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Irrational Actors and The Process of Brutalisation: Understanding Atrocity In The Sierra Leonean Conflict (1991-2002)

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In the 1990s, vivid accounts of atrocities committed by Sierra Leone's drug-fuelled child soldiers contributed to the portrayal of so-called 'resource wars' as some violent descent into a primordial anarchy. The academic rebuttal which inevitably followed stressed, by contrast, the very ordered nature of civil conflict, placing the rational-actor at the centre of supposedly 'irrational' violence. This paper nevertheless finds the rational-actor argument inadequate for explaining the most seemingly senseless acts of atrocity and calls for greater focus on expressive and psychological micro-foundations of violence in the study of civil wars.

The perpetration of atrocities in conflicts, especially in an African context, has received particular focus within international media coverage which has struggled to understand the causes of these seemingly 'bizarre' and indiscriminate acts. Perhaps due to this high profile, such violence has also been the site for competing explanations of conflict as a whole, some of which have seen the brutality and scale of these acts as indicative of an inherently 'anarchic' and violence-prone society. This flawed analysis has frequently advocated a *cordon-sanitaire* policy of action, which rather than addressing the root causes of conflict and its associated violence has risked allowing them to take an even deeper hold. An accurate examination of atrocities and extreme violence is therefore crucial to an understanding of the wider conflict dynamics which frame them, and by extension, any policy prescriptions which may follow.

This paper focuses on the civil war which took place in Sierra Leone between 1991 and 2002. The principal reason for focussing on Sierra Leonean is that this conflict involved widespread and highly publicised atrocities, and as such became the central case study upon which many arguments concerning the motives for such violence were based. This is not to say that the violence witnessed in Sierra Leone was unique to this conflict, nor to the wider African continent. Indeed, precedents for these forms of horrific violence are found throughout history and across cultures. An early

instance of mass amputations in Africa, for example, came under the brutal reign of King Leopold II in nineteenth century Belgian Congo. In Columbia, during the period known as *La Violencia* between 1948-58, an horrific array of brutal mutilations similar to those of Sierra Leone were witnessed, including the often cited cutting open of pregnant women with machetes. Another marked characteristic of Sierra Leone's violence - the use of child soldiers – has precedents as far back as ancient Sparta and fourteenth century Ottoman Empire. In the twentieth century, conflicts in Kampuchea and Mozambique saw children forcibly conscripted into the heart of violence, whilst as the war began to unfold in Sierra Leone in the 1990s, acts of atrocity against unarmed civilians were being perpetrated in the Balkans following the break up of Yugoslavia. These examples caution against demeaning descriptions of culturally specific savagery and African 'hearts of darkness'; notions which have permeated much of the analysis of the violence of the Sierra Leone civil war to the detriment of our understanding.

In dealing with 'atrocity', it is important to note the legal and moral values often associated with this concept. The term has a legal quality in its use in public prosecutions of war criminals; an atrocity is deemed to be an act that contravenes codes of conduct in war or society more generally. In popular usage in media accounts, atrocity carries with it condemnation of the act referred to. The atrociousness of these acts is often deemed to be their particular cruelty.[1] Cruelty itself may be a subjective term, affected by certain biases with regards to notions of sophisticated killing versus unsophisticated killing, impersonal versus personal violence, and as Paul Richard's has noted, 'cheap' versus 'expensive' violence.[2] Nevertheless, whether an act is labelled an atrocity appears strongly dependent upon intent, and it would seem, intent to inflict suffering upon victims. The notion of 'extreme' violence also suggests there can be proportionate or acceptable degrees of violence within conflict; atrocities are those acts which exceed these levels and are hence noted for their exceptional 'brutality' and 'barbarity.' What is acceptable and proportionate violence is strongly connected to the identity of the victim, perceived innocence or otherwise of victims. The term 'civilian' brings with it an assumption of innocence to outsiders which is clearly often not shared by those perpetrating violence. Furthermore, the distinction between civilian and combatant can itself be very problematic. In the Sierra Leone civil war, the blurring of lines between soldiers and rebels resulted in the widely used term 'sobel'; the line between combatants and civilians was equally ambiguous at times. Civilians were often viewed by combatants as collaborators, sympathisers, and in many instances, had indeed been previously involved in violence or would

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[1] See Kalyvas *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* pp53-54
[2] Richards *Fighting for the Rainforest* p*xx*.

later become active combatants. Whilst the victim of atrocity is most commonly associated with the innocent civilian, there are instances in conflict where combatants are also victim to atrocity. In Sierra Leone, direct confrontations between armed factions were rare and often intentionally avoided, yet on occasions where combatants of opposing factions were captured, torture, rape, mutilation and many other acts of extreme violence were frequently committed against them. The term 'atrocity' is used here to refer to acts of extreme violence which constitute the deliberate infliction of cruel physical harm on groups or individuals. Cruelty itself may be a subjective term, but is understood here as the deliberate infliction of pain and suffering as an end. The term 'atrocity' does not indicate the irrationality of such action or otherwise, nor does it reflect its scale or the identity of victims involved. However, the focus in this paper will lie upon acts of violence committed against civilians, since the impression of the victim as 'innocent' has often served to reinforce the perception of such violence as being especially 'barbaric'.[1]

First, the evolution of the debate surrounding the Sierra Leonean conflict is discussed, highlighting the contest between neo-Malthusian arguments and rational choice theory. Throughout the literature on this subject there is a fundamental failure to capture the true nature of many atrocities. The neo-Malthusian thesis, typified by Robert Kaplan's approach, is overly reductive in seeing the whole conflict as an inevitable and inherent chaos, whereas rational choice arguments, such as those made by Paul Richards, David Keen and Paul Collier, add too much strategic deliberation to violence which was often far from rational.

Hence the second section moves on to consider the amended position of David Keen, who in answer to the problems and criticisms of his 'functional' approach, looks beyond the rational actor framework. Discussion of the merits of his application of shame-related psychological explanations for some of the particularly brutal instances of violence highlight that the introduction of psychological analysis and the focus on emotional violence represent a much needed step in the right direction. Nevertheless, Keen's treatment displays the same reluctance as previous literature to recognise seemingly irrational forms of violence which cannot be understood either as strategically informed or as motivated through a fear of shame. Although Keen does discuss the notion of 'shamelessness' and the role of a 'shame-free zone', it is argued that this strand of Keen's approach is far more significant than is made clear.

