
WEST-AFRICAN WARSCAPES

Victimcy, Girlfriending, Soldiering: Tactic Agency in a Young Woman's Social Navigation of the Liberian War Zone¹

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Abstract

This study aims to collapse the often gendered opposition of agency and victimhood that typically characterizes the analysis of women's coping strategies in war zones. The term victimcy is proposed to describe the agency of self-staging as victim of war and explore how it is deployed as one tactic—amongst others—in one young Liberian woman's "social navigation" of war zones. Victimcy is thus revealed as a form of self-representation by which a certain form of tactic agency is effectively exercised under the trying, uncertain, and disempowering circumstances that confront actors in warscapes. However the story of Bintu also reveals the complexity of women's strategies, roles, and options as they confront conflicting challenges and opportunities in war zones. While in some circumstances women may take humanitarian aid, in others they may also take up arms. An ethnography of social tactics thus counters reductionist portrayals of women in war zones as merely the passive victims of conflict. [Tactic Agency, Victimcy, Women, War zones, Liberia]

Black Diamond could be the prototype for an action hero, a sort of African “Lara Croft.” She’s all sleek muscle and form-fitting clothes, with an AK-47 and red beret. She has a bevy of supporting beauties, equally stylish, who loiter nearby, polished fingernails clutching the cold steel of semi-automatic weapons. (Itano 2003)

Her look is Black Panther-turned-movie star: mirror sunglasses, frizzy wig beneath the beret, silver ear-rings, red-painted nails. After clearing the port with just a handful of female fighters, she reloaded the Kalashnikov, adjusted the Colt .38 wedged in her hip and roared off in a silver Mitsubishi pick-up. (Carroll 2003)

Women in War

Colonel Black Diamond of the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) rebel group received worldwide attention in Western news media in August 2003. As the head of the Women’s Auxiliary Corps (WAC), she commanded a group of girls and young women who spread fear, if not respect, among Monrovia at the time of LURD’s final advance on the city. Her appearance in Western media drew popular attention to young female fighters in African civil wars. For a few weeks, the media responded to the depictions of Black Diamond and her sister rebels by constructing images that directly challenged the dominant gender discourse. Women in war are generally discussed only as victims, but Black Diamond and her sisters emerged as actors—killers portrayed as just as lethal as their male counterparts but wearing fashionable attire. Even though Black Diamond stories offered new ideas about women in war to media observers, in many ways these narratives reproduced and reinforced a broader dominant media frame (Pedelty 1995) that has established Liberia as a case of difference—of the “African Other” to the rest of the world and even within the continent itself:

In other African conflicts, like Uganda and Congo, women have participated in rebel movements, but usually in supporting roles. They cook, clean, and often sleep with soldiers—not always by choice. But here in Liberia, often out of revenge for husbands slain at the hands of the enemy, women have fought on the front line as part of an elite and feared unit unique on the continent (Itano 2003)

The state of confusion among journalists can be read in their obsession with, and apparent bewilderment at, the feminine traits, such as hair-do, make up

and clothes, of Black Diamond and her sisters—traits that appear to stand in stark contrast to their roles as brutal field commanders and soldiers. The binary opposition between peaceful women and violent men runs deep in Western emotio-histories—a point that is obvious if we take a look at both popular and scholarly writing dealing with gender in wars and violent conflicts. Yet in most current conflicts, women do actively participate in war.

According to statistics taken during the disarmament of 1996-97, between two and four percent of the fighters in the Liberian Civil War were female (David 1997, UNDHA-HACO 1997). Other estimates hold that, within the rebel movement National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), for instance, one out of 10 soldiers were women (Ellis 1999). During the civil war, women soldiers were known to be at least as fierce as their male counterparts; men and women alike committed atrocities. A young male ex-combatant I interviewed noted that “it can be too fearful when you are fighting with a woman amongst you.” As female soldiers started to appear among the rebel groups, civilians were often shocked to see their aggressiveness. According to a young Monrovia woman, “people were more afraid of them than the men, because the female combatants’ temper was very quick” (Olonisakin 1995a:38).

Some women who fought in the war turned it into a successful endeavor. These were most often fighting commandos, and in some cases high ranking officers.² With looted wealth, they managed to build up business enterprises. And with contacts in NPFL and the ruling National Patriotic Party (NPP) networks,³ they often had a plethora of “big men” (and big women) to back them in the brief interlude of “peace” that ensued between 1996 and 1999. Probably the most well known example is that of Julia Rambo, who fought for NPFL during the war and who owned three bars in Monrovia and Buchanan in 1998. Women who were successful in the NPFL have also been appointed to the civil service. For instance Martina Johnson, a notorious general in the NPFL artillery and one of the brains behind the NPFL’s Operation Octopus, was appointed head of security at Robertsfield International Airport (RIA).

Julia Rambo, Martina Johnson, Agnes Taylor (ex-wife of the NPFL leader Charles Taylor), Ruth “Attila” Milton of the Liberia Peace Council (LPC), and later Black Diamond and her sisters functioned as role models for many young females during the war. While the power that the barrel of a gun could achieve was certainly tempting, such models were not necessarily easy for young women to emulate, much less achieve. Indeed such images of female authority and empowerment more often provided a sharp contrast to the fragile positions in which most young women found themselves.⁴ Drawing from disserta-

tion fieldwork conducted in Liberia during 1998,⁵ with a particular focus on youth combatants (Utas 2003), my intention in this particular text is to challenge currently dominant images of women in war that focus exclusively on women's status as victims. I discuss young females in the Liberian Civil War as active agents who alternatively use different tactics in their attempts to cope with the challenges and exploit the opportunities provided by the conditions produced by the civil war. Rather than reproducing the opposition between conventional portrayals of "women as victims" and the counter-hegemonic narratives (as represented by *Black Diamond*) of "women as (hyper) agents," this article seeks to theorize how agency is manifest and deployed across the full range of women's wartime experiences. More specifically, it explores the ways in which self-representations of victimhood and empowerment alike represent different "agency tactics," available to and alternately deployed under different circumstances and in different social contexts to women in war zones.

