before the war, has a chief-house background, and was captured by the Kamajor in 1999 to train them on warfare. He used to emphasise:

I'm a chief. I'm from this district, I have worked for the district, I fought for the district! They know Director Fawundu everywhere in the district. I protect them. I talk on behalf of them. I can call people from as far as Gabunde and they would come.

Due to his family background and role during the war – embodied in bullet wound scars and tattoos indicating his social status – he is able not only to rely on a wide network, including former CDF and SLA fighters, but also has access to customary authorities and officials who tend to fear him. Even when NGOs were officially banned from entering the chiefdom where the contested plantation was located, he could support activists and aggrieved residents on-site. Subject to the availability of funding, his NGO's activities range from household surveys on the impact of plantation and mining operations to mediation in political stalemates such as strikes, providing a safe space for activists and association members to meet, initial advice to affected communities and authorities, communicating emerging grievances to more influential NGOs and donors in Freetown, and, most important, informal backroom diplomacy with local politicians and customary authorities. While Emmanuel is without doubt dedicated to the communities' struggles, he sees his NGO work also as a crucial step towards becoming the next paramount chief in his home chiefdom.

These examples illustrate how ex-combatant-run CSOs draw on their networks and attributed power to support aggrieved communities. In so doing, they do not question or disrespect customary authorities but quietly outmanoeuvre the local elites who, along with the companies, capitalise at the expense of the communities. Given their reciprocal relationship, these lines of flight – the fading trust of the game changers in customary authorities – should not be underestimated. Nonetheless, I argue that the Kamajor's formal civil society commitment goes hand in hand with two major shortcomings. First, Kamajor in these positions usually have a land-owning family background and thus tend to represent the minority interests of land holders. Second, with few exceptions, their

interest in supporting aggrieved communities is limited to their chiefdom(s) of origin or neighbouring chiefdoms, if that. My findings also suggest that the peacetime identity of the Kamajor is not at odds but rather blends with individual aspirations.

The Aggrieved Kamajor's Predicament: Post-War Mistrust and Broken Confidence

A different picture unfolds for aggrieved low-status Kamajor who lack influential networks and have only limited opportunities to voice their grievances. Facing severe economic deprivation, political exclusion, surveillance, and repression, the rather quiet response of the aggrieved precariat is not surprising. The close collaboration of companies, paramount chiefs, and the police creates fear in the communities and sends a clear signal to all who object to exclusive and exploitative land lease practices. At times, however, individual Kamajor of this group might join protest marches in solidarity, attend community meetings, get together covertly with like-minded fellows at motorbike workshops, or – like in the controversial Socfin case of 2016 – help collect money to bail out activists. I contend that these Kamajor face two major constraints, and thus take a somewhat hidden and covert approach.

First, time and again various Kamajor pointed out how the Special Court proceedings (2002–2013) meant a serious setback to their self-confidence:

> The Special Court killed the spirit! You can't treat people who were sacrificing their life for their people in that manner. The Kamajor thought whatever they have done, they have sacrificed, is not appreciated. They are afraid they will be betrayed again. It's also difficult to lead activism, because they would be accused of gathering again. (Interview with a senior CDF commander, Pendembu, 17 May 2018)

The deeply felt injustice that comparatively more leaders of the CDF than of any other armed group were tried has prevailed in the country's southern districts until today. This left a mark on the younger, lower ranking Kamajor in particular, who were never adequately rewarded in the aftermath of the war nor able to accumulate status or material gains from the land deals. The lack of state recognition – the CDF's ally, at that – reinforced their feeling of being neglected by their own elders.

Second, the chieftaincies highly mistrust younger aggrieved Kamajor and keep a close eye on their activities accordingly. They know it is easy for militia members to mobilise and regroup after most Kamajor returned to their communities of origin, with their bonds and hierarchy structures never fully disintegrated (Kilroy and Basini, 2018: 353). Fearing the mobilisation of male agency headed by battle-tested Kamajor, paramount chiefs and elders in highly contested land conflicts try to avert any Kamajor gatherings

> We don't want that. We don't want them to come together at all. You know, when those men come together, they talk about the war. We don't want any new war! (Interview with paramount chief, Malen Chiefdom, 18 March 2018)

Demobilised and "a passive organisation now," various high- and mid-ranking CDF members emphasised that the Kamajor's (trans-) chiefdom networks are still in place.