Accordingly in the third section focus is given to the particularly brutal forms of violence which do

not readily fall into either a rational actor framework or Keen's shame approach, showing how the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) established and perpetuated a brutalising process whereby children were divorced from civilian society and its moral codes, thus becoming inured to violence. In this context attention is given predominantly to rebel atrocities, although it is clear that young combatants were employed by all sides and that abuses were not solely limited to the RUF, particularly given the blurred division between 'sides' and the frequent collusion of combatants. Nevertheless, as we shall see, it was the RUF who specifically instituted this process, with the result that young combatants were responsible for truly brutal atrocities which were in no sense motivated by rational strategy or shame, but were essentially the result of systematic brutalisation. Avoiding the reductive conclusions of New Barbarism, the agency of older combatants and leaders in manipulating this 'mindless' violence for their own rational ends will be examined.[2] This recognises how rational actors have actively manipulated irrational violence within the conflict. The implications of this understanding extend not only to the possible success of long term stability in Sierra Leone, but also to the wider stability of the West African region.

Approaches to Violence: From Anarchy to Order

With the onset of violence in the Balkans, United Nations involvement in the Gulf conflict, and civil wars breaking out across the African continent, many analysts sought to describe violence in the early 1990s as symptomatic of a 'new' kind of conflict which would increasingly hold prominence in the post-Cold War environment.[3] A number of what Stathis Kalyvas has referred to as 'bestselling lay-journalists' promoted a neo-Malthusian school of thought, labelled 'New Barbarism' by it's detractors, which used graphic accounts of violence in Liberia, Sierra Leone and the Balkans to argue that such conflicts could not be understood as conventional battles between armed forces for political or ideological supremacy, but as chaotic and inevitable eruptions of criminal violence caused by the release of ecological pressures and ancient hatreds.[4] This violence, it was argued, had a 'new and terrifying slant'; these were now 'wars *about nothing at all*', because as Hans Magnus Enzensberger argued, 'violence has been freed from ideology.'[5] In his influential 1994 article 'The Coming Anarchy', journalist Robert Kaplan saw Sierra Leone as the archetype of a country suffering social breakdown under the stresses of a 'surging' population competing for scarce resources.[6] The notion that Sierra Leone was reverting to a primitive state of lawless banditry was fed by nightmarish media reports of 'savage' atrocities and 'mindless' slaughter, perpetrated by diamond-seeking drug-addled child soldiers wielding machetes and machine guns.

If New Barbarism worked well in describing the horrific nature of atrocities, it was in reality a deeply inadequate explanation of their cause and their context in the wider processes of conflict. Indeed in many respects, New Barbarism had substituted an explanation for anarchic violence with a mere description of anarchic violence. The neo-Malthusian theories, and those which generally cited the conflict in Sierra Leone as evidencing a new kind of war, naturally therefore provoked a series of strong rebuttals in the academic community. In 1996 British anthropologist Paul Richards published *Fighting For the Rainforest* with the expressed purpose of countering New Barbarism. Richards emphasised the rationality of conflict, rather than its apparently anarchic nature, pointing to the role of long-term socio-political neglect fostered by a declining patrimonial system of governance in causing grievances among the rural population, particularly youth. Extreme violence, under this understanding, could be seen as a rational response stemming from this socio-political discontent. Richards therefore argued that behind the 'savage series of incidents lay, in fact, a set of simple strategic calculations'; for example, amputations were used as a terror tactic to deter voting in elections considered politically unfavourable to the RUF.[7] Beyond the strategic use of violence, atrocities could also be understood as part of a 'dramaturgical' expression of deep seated anger and grievance.[8] This dramaturgy included, according to Richards, the exaction of particularly brutal violence as part of combatant's determination to assert their own existence and significance on Sierra Leonean society, and indeed the wider world.[9] Far from being anarchic, Richards saw atrocities as being 'devilishly well-calculated.'[10]

A second incarnation of Rational Actor analysis came in a large body of literature which examined the political economy of war. Proponents such as Mark Duffield, William Reno, and David Keen stressed the importance of conflict as an alternative system to inequitable peacetime society, both economically, socially and politically, emphasising that far from representing a breakdown or a collapse, conflict involved the establishment or refinement of processes which were to the benefit of certain actors.[11] Violence in Sierra Leone, in this understanding, not only served political purposes, but served the individual machinations of those seeking to gain access to economic resources, achieve greater social standing or simply to gratify psychological and emotional needs such as a desire for a sense of physical security or adventure. The functions of brutal violence, therefore, were key to understanding why and how atrocities occurred. Related to this approach, though in many respects having more in common with New Barbarism, was a movement by economists such as Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler that focused upon 'greed' motives in the Sierra Leone conflict, increasingly referred to as a 'resource war' linked to 'blood diamonds.'[12] Using econometric

analysis, Collier in particular argued that the conflict became for many an end in itself, with violence being the tool by which the profitable criminal enterprise of war was executed and sustained. For Collier, political grievances and other functions of violence were largely secondary, if indeed present at all, to the overall driving force of material greed inherent in the warring parties. Atrocities under this understanding were therefore either part of economic strategy intended to facilitate trade and resource extraction, or were merely symptomatic of the irrelevance of popular support to apolitical criminal gangs. Considerable academic debate emerged pitting greed versus grievance explanations of conflict, which many commentators noted represented a false dichotomy between economic and socio-political incentives for violence. Nevertheless, whether viewing conflict as grievance inspired, greed inspired or a broad collective of interrelated political, social and economic factors, the rational-actor approaches commonly explained violent atrocities as functional calculations of rational strategy.