How women's participation or non-participation in wars is conceptualized differs considerably in academic accounts. A condensed summary of prototypical representations might read as follows: "men fight as avatars of a nation's sanctioned violence"; or "women work and weep, and sometimes protest" (Elshtain 1987:3); or simply "men make war; women make peace" (Dilorio 1992:51). Such modes of viewing women in war is uncritically reproduced by the news media and in other types of popular writing. However, as Judith Dilorio stated more than 10 years ago in a broad ranging review of the feminist literature on women in war, "almost all contemporary theoreticians take issue with the position that all women, or at least mothers, oppose war. There is simply too much historical evidence of women's support for, complicity in, and collaboration with the war efforts of men to make that statement defensible" (Dilorio 1992:54). In light of such evidence, it becomes important to critically examine "victimhood" depictions of women in war as something other than mere descriptions of gendered experience, but as also the products of cultural models that may be reproduced with the same mechanical naturalness employed when all children in war are labelled "victims."

In a study of historical texts on women in Africa published between 1971 and 1986, Margaret J. Hay has been able to see a shift on research subjects "from queens to prostitutes, from heroines to victims" (Hay 1988:431). During the second part of the period she studied, historians increasingly focused on the marginalized or weak subjects of society, and in particular on African women as victims of male gerontocracies, western dominance, etc. The choice of research interest was arguably political in design, challenging earlier dom-

inant foci on socio-political elites in the field of history. More recently, the neo-liberal political agenda has served as a backdrop for research in the social sciences, in which studies of women in war conceive of women as agents rather than merely as victims (see e.g., Turshen and Twagiramariya 1998).

In an article dealing with abuse of women in contemporary Britain, Patricia Connell raises concerns about both agency- and victim-prone categorizations. She is critical of the use of agency and victimhood in many cases, as they are often “conceptualised in relation to each other as mutually exclusive states” (1997:121). A simplified model of victimhood can be both “disempowering and disabling.” In her study, women often refused to characterise their experiences as aspects of victimization. Instead, Connell found that abused women used words like “coping,” “struggling,” “fighting back,” and “survival game,” even as they described instances of serious battering. By employing a perspective that makes a woman exclusively a victim, researchers risk creating a permanent state of what Kathleen Barry calls *victimism* (1979); i.e. a woman’s victim status “creates a framework for others to know her not as a person but as a victim, someone to whom violence is done” (Connell 1997:122).

On the other hand, the prevalent tendency of locating agency in every action of women’s lives also creates problems. As Connell states, “while it is a sound argument that all steps must be taken to empower the abused woman, it is crucial that in this exercise, a jaundiced or incorrect picture not be painted” (Connell 1997:122). Connell makes use of an enabling definition of abused women’s agency as “the exercise of any measure of resistance and self-determination used by an abused woman to regain control in her life and in her attempt to stop the abuse she experiences” (1997:118).

How then are we supposed to tackle the broader question of the agency of individuals confronted by the power-saturated conditions of war? Alcinda Honwana (2000) has drawn up a distinction between tactics and strategies as offered by Michel de Certeau (1984). In her use, the idea of *tactic agency* is that of short-term responses in relationship to a society’s social structure. Tactic agency forms part of the trajectories travelled by the weak. In opposition to this, there is *strategic agency*—an agency for those who can forecast future states of affairs and have the possibility to make use of other people’s tactical agency. If we follow this argument, agency is no longer something you possess or do not. Rather, it is something you maintain in relation to a social field inhabited with other social actors. Agency is thus highly dependent on specific social situations.

This text aims to collapse the opposition of agency and victimhood by talking about *victimcy* as a form of self-representation by which *agency* may be effectively exercised under trying, uncertain, and disempowering circumstances. I propose the term *victimcy* to describe the agency of self-staging as victim of war, and I explore how it is deployed as one tactic—amongst others—in women’s “social navigation” of war zones.

In using the term “social navigation,” I draw on Henrik Vigh’s proposition that “*strategy* is the process of demarcating and constituting space and *tactics* the process of navigating them” (Vigh 2003:136). In his work on soldiering in Guinea Bissau, he terms young men’s tactical agency *social navigation*, “the way agents guide their lives through troublesome social and political circumstances” (10-11). Vigh has developed his idea of social navigation from the political sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf’s concept “life chances” (1979). It is clear that the concept is not only apt for discussing tactical agency in times of armed conflict, but as it is used in this text it dictates agentive possibilities in easily transgressed temporal and spatial zones of war and peace alike.

The focus in this text lies on a single life story of a young woman, to whom I have assigned the pseudonym “Bintu,” with particular emphasis on her experiences during the first part of the Liberian Civil War (1990-1996). Bintu presents as both a victim and a perpetrator of the civil war, in her own description of the tactics she deployed during the war. Her story provides insight into the complex choices that girls and women make as tactical agents who seek to navigate the war-torn Liberian social topography.

As Bintu’s story ultimately reveals, the social navigation tactics of young women in war include establishing and carefully managing relations with boyfriends, commanders, co-wives, peacekeepers, NGO staff and other categories of marginalized civilians. It may include both the taking of humanitarian aid and the taking up of arms at different times and under different circumstances. In this sense, women may alter between tactics of victimcy and other tactics such as those modelled by Black Diamond, as they confront different challenges and opportunities in their social navigation of war zones.

Precarious and treacherous as it may be, the war zone is thus not merely a wasteland for young women, but at times may also be a field ripe with possibilities for upwards social and economic mobility, even as it may also contain unforeseen pitfalls that lead to increased marginalization. Bintu’s story demonstrates how precarious social navigation within a war zone can be and the severity of making mistakes in an environment of high risk and uncertainty.