They meet regularly but secretly, ever more so with the increasing number of conflicts emerging around commercial land deals. The former CDF "director of war," Moinina Fofana, one of the first Kamajor initiates and Special Court convictee, added:

> We call and talk to each other. I mean we all know each other. We understand each other better than anyone else. [. . .] My comrades would support me if I am in trouble or need their help. (Interview, Bo, 12 May 2017)[5]

By contrast, aggrieved low-status Kamajor are mostly unable to reach out to those networks due to close monitoring in land lease conflict areas but also because of strong prevailing hierarchies within the Kamajor network. While Fofana and other commanders may support each other, they would not risk helping Kamajor outside of their own elitist peer group. Moreover, the leaders and the Kamajor foot soldiers interpret their identity differently and face varying challenges in contemporary Sierra Leone. As such, the rural Kamajor precariat forms alternative alliances mirroring rural class boundaries so as to resist persistent, exclusive patron–client networks and socio-economic deprivation. Instead of turning to Kamajor-run CSOs whom most do not feel sufficiently represented by, lower status Kamajor join – whenever possible – forces with other game changers, often their own commanders. Moreover, they act in concert with other youths without necessarily sharing collective interests or the same political views. These collaborations are rather born out of necessity and driven by a "what's in for me" point of view (see also Fligstein and McAdam, 2012: 51).

In Makpele Chiefdom, for example, precarious Kamajor and youth who make a living off artisanal gold and diamond mining pooled their strength to resist a certain diamond investment. Led by Amara, a mid-ranking, highly respected Kamajor, they went to the exploration site and expressed their discontent. The company workers, in turn, recognised the Kamajor among them immediately and left quickly after a short scuffle. Eventually, the company withdrew even though the diamond deposits were promising.

Together, precarious Kamajor and youths tend to be fearless and do not shy away from physical confrontation. In Sierra Leone, these remaining fault lines of violence (Harris, 2006) are not limited to the actions of ex-combatants but also extend to the next generation that grew up in the midst of violent conflict with the ethos of the Kamajor. As Hawes (2015: 33) argues, political memories and trauma are inscribed in individual and collective bodies and hence experienced across generations. Following the Mende tradition of namesakes, many boys were named after militia fighters and so later, like the mining-manager Amara, these warriors became key figures in their schooling. In so doing, the legacy of the Kamajor as community protectors and warrior-heroes became embedded in local storytelling and hence shifted the Kamajor's identity retrospectively. This reverberated especially back into the lives of the less recognised aggrieved precariat.

In sum, the disproportionate emphasis on CDF leaders in the Special Court proceedings together with suspicious customary authorities including co-opted Kamajor beneficiaries have weakened the aggrieved precariat's contestation efforts and thwarted closer collaboration with more influential game changers. Growing cooperation with same-class youths indicates the emergence of potentially strong lines of flight, however.

What is more, it suggests that low-status Kamajor remobilise but do not reassemble as a group, in the sense of reactivating a dormant organisation.

Mind the Gap! Emerging Challenges for Rural Peace

Sierra Leone's post-war economic development path has perpetuated the chieftaincy monopoly, limited social mobility, and thus given rise to pre-war grievances sparking resentment among ex-combatants and youths in particular. Especially, paramount chiefs misuse their position as custodians of the land and agents of development to secure their power and enrich themselves. Peter and Richards even compared related violent outbreaks with "scenes from the civil war" (2011: 392). Multiple interlocutors have expressed concerns about the emerging intra-community cleavages, increasing levels of violence, and escalating confrontations with the police.

People are so frustrated! Sometimes, I get scared. People talk with so much passion and emotions! They say "This land is the only thing we had since the war! We fought for our survival on our own. If anyone takes it from us we have no other option but to fight!" People think the government doesn't consider them. If we aren't careful, we'll see people killing for land again in the provinces. I'm not talking about war. People have had very nasty experiences of fighting. In some cases, they have never seen the lease agreement. They nearly beat up their paramount chief in Bari! When the news broke, the paramount chief had to run! (interview with ALLAT coordinator, Freetown, 10 March 2017).

Frustration about exclusive land deals has frequently turned into violence against paramount chiefs. In Lower Banta, which is part of a rutile concession, the paramount chief was forced to move to the neighbouring chiefdom after his house – which he built with misappropriated community funds – was burned down by youths including low-status Kamajor. Elders as well as town and section chiefs, among them higher ranking Kamajor, even submitted a chiefdom case to withdraw his mandate. Even though there is a tendency in Sierra Leone to exaggerate the actual conflict potential, the country's approach to preventing the recurrence of large-scale violence, increasing discontent, and dissatisfaction with customary authorities suggests that contemporary commercial land leases nevertheless entail major risks for community coherence and conflict transformation.