The Rational Actor approach to understanding Sierra Leone's conflict, though invaluable in countering the anarchy argument of New Barbarism, was nevertheless flawed in its overemphasis on the functionality of violence. For some, Richards' focus on political grievances as motives for brutal violence risked giving undue justification for atrocities, whilst for others the very idea of 'rational violence' betrayed conceptual incoherence and a failure to appreciate the truly barbaric nature of much of the conflict's violence.[13] Economic greed also offered little explanation for acts of atrocity which gained no material benefit for the perpetrators and appeared to stem more from violent behavioural proclivities than rational strategic calculations. In the following examples, political grievances or economic greed are poor explanations for brutal violence:

> They send the children into the fire – two or three years old, girls and boys. They see belly woman [a pregnant woman] who have baby. They want say is it boy child, or is it a girl child? They cut open. They make everybody for clap and laugh. I don't know why they do that for.[14]

> My commander captured a girl with her [baby] sister and her mother. He shot the mother and the little baby dead. He left the adolescent girl alive but told her to remove her dress and he raped her . . . we all had to watch.[15]

The failure of Rational Actor approaches to adequately explain these forms of violence reflects an overall reluctance to engage with instances of atrocity which in a very real sense appeared chaotic and irrational. Although witnesses and victims might be regarded as overly reductive in viewing

such violence as the result of 'wickedness' or crazed minds, these acts are equally misrepresented as the outworking of political strategy, economic agendas or functionalism. This problem is reflected in Thandika Mkandawire's criticism of Keen's use of the phrase 'a particularly rational kind of madness', which he condemns as an 'oxymoronic...misuse' of 'the idea of irrationality.'[16] To describe especially barbaric, politically self-defeating and often impulsive atrocities as betraying a 'rational' madness is to ignore the wealth of evidence to the contrary; that these acts were by their very nature the result of a lack of strategy and political calculation. To truly counteract the New Barbarism thesis it is therefore necessary to move beyond the Rational Actor rubric, placing Sierra Leone's atrocities within the very comprehensible and often ordered system of the conflict but without distorting their often chaotic nature.

Beyond the Rational Actor Framework: The Shame and Shamelessness Argument

In August 2002, David Keen wrote:

> The anger and fear manifest in the extreme violence in Sierra Leone could not easily be
> incorporated and explained within a 'rational violence' framework that conceptualises
> individuals as calmly deciding between alternatives on the basis of their self-interest.[17]

In Keen's previous treatment of the conflict there had in fact been an implicit acknowledgement of the role of emotional violence in his discussion of the various psychological functions that war performed for combatants, including an analysis of the role of the 'sensation of power' and the 'reversal of relationships of dominance and humiliation.'[18] In this respect Keen asserts that 'irrationality', or 'violence for its own sake', always had a 'back-window' through which it could enter.[19] Nevertheless, the Rational Actor framework has invariably focused on political and economic dynamics driving conflict in Sierra Leone, reflecting its greater focus on strategy and calculation as opposed to the less articulated factors of emotion and psychology.[20] Seeking to redress the balance, therefore, Keen fully elaborates his amended position in his 2005 book *Conflict and Collusion In Sierra Leone*, building upon ideas sketched out in 2002. Of key importance is his introduction of the ideas of psychiatrist James Gilligan who, in researching the behaviour of US prisoners, sees a deeply ingrained fear of humiliation and shame within violent actors as the prime origin of their often self-defeating and self-destructive behaviour.[21] With an acute sensitivity to shame fostered by past experiences of humiliation, Gilligan argues that violent actors seek to physically eliminate the perceived source of the threat of shame, often focusing on associated body

parts such as 'eyes that look' and 'tongues that laugh.'[22] Keen applies this psychological theory of violence to Sierra Leone by highlighting conditions present in both peacetime and conflict that nurtured feelings and fear of humiliation and shame in violent actors. This argument, referred to here as the 'Shame and Shamelessness' approach, is based on two main elements: violence facilitated by a shameless environment, and violence arising from the threat of shame.[23]

The shameless environment Keen identifies comes in the form of the rebel world, which established a 'perverse universe' in which moral codes were reversed and combatants acted with complete impunity.[24] Through a system of reward and punishment, Keen argues, 'a child learns what *is* good and bad behaviour.'[25] In the cut-off rebel world, young recruits were rewarded for demonstrating brutality, punished for any reluctance to commit violence, and as a result learned violence as a virtue. Further facilitating this brutalising process were drugs, given to combatants to provide courage for the performance of brutal violence and to sooth consciences in the aftermath.[26] Drugs also provided an avenue of escape from shame by shifting individual responsibility and moral agency to their maddening effect. The 'madness' and chaos of war itself also provided an external force to which combatants could off-load the responsibility for their brutal behaviour.[27]

Interacting with the enclosed world of Shamelessness in Keen's framework is the 'ever-present threat of shame.'[28] Keen argues that the shame associated with committing atrocities against civilians could be avoided or reduced through a dehumanization of victims.[29] Once the lives of civilians were devalued, the perpetuation of further physical abuses became inevitable. In this way, violence in itself became 'a brutalising process.'[30] The fear of being shamed by civilians, Keen argues, also encouraged combatants to attempt to physically suppress any perceived source of condemnation or rejection. Following Gilligan's argument, this included the targeting of body parts associated with shaming for mutilation. The threat of shame could also be felt by combatants in displays of sympathy by civilians for victims of atrocities, or in signs of weakness such as crying.[31] These negative civilian reactions to violence, Keen argues, were often taken by fighters as a judgement on their actions and 'humanhood', feeding rebel's anger over being described as 'wicked animals' and 'devils'.[32] Finally, the threat of shame was also a useful tool for RUF commanders in seeking to deter desertion. By forcing recruits to attack and abuse members of their own family and community, Keen argues that commanders instilled fear in fighters that returning to their homes would expose them to shame for their actions and even retribution.[33] In this respect atrocities became an essential strategic component of the RUF's continued existence.