My review of the tactics Bintu used as a “social navigator” of the Liberian war zone suggests a need for a far more complex understanding of women’s experience in African and other wars than prevailing depictions that deduce from women’s accounts of victimization that they have no agency. While women are captured and forced to join rebel soldiers (as the prevailing picture proposes), they may also join them as wives or girlfriends in a proactive effort to protect self and family. Other motivations such as the quest for looted goods may also compel young women to join such boyfriends on the very battlefield itself.

Victimcy and Methodology

In my 1998 fieldwork among child and youth soldiers in Liberia, I initially encountered victim images only. Since this is the predominant picture of the child soldier, I expected this. And how could it not be? If a stranger came up to you and asked you if you have killed and committed atrocities would you answer “Yes, and I did it willingly?” Similarly, during a consultancy focusing on Sierra Leonean refugee women in northern Liberia, I was initially taken by surprise when every single woman we interviewed immediately and without hesitation declared that she had been raped during the Sierra Leonean Civil War. Yet I soon came to realize that presenting themselves as victims was a means by which women effectively established themselves as “legitimate recipients” of humanitarian aid.

This raises methodological concerns. I argue that “victimcy”—as a form of narrative that structures the presentation of self in particular ways—cannot be interpreted apart from an understanding of the interaction context within which such presentations are made. Generally research on young soldiers (as well as their wives or girlfriends) worldwide is carried out by “strangers” seeking to collect stories of private and deeply traumatic character during one or maybe two interactions. From the informant’s point of view, there is much to gain by supplying a complete victim image. Such an image is intended to rid the person of social blame in a particular moral landscape and creates a platform for both social (re)acceptance and socio-economic possibilities. A victim image opens up possibilities not only for partaking in lucrative emergency aid projects but also for the creation of compassionate bonds with important social actors in both war zone and post-war settings.

An adequate contextualization of “victimcy” requires the building of relationships in which social interaction is characterized by both forms of trust

and forms of interest that are different from those that predominate in situations in which humanitarian assistance may be at stake. As a result, anthropological fieldwork, based on long-term participant observation and extended case studies, is particularly well-suited for this kind of work. Geertz' recapturing of the term "deep hanging out" (1998) in his critique on Clifford's *Routes* (1997) appears to be an especially apt label to describe participant observation of young people in war zones. It should be noted that entering the social spheres of young ex-combatants and their girlfriends was in no way a simple affair and that the much mystified anthropological entry as a rite of passage into a permanent state of social inclusion, as proposed by Geertz (1973) and others, could in fact turn into a similar all-too-sudden closure of access to research space (Utas 2004b). My fieldwork was a constant battle to remain included and maintain access to research subjects.

In researching young women's lives, we found that some of our long-term contacts provided us with highly contradictory material or that people in their close surroundings had very different information to give us—rendering our data rife with ambiguities about the events and circumstances they purported to report upon. Yet in a secondary sense, they remained fully "authentic" as active presentations of self in their own right. In some sense, Bintu was something of a special case because she was a long-time friend of my Sierra Leonean research assistant (my wife), and she thereby felt able to recount experiences in a wider range of registers than that of victimcy alone. Thus in her recounting to us, Bintu often de-emphasized her experience as a victim. However had the audience been a group of humanitarian aid workers, she would surely have emphasized her experience as a victim. Trust built up over years was crucial in this case.⁶ In that sense I would argue that the story of Bintu is not a unique story as such—but it is quite unique that it has been narrated to us.

The Liberian Civil War

The Liberian Civil War⁷ started when a small group of men led by Prince Johnson entered the eastern town of Butuo, in Nimba County, on Christmas Eve 1989. The Libyan trained, rather ill-equipped group became known as the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) and within weeks splintered into two factions; one led by Charles Taylor, and the other, the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL), by Prince Johnson. Both groups rapidly forced their way towards the coast and in June 1990 left the forces of

President Samuel Doe in control of Monrovia only. Despite the presence of a West African peacekeeping force (ECOMOG) President Doe was killed by the INPFL in September the same year. In the power vacuum that followed, no single group was able to take control of Monrovia, but the NPFL did achieve a firm grip on the interior. Prince Johnson, although initially successful, left Liberia in 1993 after first rejoining with Taylor and then moving over to join ECOMOG. Eventually, his INPFL soldiers merged with the NPFL or were picked up by other emergent rebel factions. From then on, NPFL became the major player in the war. Taylor called his territory "Greater Liberia" and selected Gbarnga, in Bong County, first as NPFL headquarters and later as his capital. Gbarnga, as we shall see, is of great importance in this text.

Other factions had joined in the fighting. United Liberation Movement of Liberia (ULIMO) was formed in the Sierra Leonean capital Freetown with support from the Sierra Leonean government and even fought alongside the Sierra Leonean army against the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels in that country—who in their turn enjoyed NPFL support. In Liberia, ULIMO split in two along ethnic lines: ULIMO-K became largely a Mandingo faction supported by Guinea whilst ULIMO-J enjoyed support mainly from the South-East Krahn population. ULIMO-J was joined by another southern force, the Liberian Peace Council (LPC), which fought off NPFL successfully up to 1996. The national army, Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), remained loyal to the south and fought alongside ULIMO-J and LPC.

Initially the NPFL/INPFL-led war was perceived as a "revolution" in which the peoples in Nimba County (Nimbadians) in particular fought with sticks and cutlasses. However, as time passed and other rebel movements joined in the fighting, the war degenerated into an exchange of acts of terror, whereby largely young rebel soldiers fought each other. Their use of violence did not serve direct political ends, but rather was motivated by a wide array of individual interests, including the protection of families and the seeking of power and wealth. Political leaders turned into warlords, with their own private interests in fighting over the control of mineral-rich areas and logging concessions (Ellis 1998; Reno 1996, 1998, 2000). Within a few years, half a dozen rebel movements had spread terror throughout the country. The NPFL, for instance, which originally claimed to be fighting for the Nimbadians, spread fear through the entire Nimba County. NPFL boys looted and molested the very people they were claiming to defend in the war. After seven years of civil war, between 150,000 and 200,000 people had been killed.⁸ 600,000 to 700,000 refugees fled to neighboring countries, and the majority of the remnants of a pre-war pop-

ulation of 2.2 to 2.5 million was internally displaced. Subsequent peace talks and elections were held in mid-1997. Ironically, Charles Taylor and his National Patriotic Party—formed out of the NPFL apparatus—won a landslide victory and thereby accomplished what NPFL combat failed to do.