The increasing alienation between the chieftaincy and the Kamajor in particular, combined with mounting repression, has resulted in two major lines of flight: namely, the waning trust of both game changers and the aggrieved precariat in the chieftaincy alongside the emergence of low-status Kamajor and non-combatant youth alliances. Both of these forces of contestation challenge the status quo and involve the strategic redeployment of wartime identities. This underlines that membership of a fighting faction stays a contingent part of their identity as the Kamajor navigate the present. Vice versa, affected community members seek help from game changers because "they used to carry arms" – which is, in the case of the militia fighters, still linked to images of their extraordinary strength and courage. In this vein, the Kamajor protector ethos has been significantly restrengthened and incorporated by the game changers. Declining trust suggests the Kamajor's estrangement from the chieftaincy and co-opted (fellow) beneficiaries. Turning away from exploitative chiefs and elders, a rather novel configuration of local resistance

emerges that draws on wartime networks but likewise creates new alliances of which the aggrieved precariat or game changers are only one part. Moreover, the contesting Kamajor may follow different agendas, depending on their post-war identity and status. These range from resentment to aspirations to qualify for future positions in the chieftaincy, protect the communities from injustice, or secure their own livelihoods.

Besides, the Kamajor's historical experience plays into their decision to engage in contesting exclusive land deals and their choice of means. For now, it seems the legacy of the Special Court and the Kamajor's prevailing complex bonds to the chieftaincy along with recent identity shifts, war fatigue, and the strategic advantages of non-violent resistance in terms of (international) funding and legitimacy trump the "guns in their minds" (Hoffman, 2011: 39). Whether some Kamajor living under precarious conditions will eventually mobilise to fight alongside aggrieved youths is another question entirely. Ultimately, violent means "may be a civil duty [. . .] to make it impossible for 'business as usual' to continue" (Eliasoph, 2011: 229).

Especially young men not only have different expectations from land leases, but also follow their own ways of engaging with the state, chieftaincy, and corporate power (see also, Hall et al., 2015: 482–483). It is relatively easy to reconfigure and (re)mobilise aggrieved youths around the trajectory of the Kamajor that traces back to images of the *kamajoisia*; "revolutionary youth culture, legacies of mercenary labour, and masculine responsibility" (Hoffman, 2011: 71). In addition, the younger generation lacks the experience of war and awareness of the costs of taking up arms and thus might be more inclined to be confrontational. History might repeat itself here, albeit with one important difference: loyal bonds to the chieftaincy might not be an inherent part of the local resistance movement's identity. If growing inequality, nepotism, and exclusion are not addressed soon, it might pave the way for stronger lines of flight that break away from state *and* chieftaincy rule. In so doing, resistance might expand across chiefdom boundaries and spawn into a nationwide movement. After all, the idea of militias is not limited to the Mende. Once the repercussion of these forces of change, be it in the sense of banners or bullets, can no longer be anticipated or controlled by the authorities, then rebelliousness will have turned into a new war machine.

Conclusion

Embedded in the land deal, agrarian transformation, and conflict transformation literature, this article takes a closer look at the impact of commercial land deals on post-war stability and risks for reoccurring violence in Sierra Leone. Specifically, I have probed the repercussions of land deals for the Kamajor militia fighters in the south of the country as well as their responses thereto. While the Kamajor have never been a homogenous group, I have highlighted the diversity of post-war identities and how these determine expectations vis-à-vis land deals and rural development.

The growing gap between co-opted beneficiaries as well as potential game changers and the precariously placed Kamajor thwarts the re-emergence of the Kamajor militia, in the sense of reactivating a dormant organisation. Instead, a novel configuration of localised rural resistance against injustice is emerging in the wake of exclusive and exploitative land deals. These movements might draw on the protector ethos of the

Kamajor that experiences a revival. Yet, I have shown that despite resemblances to key pre-war grievances, diminishing trust in the chieftaincy, and occasional violent outbreaks, the emergence of large-scale violence is still unlikely for now due to prevailing complex Kamajor–chieftaincy relationships, highly territorialised chiefdoms, and the moral setback from the Special Court proceedings.