As a response to the limitations of the Rational Actor conceptualisation of violence, the Shame and Shamelessness argument makes significant progress. The focus on the creation and perpetuation of conditions which served to remove the shame and stigma from atrocities highlights the crucial role that emotions and psychological motives played in the Sierra Leone conflict. Keen's examination of the removal of shame brings much needed attention to the manner in which grievances over Sierra Leone's peacetime conditions fermented real anger and frustration, which was not exclusively channelled into rationally derived political strategies aimed at social transformation. By showing how emotions interacted with a conflict environment in which legal and moral imperatives were removed or reversed, Keen's thesis underlines the need to consider the war as a whole as a violence-facilitating process.[34] The recognition of the active creation of Shamelessness, particularly in the instance of the use of drugs by young combatants, shows how violence was often irrational or mindless, and yet purposefully encouraged and manipulated by commanders. This manipulation is also apparent in Keen's analysis of shame as a deterrent, with forced atrocities betraying commanders' rational strategy intended to reinforce combatants' membership and loyalty to the RUF. In the Shame strand of Keen's argument, the employment of Gilligan's ideas proves particularly instructive in regards to seemingly mindless atrocities which included bizarre humiliations of victims or forced clapping and laughter. In the example of the cutting open of a pregnant woman's womb to discover the sex of her unborn child, the witness states: 'They make everybody for clap and laugh. I don't know why they do that for.'[35] Using the insights of Shame and Shamelessness, however, this behaviour becomes less bizarre and inexplicable, more clearly understood as an attempt by combatants to coerce assent from civilians, betraying their sensitivity to condemnation and their demand for respect. In one of many examples of amputation, a fifteen year old victim describes how RUF soldiers targeted hands:

> They dragged us, they had us get down on our knees and put our arms on a concrete slab. They had others standing over us and holding us from behind. One rebel did all the cutting. A few had both hands cut off; others just one. And then they walked away. I couldn't even bury my arm. And now I don't think I'll ever find someone to marry me.[36]

In this instance, Richards' explanation of amputation as a strategy related to voting is made redundant by the victim's age. Instead, the logic of shame proves more significant; the permanently visible mutilation was seen as reducing the victim's chances of marriage, reflecting the social stigmatization felt by many amputees and the degree to which such violence was seen as a humiliation. In another example of shame-related violence, the testimony of a young teenager

highlights an attempt to reverse hierarchies through humiliation and to simultaneously coerce approval from witnesses:

> We decided to go to our grandfather's place, a chief. When we got there, the rebels came. My grandfather was killed by the rebels in front of the house. They put him in front of the house. They gathered his wives, and they shot him. They asked the wives to laugh.[37]

In interpreting such atrocities, previous analysis has invariably ignored the importance of the role of shame and humiliation in motivating the brutality of violence. For New Barbarism, this violence simply reflected the primordial depravity of human natures that had not been 'tranquillized' by an 'educational and cultural standard' derived from 'Western Enlightenment.'[38] Whilst Richards recognised a link between atrocities and grievances, this violence is misrepresented as 'well calculated' in the context of an overall strategy of political reversal. Keen's Shame and Shamelessness analysis makes sense, however, of particularly cruel violence that went beyond the requirements of rational strategies and appeared more strongly related to the emotional and psychological sensitivities of perpetrators. Rather than crudely dismissing this non-strategic violence as simply mindless, Keen shows just how important minds were in some of Sierra Leone's most brutal atrocities.

In attempting to move beyond a Rational Actor framework, Keen's Shame and Shamelessness thesis is an important step in the right direction. The examination of the mechanics of shame brings much needed light to the emotional motivations for some of the most extreme acts of violence, yet it cannot in itself explain all atrocities in the conflict which seemed, superficially at least, devoid of motive or rational explanation. In part these forms of violence are discussed in the Shamelessness element of Keen's thesis, which in covering the role of drugs and the brutalising rebel environment, accounts for many indiscriminate acts of violence which appear to be born out of the absence of moral restraint and a certain mindlessness. However, reflecting the trend of previous approaches that sought to dismantle the flawed New Barbarism thesis, Keen is reluctant to attribute the Shamelessness factor with as much significance as he does that of Shame, reserving most attention for what is essentially a rationalization of emotional violence through recourse to Gilligan's ideas. Whilst it is clear that shame was an important factor in many instances of violence, by placing the greater stress on shame as a trigger for violence, Keen risks betraying the truly irrational nature of some of the worst atrocities in the Sierra Leonean conflict, adding an element of psychology which in many cases was not there.

The initial invasion of Sierra Leone and the atrocities that followed point to the limitations of Shame as an explanation for RUF brutality. When the RUF and their Liberian allies entered Sierra Leone in March 1991, they were not greeted by a hostile or critical civilian population, but rather one which if not openly in sympathy with rebel aims, was certainly open to listening to their grievances. A teenager from the town of Pujehun describes how villagers gathered voluntarily 'to lend an ear to the rebel's plea for democracy.' During this meeting the village was 'looted behind their backs as the high ideals were being espoused.'[39] Throughout this early period, as Keen notes, 'no civilian was safe' as rebels were 'burning houses indiscriminately, looting and killing.'[40] To describe these acts as evidencing a desire for respect and recognition, or as an attempt to 'silence and invert' condemnation, would be to ignore the fact that Sierra Leoneans had not greeted the invasion with condemnation and shaming behaviour. Indeed, condemnation followed, rather than preceded, the perpetration of atrocities.

A further difficulty in applying the Shame argument comes when the role of child combatants is considered. If, as Keen argues, acts of atrocity were often committed through a fear a humiliation that stemmed from perpetrator's own experiences of humiliation within Sierra Leonean society, the limited experience of young recruits is problematic. Approximately 40,000 combatants in the Sierra Leonean conflict were children, many of whom were forcibly coerced into the conflict at a very young age when it would be nonsensical to talk of them holding grievances against a society they had hardly known.[41] Indeed, if these combatants were to harbour any grievances they would most likely be directed toward those rebels who abducted them from their villages and families. If the youngest child soldiers had been brought up within the enclosed world of the RUF, exposed from an early age to its perverse moral universe that 'profoundly messed' with their 'sense of what was right and wrong', it is somewhat contradictory to posit shame as their motive for violence.[42] Keen states that 'our most immoral actions may stem precisely from our moral impulses, since without these we would have no sense of shame in the first place.'[43] In the case of child soldiers, these 'moral impulses' had been moulded by the 'shame-free zone' to accept violence and atrocities rather than to condemn them. Therefore, to describe young combatant's atrocities as resulting from the threat of shame is to attribute to them a certain moral order which in truth they had never experienced. If shame was not the driving motive of this violence, this certainly did not lead to less 'immoral actions' or lower degrees of brutality among child-soldiers. Indeed, precisely the opposite appears to have been the case:

> We feared them. They were cruel and hard hearted; even more than the adults. They don't
> know...what is good and bad. If you beg an older one you may convince him to spare you, but
> the younger ones, they don't know what is sympathy, what is mercy. Those who have been
> rebels for so long have never learned it.[44]

This testimony suggests that far from a sense of shame arising from 'moral impulses', the particularly cruel brutality of this violence arose from a veritable absence of morality, at least in a form recognised by civil society, which in itself was a characteristic associated with young combatants fostered in the conflict environment. In this sense, for many people victim or witness to such violence, the perpetrator's actions were in a very real way both 'wicked' and 'irrational.'[45]

It is the Shamelessness strand of Keen's argument then, which discusses the establishment of a brutalising isolated rebel world and its impact on child soldiers, which proves most useful in explaining much of the violence in which children were directly involved. A better understanding of the process of brutalisation in the Sierra Leone civil war offers an insight into the interaction of the chaotic violence of desensitised combatants with the rational aims of conflict leaders. This provides the most convincing refutation of New Barbarism's reductive conclusions without misrepresenting atrocities as inherently rational.

'A Particularly Organised Kind Of Chaos'[46]: Irrational Violence and The Brutalising Process

There were clearly many various processes perpetuating conflict in Sierra Leone, and a whole spectrum of motives behind particularly violent atrocities against civilians. There is little doubt that grievances over long term abuses and disparities under the APC system of patrimony fostered anger and frustration which fuelled both political violence and the more complex form of psychological, shame-related violence to which Keen has given valuable light. It is also the case that economic agendas were an important factor, with many attacks against civilians facilitating looting and the capture of alluvial diamond mining sites. Nevertheless, there are many instances of particularly violent atrocity which do not readily fit within the rational framework of understanding violence in which individual actors conduct their behaviour based upon a calculation of the possible benefits or functional value. Whilst an understanding of the role of shame provides an important insight into some of this irrational violence, it fails to explain atrocities facilitated by the enclosed rebel world, which was in a very real sense beyond shame and the moral norms of civil society. For this reason the 'shame-free zone' which David Keen discusses needs to be given much greater emphasis, and in particular, the manner in which children were manipulated within the conflict environment. This

approach gives due recognition to the impression of many witnesses that atrocities were 'mindless' and even 'wicked', since it demonstrates how far from being motivated by grievance or strategic considerations, many young perpetrators acted violently according to a brutalising standard of behaviour which they had come to know as routine.

The removal of combatants from Sierra Leonean society, and by extension the moral codes and conventions of behaviour which are established through community and familial life, was actively pursued through the large scale abduction of children. Although the Sierra Leone Army (SLA), and Kamajors recruited under age combatants to their ranks, it was the RUF who resorted to kidnapping young victims to forcibly convert them into rebel soldiers.[47] According to Abdullah and Rashid, this reflected the ability of the army and civil militias to recruit volunteers seeking revenge against the RUF, whereas the RUF as perpetrator of many of these atrocities, found itself unable to rely on a broad constituency of support. With a shortage of ready volunteers the RUF began abducting children as the war progressed, seeking to ensure a long term supply of labour and military force, with young children providing easy targets and highly malleable recruits. The scale of these abductions, and therefore the number of young combatants affected by the isolated rebel environment, was considerable, with the NGO PRIDE confirming that 72% of ex-RUF combatants interviewed claimed to have been forcibly recruited.[48] UNICEF put the number of children missing through abduction after June 1997 at 1,500, with 46% being between fifteen to seventeen years old, and 8% children under the age of eleven.[49] The NGO Human Rights Watch documented numerous testimonies from those witness or victim to abductions, with many accounts confirming the very young age of those taken and their immediate introduction to training and combat:

> They [the rebels] gathered the abductees together and had them march up and down in the bush; left, right, left, right and so on and then divided them up into groups. They had the small boys from six to ten years old, then those from twelve to fifteen and finally those from fifteen to eighteen. For the older boys, the training was compulsory for all of them. I saw them doing physical exercises, teaching them how to dismantle and clean all kinds of guns, explaining them how many cartridges are in a clip, and all that.[50]

Removed from their villages and towns, with only commanders and older combatants as figures of law and authority, abductees were inducted into the isolated world of rebel bush camps and exposed to a radically different moral order. While conditions were brutal and children suffered the worst abuses within the rebel habitat, so surgical was their removal from Sierra Leonean society and their

own families that children grew to see their captors as their kin, referring to the RUF leader Foday Sankoh as 'pappay.' Children's membership within the rebel world was reinforced through the forced committing of atrocities, with RUF commanders giving direct orders to new recruits to maim and kill civilians, often members of their own families and community. This was not simply a test of loyalty or ritual of initiation, but was the beginning of a process of desensitisation to extreme violence. This violence for the sake of facilitating violence also had the crucial effect of emphatically sealing young combatants membership to the RUF's enclosed world, with atrocities against family members and communities ensuring children feared returning to civil society and possible reprisals, whilst also giving them common traumatic experiences which only their fellow rebel fighters could understand. The totality of their separation from civil society was epitomised in the words of a combatant during an attack on a mosque: "you bastard civilians; you don't like us and we don't like you."[51]

The process of brutalisation also involved the establishment an alternative rebel system of social and moral order which, as Keen argues, represented the reverse of that found in wider society. It was not simply that brutalisation was achieved through forced commands and orders, but that the entire hierarchy and social mechanics of the rebel world were geared towards the promotion and acceptance of violence as both routine and commendable. RUF commanders publically punished those reluctant to commit atrocities, with peer pressure reinforcing the stigma of exhibiting such 'deviance.'[52] Likewise, displays of mercy towards civilians exposed combatants to the risk of being attacked themselves, whilst acts of particular brutality or inventive cruelty were greeted with rewards and even heroic status. Young children were especially susceptible to these peer pressures and the dynamics of shame and status. As Ibrahim Abdullah has noted, older combatants were more likely to retain a sense of morality inherited from their life within Sierra Leonean society, and as such would need 'longer periods to break in.' With their greater autonomy of judgement they might even 'question superiors, disobey orders or desert.'[53] Young children, however, nurtured within the confines of the rebel world from a young age, offered 'blind obedience' to the principles of their commanders, rendering them far more likely to commit atrocities without recourse to grievances or other rational justifications for violence.[54]