By placing some of his most trusted NPFL officers (including some women) and NPFL civilians into important positions of civil service and, more importantly, many of his soldiers into a grand security apparatus, Taylor's civilian government more or less came to mimic that of NPFL rebel command. Continued harassment of civilians as well as wanton violence directed at dissenters became the prevailing method of the NPP government.

The Liberian War Zone

In this text, I use the notion of “war zone” in a broad way including not only frontlines where fighting is going on but also bases and towns in rebel- and army-protected areas. The Liberian war zone was at times extended over national borders into Sierra Leone, Guinea, and the Ivory Coast. This was obvious when it came to direct extension of armed combat of, for instance, the NPFL in Sierra Leone. However, it also included the trade in looted goods carried out by exiled Liberian citizens in towns and refugee camps of neighboring countries. Refugee settlements were also often places for political support and at times operated as back bases for rebel movements (as was the case for NPFL in the Ivorian town Danane in the Ivory Coast). The Liberian “war zone” was the practical arrangement of the more abstract, far-reaching, rhizomic *warscape* (Nordstrom 1997).

Some issues should be highlighted concerning the Liberian war zone. First, life in the war zone created moral ambiguities by generating extreme uncertainty, by forcing the mass movement of peoples, and by fragmenting moral communities. Both soldiers and civilians carried out tasks they would not undertake under ordinary circumstances. Second, the quest for safety inside the war zone was all encompassing, leading, for instance, villagers to send their young men and women to team up with different rebel groups in order to protect their lives and property. Risking the life of the few could save the many. Third, in their quest for protection and economic survival (and at times opportunism), civilians were often in close social and economic contact with rebel soldiers. A clear-cut division between soldier and civilian could not easily be drawn in the war zone. Liberians who did not go into exile, or moved to UN-protected Internally Displaced (IDP) camps, or larger cities, had in one way

or another, some contact with rebel factions. We should thus acknowledge a rather blurred category of civilians that took part in the trade of looted goods, carried arms, and in other ways backed up soldiers.

Fourth, and finally, the idea of the war zone as a space of total anarchy provide at best only a partial and misleadingly incomplete picture. The rebel armies were organized according to western military models, with bureaucratic structures that sought to control both soldiers and the civilian population within their territory. The NPFL, for instance, set up a civilian government for Greater Liberia in Gbarnga, tried to maintain a civil legal system, and at one point even floated its own currency. However lacking in capacity, such "state structures" did provide some services to civilians. Moreover, it bears noting that the system of the pre-war state itself had been equally weak and largely governed by unpredictability, individual wish, and state/civilian violence (Ellis 1999, Huband 1998, Utas forthcoming(b)). In short, the war zone was not an area void of efforts at social order or recognized authority, but rather in many ways, it was marked by strong lines of continuity with pre-war patterns of governance and the violent exercise of power.

Bintu's Story

When Bintu was 16 years old, her parents placed her into an arranged marriage with a much older man. In a city like Monrovia, marrying at this age was considered quite rare, but Bintu hailed from the Muslim minority ethnic group, Mandingo, that holds its "traditional" ways in high esteem. As with many minorities, the Mandingo people in Liberia seek to maintain distinct practices even in the pluralist context of urban life. Raised with urban and in part westernized ideals made getting married at this young age immensely difficult for Bintu, and it did not take long before she ran away from her husband.

Bintu's experience with the military started well before the war itself. Like many other girls in their teens, Bintu was going out with older men to pay for school fees, to gain independence from her "all too traditional" parents, and to sustain a posh lifestyle.⁹ One of the men Bintu was seeing was a very high ranking officer in the Liberian army. As their relationship intensified, she decided to move in with him, and she remained in this situation as the war began in 1990. When the war drew closer to Monrovia and both the INPFL and the NPFL approached the town from two sides, Bintu became apprehensive about her personal security. Yet she did not leave her boyfriend's side, even as Monrovia came under siege.

Under circumstances still shrouded in mystery, ECOMOG (the West African peace-keeping force) sold-out and trapped President Samuel Doe. On September 9, 1990, Prince Johnson and INPFL caught Doe and his small entourage in the ECOMOG-controlled commercial harbor. Bintu's boyfriend was among the men who were overpowered by INPFL soldiers, and he was killed during the initial fire exchange.¹⁰ Bintu was only 19 years old at the time, but being the girlfriend of such a high ranking officer made her already well known to the public in Monrovia. The fall of the Doe government and the death of her sole protector thus put her in a delicate position.

Bintu's ethnic origin made things worse. The Mandingo people are a diasporic Muslim minority in a largely Christian country. Even if the Mandingos have been in Liberia for centuries—their presence precedes that of some of the other ethnic groups (d'Azevedo 1994)—they are often described by other ethnic groups in Liberia as intruders, foreigners, or a "tribe" without their own "home county" and thus as not "real Liberians." In early ethnographic writing, the Mandingo "represented a civilisation which provided invidious contrast to the multiplicity of small societies of 'savages' in the forests along the western coast" (d'Azevedo 1994:197). Involved in large trading networks, the Mandingo people early developed close ties with the Americo-Liberian settlements on the coast and eventually with Americo-Liberian governments in Monrovia.¹¹ Settled Mandingo traders could be found in villages all over Liberia, and their relative material wealth was a constant source of envy.