Conceptually, I propose a refinement of contentious politics that looks beyond mobilisation and collective action but focuses on novel relational configurations, such as the importance of dissolving trust and loyalty. The war machine has proved to be an interesting angle that contrasts the readings of conventional social movement theories and war studies, which struggle to capture contesting forces that collide and intersect and yet contribute to the transforming of the status quo.

The empirical findings from this study offer several contributions to the current literature on Sierra Leone's post-war legacies and development pathway. First, I show that militia fighters look to each other for support but also draw just as much on wider networks and patrons in their search for economic survival. As a matter of fact, in the case of the Kamajor close networks with fellow fighters do not necessarily translate into higher risks of a new war.

Second, and in line with other authors, my findings underline that DDR programmes need to address the long-term needs of ex-combatants who continue to live in unequal societies. In this vein, future research needs to explore in more detail what happens when the post-war social contract unravels beyond events occurring in the national political arena. Third, this analysis proves useful for expanding our understanding of the challenges that post-war militia fighters face in contemporary Sierra Leone, as most scholars have hitherto focused on RUF fighters in urban areas. Fourth, this article has contributed to filling the knowledge gap on the interplay of agrarian transformation and the response of ex-combatants to modernisation and neo-liberal development politics. While many post-war development agendas tend to justify commercial land deals, I argue in line with critics of the liberal peace approach for the need to rethink and stop advertising large-scale investments in the agricultural and natural resource sectors as a silver bullet. In so doing, social and environmental justice must be considered key in peacebuilding efforts – instead of economic growth based on uneven development.

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Notes

1. Long the argument of impoverished urban youth who lacked any source of social advancement, with the availability of lootable diamonds and timber stocks prevailed (Abdullah, 1997).
2. Kamajor were initiated for life, which is why I don't speak of "ex-Kamajor" but of the former Civil Defense Force.
3. Patron–client relations constitute a connection of mutual reciprocity. In West Africa, independence is rather seen as dangerous, which is why a person situates herself in relation to other, more powerful persons (see also, Millar, 2014: 112).
4. About half of the chieftaincies (149 in total) were vacant after the war.
5. Their extraordinary strong bond can be traced back to the Kamajor's initiation rites and the immunisation of their fighters to the bullets of the enemy in particular. Combined with the secrecy surrounding these initiation rites, Kamajor are still ascribed extraordinary powers to this day (Hoffman, 2011: 242).

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Die ambivalente Rolle von Ex-Kombattanten im Widerstand gegen Landinvestitionen in Sierra Leone

Zusammenfassung

Kommerzielle Landinvestitionen stellen insbesondere für Nachkriegsgesellschaften unvorhersehbare Risiken dar und setzen diese den Verwerfungen der Weltwirtschaft aus. In Sierra Leone tragen Plantagen- und Bergbauprojekte zur Perpetuierung der Macht lokaler Eliten bei, erschweren zunehmend die soziale Mobilität und führen insbesondere bei Jugendlichen und Ex-Kombattanten zu Frustration. Unter Bezugnahme auf das Konzept der *war machine* analysiere ich, wie die Kamajor-Milizionäre den Widerstand gegen kommerzielle Landinvestitionen im südlichen Sierra Leone mitgestalten. Zudem untersuche ich, inwiefern umkämpfte Landinvestitionen zur Remobilisierung von Ex-Kombattanten beitragen und Konflikttransformationsprozesse beeinflussen können. Die Ergebnisse basieren auf umfassender ethnographischer Feldforschung und zeigen einerseits, dass sich benachteiligte Gemeinden bevorzugt an die von Kamajor geführten zivilgesellschaftlichen Organisationen wenden, um Unterstützung zu erhalten. Andererseits scheuen insbesondere unter prekären Bedingungen lebende Kamajor, die von den Vorzügen der Landinvestitionen weitgehend ausgeschlossen sind, vor offenen Auseinandersetzungen zurück. Ich argumentiere, dass obwohl die historisch engen Beziehungen zwischen den Kamajor und den

lokalen Chiefs im Rahmen der kommerziellen Landpachtverträge erodieren, komplexe Klientelnetzwerke in Verbindung mit der erfahrenen Demütigung im Sondergerichtsverfahren und die zunehmende Überwachung offenere Widerstandsformen verhindern. Dennoch bleibt die (indirekte) Unterstützung der Kamajor zentral für den Kampf der Antiplantagen- und Bergbauaktivisten und -aktivistinnen.

Schlagwörter
Sierra Leone, Konflikttransformation, liberaler Frieden, Remobilisierung, Nachkriegsidentitäten