If the brutalising environment of conflict meant young combatants developed a proclivity to violence, more behavioural than related to rational motive, then the use of drugs and other substances further contributed to the impression that their atrocities were mindless and irrational. Whilst it is clearly important to avoid invoking drug use as an excuse for combatants' behaviour,

particularly through what Baumeister describes as the 'modern version of possession by demons', the powerful effect that drug use had on young fighters and the scale of its practise should not be discounted.[55] Furthermore, examining the role of drugs in facilitating violence recognises the agency of those in positions of authority who actively promoted their use in anticipation of their destructive effects. A Human Rights Watch report of 1999 describes 'widespread usage' of drugs such as cocaine, stating that 'Most victims and witnesses [...] believe most of the atrocities were committed while under the influence of these substances.'[56] Drugs were regularly administered by commanders to young combatants before they embarked upon atrocities, but also formed part of the daily divorcing process from civilian society, disorienting fresh recruits and making them more amenable to training and indoctrination:

> From the first day they drugged us. They showed me some powder and said it was cocaine and was called brown-brown. I saw them put it in the food and after eating I felt dizzy. I felt crazy.[57]
>
> One day I saw a group of rebels bring out about twenty boys all abductees between fifteen and twenty years old. They had them lined up under gunpoint and one by one called them forward to be injected in their arms with a needle. The boys begged them not to use needles but the rebels said it would give them power.
>
> About twenty minutes later the boys started screaming like they were crazy and some of them even passed out. Two of the rebels instructed the boys to scream, I want kill, I want kill and gave a few of them kerosene to take with them on one of their burn house raids.[58]

Another abductee described the effects of being injected with a psychotropic substance, stating "I was flying and my head ached [...] my head felt heavy and confused."[59] The way in which drugs filled young combatants with a sense of power and fearlessness also had a significant impact on their violent behaviour. In the report by Human Rights Watch a nine year old rebel described drugs as 'a medicine they give us which makes us to have no respect for anybody; whatever we think to do, we just do it.'[60] Other young combatants stated that 'it gives us power and makes us fear nobody', and 'It makes us feel so tall and you people [civilians] look so small.'[61] By experiencing these effects in combination with the pervasive influence of the brutal moral codes of rebel society, young combatants were pushed towards extreme violence against civilians, and by its very practice, desensitised and accustomed to it. This lead to children becoming perpetrators of some of the worst violence of the conflict, a fact played out by the pattern of atrocities in the war and the many testimonies of witnesses, victims and the fighters themselves. In the particularly violent invasion of

Freetown in January 1999, during which almost 50,000 people were killed or maimed, child soldiers played a central role.[62] A victim of that attack described the chaos of indiscriminate violence as young fighters entered the Rogbalan Mosque and began shooting, cutting, and dousing people with petrol:

> The mosque was very crowded. It was very confusing and people were running and trying to escape but the ten-year-old was standing by one of the doors and I saw him stab people as they tried to run past him. Sometimes the executioner would aim directly at one person and other times he'd just fire randomly. Then he walked back to the women's section and opened up on the people gathered there. Then he positioned himself in the passage leading out of the mosque and started picking people off as they tried to escape. It was here he killed a lot of people. His was the only way out, so as people made a run for it, he would shoot them.[63]

In this particular attack sixty-six bodies were counted, including seven children. When the violence came to an end it did so in response to the blowing of a whistle, something the rebels recognised as a signal to move on. This emphasises the manner in which the brutal and cruel violence of the young combatants, here involving a ten year old, was in itself highly indiscriminate but at the same time part of the overall strategy of commanders on the ground.

Many such acts of violence by young combatants exhibited neither sensitivity to shame nor political grievances as motives, but were carried out in a disturbingly routine, dispassionate manner without hesitation. Where a semblance of emotion was displayed, enjoyment or humour was not uncommon, with combatants even seeking out unique ways to exact violence so as to win status among fellow combatants.[64] One testimony relates how RUF soldiers tricked civilians into believing they were Nigerian peacekeepers. When they revealed their true identities they 'started to laugh', before forcing the group of thirty men, women and children to the ground and shooting each individual in the head and chest.[65] Such violence demonstrates the brutalised nature of these combatants, who rather than committing atrocities through fear of shame, economic motive or grievance, found amusement in cruelty which to those outside the rebel world was morally repugnant. Whilst such behaviour served the purposes of instilling fear in the wider population, constituting a military strategy of terror, the tormenting and torturing victims often continued when this objective already seemed achieved. This underlines that although manipulated or instructed by commanders, violence was ultimately shaped by the agency of the individual combatants themselves, who in many

harrowing accounts of the conflict, are described as committing atrocities in particularly cruel and terrifying ways which are unnecessary from a strategic perspective.