The military government of 1980-1990 was initially more hostile to the Mandingo traders. However, after violent protests in Nimba County following a rigged election and then an attempted coup, both in 1985, President Doe started to woo members of the Mandingo community, propping them up both centrally and locally in the political system (Ellis 1999). Prominent Nimbadians and later NPFL/INPFL strongmen came to emphasize the Krahn/Mandingo axis in their propaganda, calling it an "ethnic marriage." Thus when government troops lost ground, a Mandingo "ethnic cleansing" followed in their wake.¹²

After the fall of Doe's government and the death of her boyfriend, the once "socially fertile" soil of Monrovia became Bintu's wasteland. To stay alive, she had to proceed with maximum discretion. The very day of her boyfriend's death, she was taken to the harbor and guided around the dead bodies, of which her boyfriend's corpse was one. The INPFL soldiers tried to provoke a reaction in her. In her own words, she was "forced to act brave," since she realized that any emotion of recognition would mean her death. Though shat-

tered, she somehow made it through the ordeal and was released. That, however, did not put an end to the harassment. In fact, the INPFL soon sent another soldier to her house to continue the investigation. But the soldier they sent to her came to be her next protector. In her own words:

The commando they sent to interview me so as to get rid of me, that was the same commando who fell in love with me. So the easiest I could do was to love to him [have a relationship with him—in Liberian English]. I didn't like him though.

Thus, within a week of the death of her old boyfriend, she entered the enemy base as the girlfriend of an INPFL soldier. Her new boyfriend knew of her earlier relationship with the late AFL officer but helped her to cover it up. Bintu cut her hair short and made every effort to behave differently. She was no more the old Bintu; she changed her name to a non-Mandingo name.

As she described it, Bintu saw the INPFL man solely as a source of protection in surroundings that would likely have been lethal for her without him. Bintu was far from the only girlfriend of the INPFL soldier; in fact, there were six others living in the same house. Most of them were involved with the man as a matter of protection or economic gain. For others, it was not only a matter of protecting oneself but also one's family. "Loving" the right commando could safeguard both family and estate.

Typically, the more powerful and high-ranking a soldier was, the more girlfriends he would have. Girlfriends could be viewed as "booty" of war (Dilorio 1992:53), as some soldiers "used their gun to love to good, good girls," to quote Bintu. Girlfriends were not only picked up for the pleasure of the soldier, but also for the status he obtained by being able to cater for them. Often the presence of "wives" gave the soldier his status as a senior man in the same fashion as in "traditional" polygamous households. In the eyes of many urbanites in Monrovia, polygamy was hopelessly backward (cf. Little 1973), but as most of the rebels had their roots in the countryside, they were merely mimicking strongmen in their villages.

However, from a young woman's perspective having a high-ranking boyfriend meant not only better protection, for self and family, but also a base for upward social mobility (if more often an imagined than actually realized mobility). High-ranking officers provided enhanced economic prospects as the capacity to obtain looted goods increased according to the number of men they commanded. Large shares of looted goods flowed up the command

structure. In a war machine that was a mechanism for looting, one of the main incentives to be a fighter, or to be a girlfriend of a fighter, was the spoils of war. As Bintu explains:

You had your family, and they did not have any food. If you did not have a relationship with a commando, how would your family survive? You had your mother, father, brother, sister, uncle. If you didn't love a commando, they would not get food.

Bintu stated that at the time looting was not in her interest, since she was still mourning her ex-boyfriend, and such vanities could not change her mood. Yet she described how her mates (co-girlfriends) readily indulged in looting. Some of them went so far as to wear military fatigues and enter the battlefield just to get their hands on commodities. The war granted young marginalized women such as these access to commodities they had hardly seen before, much less put their hands on. Looting euphoria merged with the seductions of consumer society.¹³ In fact, according to Bintu, the other girls regularly pressured their common boyfriend to bring looted goods home to them:

They will tell him to bring this thing and that thing because they haven't been owning these things before and now they wanted to get it overnight.

To share a man with six other young women was far from easy. In the house Bintu had to use shrewd "social navigation tactics" with her "mates." Competition over resources, and over domestic power, was harsh between them, and backstabbing was part of the game. Disclosing secrets such as relationships with other soldiers could be lethal if done to the wrong mate. If somebody gossiped to the boyfriend, one risked being severely beaten and even getting killed; the law was to a large extent dictated by the whims of the carrier of the gun.¹⁴ War-numb boyfriends—high on dope or alcohol and newfound power—made the situation even riskier. Bintu says that she used to "play low" by always making every effort to show that she loved the man.

Thus in general terms, mates lived in a warlike atmosphere even domestically. Competition was especially fierce when the man was out of town, often involving lengthy periods of time when he went to the warfront. Bintu states that mere physical strength often made the difference in the absence of the man:

So if one of the others had strengths more than his favorite girl then she would beat the hell out of her when the man was out. When the man went on mission and returned with all those things he would give most of it to his favorite girl. But if she was weak the other girls would beat her and take every goddamn thing from her. That's how it used to be.

While Bintu quickly developed skills that allowed her to deal with the competitive environment within the house, other less experienced—or just less lucky—girls lost their lives because their soldier/rebel boyfriends found out or just suspected that they had love affairs with other men. Mismanaging domestic relations could put one's life at risk as malicious forms of gossip were part of the game over domestic control. One had to be extremely careful about whom to talk to and how one addressed them.

In Prison

Following the torture and death of Samuel Doe, Prince Johnson and INPFL failed in their attempts to gain sole control over Monrovia. Increasingly involved in battles with the NPFL (which controlled the rest of the country) and with ECOMOG contesting their power in Monrovia, INPFL was significantly weakened. During a clash between INPFL and NPFL, Bintu's boyfriend was wounded, an event she vividly recalled since she was with him when it happened. They were in their flat when they came under attack, and all the other girlfriends ran away under the heavy fire of the NPFL forces, but Bintu was forced to remain with her boyfriend, who kept her at gunpoint. As the battle waned, her boyfriend, who had been severely wounded, passed away despite having received medical care.

Once again, Bintu was on her own. It was her good fortune that she had managed to keep a mini-bus (looted of course) that a friend of hers used as a taxi in Monrovia. As cars were sparse, she continued to do good business with it for some time in the city. However when she received a message from her mother, who had gone into exile in Guinea, that things were really difficult there, she made the decision to drive the mini-bus through Liberia up to Nzerekore in Guinea.

By February 1992, ULIMO had entered from Sierra Leone and had started to make advances into NPFL-territory. To go to Guinea she had to take the road through NPFL controlled territory, and in particular she had to go through Gbarnga, where NPFL had their headquarters. Somehow she man-

aged to pass through the innumerable checkpoints on the road to Gbarnga, but was arrested at one of last the checkpoints before entering town. Though the purpose was most likely to confiscate her vehicle, the consequences for Bintu were far-reaching. She was accused of being a spy and consequently thrown in jail. Being in Gbarnga she had no one “to talk for her”—no family, no patron, and no social network—and she was terrified of being recognized as a Mandingo deep in NPFL territory.

NPFL soldiers shaved her head with a snail shell as was ritually done to prisoners, and they beat her severely so that she would confess to being part of a ULIMO reconnaissance mission. Indeed, the rebel factions used civilians—often children, women, and old people—for such operations. Bintu did not confess to any of the accusations, so she was kept in jail. She remained there for eight months and experienced a life of horror, raped by anyone who felt the urge. As she described it:

They beat me and raped me, more than more, and I lost everything I had. Any commando who was ready to see a woman for free would come and rape me—with my sabou (shaved head). I did not have clothes on. They did not even want to know that I was a human being—they did not want to know.

Though rape was a widespread phenomena in Liberia during the war (see Lucas 1997, Olonisakin 1995b), it was not a deliberate strategy of “ethnic cleansing,” as is reported from other war zones (see, for example, Card 1996, Korac 1994, Omar and de Waal 1995, Stiglmayer 1994). Rather rape was a celebration of a hyper-masculine warrior identity (see Bowker 1998, Hagedorn 1998, Toch 1998, Xavia Karner 1998), or a wartime “denigration and objectification of women-as-sex” (Dilorio 1992:54). Consequently, rape was frequently carried out against any unprotected woman, regardless of whether they had ethnic or political affinity with those who perpetrated this violence.

In prison, Bintu was kept with a group of six other girls, all of whom were executed on suspicion of collaboration with the enemy. Yet Bintu survived the somewhat paranoid security apparatus of NPFL. One day when Bintu was taken outside to drink, a young woman appeared in front of her. Bintu recalls how a soldier had just given her a hard kick on her spinal cord, uttering something like: “Let’s go you damn reconnaissance girl,” when the young woman appeared and asked Bintu’s guard in a masterful voice “Who is that girl?” In the Liberian cultural context the question was not simply a query but

drew on the idea that every individual is “for someone” in a system that Caroline Bledsoe has labelled “wealth in people,” where wealth is more dependent on bonds of duty and obligation to others than ownership of land and material possessions (Bledsoe 1980). If another person (big man or woman) had already vouched for Bintu, the young woman would not be able to take further action.

It was the week after they had executed the other female inmates, who were also accused of being spies. Bintu was at first rather skeptical about this young woman, wondering if it was just another strategy to make her talk. The soldier started to recount all the charges being levelled against Bintu. Suddenly, the girl said “This girl is my sister [denoting friendship, not necessarily kinship]. She is a Kpelle, but she grew up with Mandingo people. Her name is Hawa Kekula.” The soldier maintained that her name was Bintu Keita, but the young woman insisted on her fictitious claim. In our interviews with Bintu, she never mentioned any other motive than true humanity for the young woman taking on her case, but in line with the “wealth in people” idea, we must speculate that at least a partial reason for her quite dangerous engagement with Bintu’s case was that it formed part of her own strategic social navigation, and thus part of gaining social status as a patron (big woman). We should not, however, take the rational choice perspective too far and completely erase humanitarianism and emotion as motives for her action.

The young woman turned out to be instrumental in Bintu’s release, as she was the girlfriend of a senior NPFL commander, Joe Mulbah (later Minister of Information and Tourism in the NPP government). Backed by Mulbah, the young woman demanded the soldiers stop raping and beating Bintu and ordered them to serve her proper food. The young woman began to come around on daily errands, bringing food and snacks such as bananas and peanuts, though frequently the food items never made it past the guards. Within a short time, the young woman started to advocate for Bintu’s release.

The young woman had a cousin who became attracted to Bintu and visited her while she was still imprisoned. Bintu decided to start to “love” the cousin to “satisfy” the young woman who helped her. Despite her much-improved situation, the soldiers that guarded her still raped her, and her new boyfriend could not begin litigation because he was a civilian and not a soldier.

The young woman used all her influence on the NPFL administration to advocate for Bintu’s release, and by drawing from contacts in her social networks, she managed to get increasingly high-ranking people within the NPFL involved in Bintu’s case. It was finally relayed to Taylor’s chief of protocol. It

should be noted that in the “wealth in people” system, one of the important functions for those subjected to big men (or big women) is that they have in their network more important people who can advocate for them when there is a need and that their problems will generally be relayed up the system to a level at which it can be resolved (in this case all the way up to the chief of protocol). As was noted above, Bintu “had nobody to talk for her.” She had no social network in Gbarnga when she was first imprisoned, but now the young women placed Bintu in an existing network on a social position right beneath her. That was what saved Bintu’s life.

Bintu was subsequently released but forced to remain in Bong County. At about the same time, she found out that she was pregnant. No one could determine whom the child belonged to. It could be any of the innumerable rapists. But her boyfriend courageously “claimed the belly” [claimed responsibility for the child]. Bintu’s boyfriend was in his turn protected by a cousin, a senior NPFL commander named Frank Sherman. Sherman spent most of his time at the warfront, as NPFL was now busy fighting ULIMO in the northwest and LPC in the south. During Sherman’s absences from Gbarnga, and despite his seniority in NPFL, most of his protection abilities declined. The following quote highlights the fragile position that young women, such as Bintu, found themselves in the war zone, even when far removed from the frontline in the heartland of NPFL administration:

This boy (her boyfriend) was not a soldier so I did not dare to go out unless his cousin Frank Sherman came from the bush. Frank Sherman was a guerrilla. When Sherman came, I would be free. We would get into a soldier car and ride around a bit. It would make me feel a little better. But when Sherman left, I would have to hide again so other soldiers would not come and hunt me down again and fuck me on top of the belly [pregnancy]. So that was how it was looking. I did not even come out when Frank Sherman was not in Gbarnga.