The behaviour of child soldiers during the Sierra Leonean war moved some observers to define the conflict in terms of anarchy and unrestrained primordial violence. This conclusion was not solely confined to the reductive analysis of New Barbarism, but was reached by many of those victim to atrocities who struggled to understand the motives of young perpetrators and felt that rationalisations of such violence distorted its true nature. Accordingly, one witness to the brutal massacre of a family by a young boy stated: 'They are wicked, those boy soldiers. They spare no human life.'[66] Another Sierra Leonean who came into contact with a young combatant exclaimed: 'He's still somebody's child. Maybe he was abducted. God knows what they've done to him.' [67] Both these statements encapsulate what has been at the heart of the problem with much of the analysis of violence and atrocity in Sierra Leone. The first comment, which recognises the 'wicked' behaviour of the combatants, has been the basis for flawed analyses which focussed solely on the violent and irrationally destructive nature of drug-fuelled fighters, failing to see the wider processes which informed violence and the historical context of the conflict. The second statement highlights an attempt to avoid dehumanising combatants in this way, placing actions and behaviour in the context of structural processes which have shaped them and from which a variety of parties have sought to benefit. However, this attempt to counteract the reduction of the conflict to total anarchy has in much analysis resulted in the overemphasis of rational and logical motives, to the extent that the truly barbaric and mindless nature of violence described as 'wicked' has been misrepresented as, in some sense, quite reasonable. It is possible, and indeed necessary, to recognise both these statements as valid representations of the conflict without demeaning either the combatants or the suffering of their victims. In a real sense the behaviour of young soldiers can be described as wicked and irrational, yet it is clear that this very behaviour was actively engineered and reinforced by the designs of RUF leaders who constitute the proverbial rational actor. There was nothing inherent about the violence of young combatants; rather, it was established through the imposition of artificial and brutalising conditions which deeply impacted upon abductees and those enveloped by the rebel world over a period of many years. This tension in the literature between seeking to accurately portray the very brutal forms of violence and at the same time recognise the wider conditions which framed individual actors' behaviour is criticised by Abdullah and Rashid as often resulting in a 'binary either/or situation' in which children are either seen as conscious agents 'fighting with their eyes wide open' or alternatively as 'victims of wars they had no hand in originating.'[68] This binary approach represents as much a false dichotomy as that of 'greed versus

grievance', since in truth children were both conscious agents often acting to perpetuate the conflict through brutalising atrocities as well as victims of the manipulation of leaders and older combatants.[69] Whilst it was the over-arching structures of the rebel conflict dynamic which established young combatants as particularly brutal and morally dislocated killers, it was the subsequent atrocities of these combatants which as Maclure and Denov note, 'fomented and perpetuated these structures.'[70]

Conclusion

Approaches to understanding extreme violence in the Sierra Leonean conflict have frequently overemphasised the role of grievances and their associated anger and frustration, which in some analyses has been used to explain the perpetration of atrocities. Whilst in many instances of violence this rational explanation may be accurate, there are yet many other instances of atrocity where neither grievance, economic self-interest or military strategy are served. In these cases far more significant has been the brutalising process of the conflict which led young combatants to exercise extreme violence without compunction as a routine of their conflict behaviour. Through the mass abductions of young and impressionable children, RUF leaders exposed youngsters to a desensitising environment in which violence and atrocities were not only trivialized but were actively rewarded. Further facilitated by the dispensation of drugs and the forced committing of atrocities, these young combatants represented to their leaders a particularly useful kind of violent chaos, which they used to both terrorise and punish civilians under a wide range of military and economic interests. Nevertheless, despite the role of leaders in this process and their utilisation of atrocities for strategic ends, the particularly brutal forms of violence exacted by child soldiers were shaped by their own agency and were by nature often beyond the control of a fragmented and inconsistent RUF leadership. The impression of those witness or victim to such violence that it was in some sense 'wicked' or 'mindless' accurately describes the manner in which, far from betraying a rational consideration of conflict aims or a particular grievance, young combatants acted according to their brutal education in violence which even led them to enjoy the cruelty of their atrocities. The recognition that extreme violence in Sierra Leone represented a harnessed form of chaos is important in highlighting how seemingly irrational violence of young combatants interacted with the rational aims of cynical leaders. This explanation seeks to rectify both the propensity of the New Barbarism thesis to ignore the role of rational actors, and the failure of many Rational Actor approaches to account for irrational violence. Furthermore, by understanding how the logic of

violence extends beyond grievances, a fear of shame or some economic greed, the need for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration programmes to address the problem of brutalised child soldiers and their entrenched moral order is made clear. The difficulty of integrating combatants brought up within the conflict environment into civil society, and their proclivity to commit atrocities as part of their routine conflict behaviour, is evidenced by the emerging regional dynamic of migrating child combatants.[71] Although economic incentives, as ever, have played their part in bringing West African fighters to these conflicts, the presence of the same brutalised child combatants who inhabited the enclosed world of the RUF has been accompanied by exactly the same array of atrocities. Until this issue is effectively addressed, the potential for renewed violence will continue to threaten Sierra Leone's long-term stability.

1   Roy F. Baumeister, *Evil: Inside Human Violence and Cruelty* (New York: Henry Holt 1997) p.73.

2   Paul Richards employs the term 'New Barbarism' to describe the ideas of Robert Kaplan and other neo-Malthusian theories. See Paul Richards, *Fighting For The Rainforest: War, Youth & Resources in Sierra Leone* (Oxford: James Currey 1996).

3   See for example Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Civil Wars: From L.A. to Bosnia* (New York: The New Press 1994)

4 Stathis N. Kalyvas, '"New" and "Old" Civil Wars: A Valid Distinction?' *World Politics*, 2001, 54: 99–118, p.100.

5   Enzensberger, (note 3)

6   Robert Kaplan, 'The Coming Anarchy', *The Atlantic Monthly,* Volume 273, No. 2 (1994) pp. 44-76.

7   Richards (note 2) p.xx.

8   Ibid pp.55-60.

9   Ibid pp.70-86.

10   Ibid p.xvi.

11   See for instance David Keen, 'Sierra Leone: War and its Functions', in Frances Stewart and Valpy Fitzgerald (eds), *War and Underdevelopment, Volume 2: Country Experiences* (Oxford: Oxford Univeristy Press 2001); Mark Duffield, 'Globalisation, Transborder Trade, and War Economies', in Mats Berdal and David M. Malone (eds) *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars* (Boulder CO: Lynne Reinner 2000) p.69, 73; William Reno, 'Shadow States and the Political Economy of Civil Wars' in Mats Berdal and David M. Malone (eds) *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars* (Boulder CO: Lynne Reinner 2000) p.44.

12 See Paul Collier, 'Doing Well Out of War: An Economic Perspective', in Mats Berdal and David M. Malone (eds) *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars* (Boulder CO: Lynne Reinner 2000)

13   Thandika Mkandawire, 'The Terrible Toll of Post-Colonial 'Rebel Movements' in Africa: Towards an Explanation of the Violence Against the Peasantry', *Journal of Modern African Studies,* Vol. 40, No. 2 (2003), pp. 185-186.