Sherman was not present when Bintu delivered her child, but he had left a looted satellite dish in her hands prior to his departure to the warfront. By selling it, she would have been able to extract enough money to pay a midwife and buy necessary things for the newborn. However, as the spoils of war were contested, a NPFL general passed by one day and confiscated the dish before she was ever able to sell it. As a civilian, her boyfriend never had any money and could not assist Bintu in any substantial way. In this difficult sit-

uation, the young woman who helped Bintu out of prison again came to her assistance. Despite the travel ban that NPFL administration had imposed on Bintu, the young woman arranged her secret departure from Gbarnga. Bintu and her toddler travelled to Nzerekore in Guinea, where she was finally reunited with her family.

Yet interestingly, Bintu did not stay in Nzerekore for long. Soon after her arrival, her baby died since, as she said laconically, "It was not strong enough to make it." Quite probably, her family had difficulties in coming to terms with Bintu's tragic experiences in Liberia, but most important, as we shall see, what the refugee setting offered was inadequate for a social navigator like Bintu.

Joining the War Economy

In her explanation of her decision to return to Liberia and the war zone, she states that it was due to the hardships Liberians had to withstand in the refugee camps. As the majority of Liberians in Nzerekore lacked substantial forms of income, they were greatly dependent on the international community for providing food and shelter. Food rations delivered by WFP/UNHCR could often not sustain families and would at times be delayed for months. Activities on the verge of the illegal, often trade in looted goods, kept refugees from direct starvation. Refugees in Nzerekore further experienced powerlessness, including verbal and physical maltreatment from Guinean citizens, harassment, and at times outright abuse from local authorities, in particular the military and the police. Young women were particularly easy targets and had at times to provide sexual favors just to pass checkpoints, thus severely restricting their abilities to travel. Such a wide range of structural uncertainties have been observed in other refugee settings in the region (Coulter 2001, Utas 2004a [1997]), and in Bintu's and many other young peoples' minds the opportunity structure (including its hazards) of war-torn Liberia was preferable to the problematic livelihoods of the refugee setting.

While Bintu's account highlights the struggle of many in refugee camps, it also pinpoints Bintu's tactical agency in the war. It also underscores the war zone as more than a wasteland, but as a space in which social and economic opportunities unavailable in "safe" areas (such as refugee camps) could be found. To many young Liberians, participation in the rebel armies or in other areas of the war economy was an attempt to overcome, in their eyes, a profoundly marginal socio-economic situation. War became a charter to become a "somebody," an avenue of social mobility and to social inclusion within a

social arena from which they felt very much excluded—in this sense war itself became the theater of the oppressed.

Within the war zones, social exclusion and marginalization was more apparent in motivating young men to participate in combat (see Jackson 2002; Richards 1996; Utas 2003, 2004c, forthcoming(a)), yet they also played an important role in motivating young women. The markers of power and modernity carried by Black Diamond and her sisters, discussed in the opening of this text, symbolized their temporal success in entering the center of society.¹⁵ Bintu thus returned to Liberia in order to seek for her own successful future instead of passively waiting as a safer but marginalized and disempowered refugee in Guinea.

As Bintu returned to Gbarnga, finally acquitted of suspicion of being a spy, she reacquainted herself with her former friends. She started going out with her old boyfriend. She was still under protection of Sherman and also maintained close ties to the young woman who helped her out of jail. The young woman had, however, broken with her boyfriend Mulbah. Bintu claims that the reason for their separation was that the young woman had been too consistent in aiding Bintu. Prior to Bintu's departure, he had given her an ultimatum of "either him or that Mandingo girl" and she decided to stick up for Bintu. Bintu's case was most probably just one of many conflicting issues that broke up their relationship and from a "wealth in people" perspective, we can now see how the earlier "investment" in Bintu paid off. The young woman's separation from Mulbah placed her in a bad position, as few other soldiers dared to go out with her due to her prior relationship with a senior officer. Bintu, on the other hand, was attractive, and men fancied her. As a result, she had to do *crocrogy* (criminal business—in this case going out with several men) in order to sustain her female friend. Her boyfriend was aware of her male affairs but had to comply because he was a powerless civilian without any source of income or assets. Bintu became his financial provider, too. During Sherman's absence, Bintu's "loving business" sustained them all.

I never really used to enjoy going out with these fighters. I was doing these things because I wanted to survive—do you understand? It was no enjoyment at all. I just wanted to survive, because the crime they put on me was very bad. Reconnaissance—if they caught you for that they would kill you. So I was forced to make life "sweet" for myself. Besides that, things were so difficult for the girl who had left her boyfriend because of me. So I just had to strain. You know strain—to the full

meaning of the word. For me, it was not really any problem because I knew the life I had been living. But for her—she lost her whole home for my business. So I used to strain myself to satisfy her.

At this point Bintu also started taking interest in the looting economy. Joining Sherman at the front, she took up arms and fought as an irregular. Her war experience had numbed her so completely that she spoke of going to the battlefield as a “relief.” Yet her account also highlights the immense feeling of empowerment that many young rebel soldiers experienced when they carried arms. Pushing people in any direction they wished was a small sensation to marginal youth and even more so to young people who had experienced the powerlessness of being a civilian in war time, as reflected in how Bintu described her own feelings:

Frank Sherman was the rooster for us. Sometimes he would give me a gun, and I would follow him to the front. I was just tired of all the talking and the raping in town, so when Sherman gave me a gun and said “Let’s go,” I was relieved to get out of town. We went fighting—I used to join him in the bush. The first time we went all the way to Grand Gedeh. The second time we went there he got killed, but we went to so many other places before that. I remember when we fought in Kakata. During NPFL’s first attack on Kakata, I was there with him. This was when they attacked BWI (Booker Washington Institute). He gave me a gun and said, “Today we will all go fight—do you understand?” I will tell you one thing about fighting: to fight, to meet your enemy, and to exchange bullets with them is not hard, but to retreat, that is the real problem. And I was not a military woman. It was God and nobody else that saved me that day. To retreat from BWI all the way to Fourteenth Street, that was a problem. But God brought me out of that.