14   Cited in David Keen, *Conflict and Collusion In Sierra Leone* (Oxford: James Currey 2005) p.228.

15   Cited in Richard Maclure and Myriam Denov, '"I Didn't Want to Die So I Joined Them": Structuration and the Process of Becoming Boy Soldiers in Sierra Leone', *Terrorism and Political Violence,* Vol. 18, pp. 119-135 (2006) p.126

16   Keen, 'Sierra Leone: War and its Functions' (note 11) p.157; Mkandawire, 'The Terrible Toll of Post-Colonial 'Rebel Movements' in Africa' (note 13) p.186.

17   David Keen, '"Since I Am A Dog, Beware My Fangs": Beyond a 'Rational Violence' Framework in the Sierra Leonean War', *Crisis States Programme,* Working Paper No. 14, August (2002) p.4.

18   Keen '"Since I Am A Dog, Beware My Fangs" (note 17) p.4; David Keen, 'The Political Economy of War', in Stewart, Frances and Valpy Fitzgerald (eds) *War and Underdevelopment, Volume 1: The Economic and Social Consequences of Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford Univeristy Press 2001) p.56; David Keen, 'Incentives and Disincentives For Violence', in Berdal, Mats and David M. Malone (eds), *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars* (Boulder CO: Lynne Reinner 2000), p.23.

19   Keen '"Since I Am A Dog, Beware My Fangs" (note 17) p.4

20   For interpretations of the functional argument as purely economic-centred see Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2006)

21   In fact Gilligan goes further, stating: "The emotion of shame is the primary or ultimate cause of all violence." James Gilligan, *Violence: Our Deadly Epidemic And Its Causes* (New York: Putnam Books 1996) p.110.

22   Keen, *Conflict and Collusion In Sierra Leone* (note 14) p.63.

23   Ibid p.75.

24   Ibid p.76.

25   Ibid p.76.

26   Keen p.76.

27   Ibid p.77. This driver of the "shame-free zone" builds on the work of Stephen Ellis, who in his treatment of the civil war in neighbouring Liberia, documents the important relationship between the denial of individual agency and use of masks and spirit possession in the Poro society and initiation rituals. Stephen Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy: The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimensions of an African Civil War* (London: Hurts and Co. 1999)

28   Keen, *Conflict and Collusion In Sierra Leone* (note 14) p.77.

29   Ibid p.77.

30   Ibid p.77.

31   Ibid p.79.

32   Ibid p.79.

33   Ibid p.78.

34   That conflict facilitates violence would seem an obvious point, yet Rational Actor approaches often obscure this dynamic in focusing upon war as a facilitator of economic and political agendas.

35   Keen, *Conflict and Collusion In Sierra Leone* (note 14) p.228.

36   Human Rights Watch, 'Getting Away With Murder, Mutilation, Rape: New Testimony from Sierra Leone', *Human Rights Watch,* July (1999), Vol. 11, No. 3, Ch. IV.

37   Cited in Keen, *Conflict and Collusion In Sierra Leone* (note 14) p.60.

38   Kaplan, 'The Coming Anarchy' (note 6) p.70, p.72.

39   Keen, *Conflict and Collusion In Sierra Leone* (note 14) p.41.

40   Ibid p.41.

41   Maclure & Denov (note 15) p.120. This figures uses the UN definition of children as those below the age of eighteen.

42   Keen, *Conflict and Collusion In Sierra Leone* (note 14) p.76,

43   Ibid p.63.

44   Human Rights Watch, 'Getting Away With Murder, Mutilation, Rape' (note 36) Ch. VI.

45   Ibid Ch. VI,

46   A phrase employed by Keen, 'Sierra Leone: War and its Functions' (note 11) p.157.

47   Ibrahim Abdullah and Ismail Rashid, '"Smallest Victims; Youngest Killers": Juvenile Combatants in Sierra Leone's Civil War', in Ibrahim Abdullah (ed), *Between Democracy and Terror: The Sierra Leone Civil War* (South Africa: UNISA Press 2004) p.239; Maclure & Denov (note 15) p.122.

48   Cited in Keen, *Conflict and Collusion In Sierra Leone* (note 14) p.45.

49   Cited in Human Rights Watch, 'Getting Away With Murder, Mutilation, Rape' (note 36) Ch. IV

50   Ibid Ch. IV

51   Human Rights Watch, 'Getting Away With Murder, Mutilation, Rape' (note 36) Ch. IV

52   Maclure & Denov (note 15) p.126, p.129.

53   Abdullah, *Between Democracy and Terror* (note 47) p.243.

54   Ibid p.243

55   Baumeister (note 1) p.82

56   Human Rights Watch, 'Getting Away With Murder, Mutilation, Rape' (note 36) Ch. IV.

57   Ibid Ch. IV.

58   Ibid Ch. IV.

59   Ibid Ch. IV.

60   Ibid Ch. IV.

61   Ibid Ch. IV

62   Abdullah (2004) p.240

63   Human Rights Watch (1999) Ch. IV

64   Many accounts refer to particular individuals or units, such as the 'Cut Hands Commando' and the 'Burn House Unit', who had achieved status through their various brutal 'specialisations'. See for example Keen, *Conflict and Collusion In Sierra Leone* (note 14) p.228.

65   Human Rights Watch, 'Getting Away With Murder, Mutilation, Rape' (note 36) Ch. IV.

66   Ibid Ch. VI

67   Ibid Ch. VI

68   Abdullah & Rashid, 'Smallest Victims; Youngest Killers' (note 47) p.239.

69   For an interesting exposition of this issue see Maclure & Denov (note 15), who in recognising the dichotomous fallacy of 'structure versus agency', opt for a structuration theory framework.

70   Maclure & Denov (note 15) p.131.

[71] See Human Rights Watch, 'Youth, Poverty and Blood: The Lethal Legacy of West Africa's Regional Warriors', *Human Rights Watch,* March (2005), Vol. 17, No. 5. The instability of the West African region continues to present the risk, as highlighted by unrest in Cote D'Ivoire, of former combatants from Sierra Leone and Liberia becoming involved in conflicts as regional mercenaries.