Like Bintu, most female soldiers fought as irregulars and never attended any formal training. A majority of young women who fought in the civil war got involved through their soldiering boyfriends. However, both INPFL and the NPFL had special female units comprised of, in the words of ex-NPFL leader and ex-president Charles Taylor, “not just gun-toting women” but women who were “highly trained” and “an important part of our fighting force” (quoted in Huband 1998:76). Women such as Black Diamond and her much feared

Women's Auxiliary Corps embodied a "navigating" alternative to the endless dependency of rebel-soldier-girlfriending tactics.

Girlfriending

Bintu knew that her protection under the "rooster" Sherman was fragile, so it was not only out of monetary necessity that she had love affairs with other men. To put all of her eggs in one basket would simply be too dangerous. So when Sherman died on the front, she was prepared. For many young women, seeing other men secretly on the side was a very dangerous risk diversification strategy, yet one that was ultimately more dangerous to not engage in than to pursue. A "back-up" was crucial in the event that one's protector died on the battlefield. On the other hand, if a young woman left her boyfriend, it was very important to find a new boyfriend who had higher rank than the previous one, so he did not return and "claim any rights." Fights over girlfriends were common. Here, Bintu relays one example:

This story happened once upon a time in one club in Gbarnga. We went to the club, and there was this girl who used to go out with one commando. Later she left him because she was very jealous—you hear. This commando used to love around a whole lot so she decided to leave him. And you know, if you told these commandos that you didn't want them—just like when you are fed up with somebody—that meant serious problem. When you retreated from them and they saw you with somebody new, might God bless you that your new boyfriend would have a higher rank than the old one. If your new boyfriend's rank was lower than the old one's then he would definitely go and disturb you. You would be forced to love to him again [have a relationship/have sex with him]. So this girl, she wanted to act *kwii* ["civilised" or "modern"].¹⁶ She left her old boyfriend for a new one.

So we all went out that night—Sherman was in town. You know when Frank Sherman was in town, that was the time I could boil. When we went to the club, this girl I am talking about was sitting down there with her new boyfriend. She was two months pregnant for this boyfriend, and he had given her money to plait her hair. She had her hair plaited with attachment [synthetic hair plaited in]. So her old boyfriend came and met her sitting with the new one. Now this new boyfriend was boasting too much. So it hurt her old boyfriend. It wasn't

easy; the old boyfriend went and commanded her saying “get your arse out—let’s go.” She said, “No, I’m not going, you and me are not loving any longer and in fact I’m pregnant with this man’s child. So you don’t have any right to command me and carry me home.” He replied, “I will command you and carry you home because this man just feels that he is all and all. So for that reason I’m carrying you home.”

A fight broke out in the club—it was not easy that night. They fought until they had rooted up the whole hair of the girl. Her old boyfriend grabbed her one way and the new one another. They tore her skirt open. It was not an easy fight. I myself joined in that night. The boy that I used to sneak out to meet was fighting on the side of the new boyfriend and Sherman was taking the other side. I don’t know where the grudge came from. They tore off my own skirt too. It was not an easy thing that night. In the end, they had to carry us to the Task Force Office for investigation. I had to explain how I got involved in other people’s confusion.

Those were some of the experiences that girls would have if they were having a relationship with a fighter and got tired of their problems. You could not just get rid of them by saying, “I don’t want you.” They wouldn’t understand—they would just force you. They could have more than fifty women, but as long as they saw you and their heart would cut for you again, they would force you. They would only leave you alone if your new boyfriend had a higher rank than the old one. Then, maybe, they would respect that person but not you—because they would never respect a woman.

Moving On

After Sherman’s death, Bintu started seeing a Sierra Leonean ECOMOG officer regularly, but kept other boyfriends as well (often from the line of peacekeepers). Her family again convinced her to get married and she moved back to Monrovia. In this, her second marriage, she still encountered a number of problems, mainly economic. She gave birth to another baby, this one strong enough to stay alive. However, Bintu was unable to remain with the man, so she once more left for Guinea, struggling on that front for some time before bringing her child and her mother to visit her brother in Sierra Leone. In part, she planned to attempt a reunification with the Sierra Leonean ECOMOG officer, but did not succeed in doing so. She was in Freetown during the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) coup that brought Johnny Paul Koroma

to power on May 25th, 1997. Tragically, her mother was hit in the head by a stray bullet that “fell down from the sky,” and died in her arms. During our interviews with her in 1998, Bintu was back in Nzerekore in Guinea, an interstitial stop in her social navigation.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued for the need to locate young women’s lives in the Liberian Civil War as a matter of constantly adjusting tactics in response to the social and economic opportunities and constraints that emerge unexpectedly and ambiguously within war zones. The agency of these women is not a matter of “have, nor have not,” but rather represents a range of realizable possibilities that are informed by specific social contexts as well as larger economic and political contingencies. A more robust analysis of women’s lives in the war zone requires seeing women as something other than mere victims devoid of agency, or alternatively as “fully free actors,” but rather as tactical agents engaged in the difficult task of social navigation. As social navigators, we can better understand their search for protection of self and families, and the role that “victimcy” can play in achieving these objectives, even as we can also better understand their participation in the war economy of looted goods, and even in actual combat itself.

A “social navigation” perspective also allows us to see the relationship between “victimhood” and “agency” as far from a linear path proceeding from a point of being a victim to that of being a survivor. In Bintu’s account, we see her traversing a variety of high points and low points, moving between different statuses and confronting different levels of risk over time, and at times by her own choice. A linear, developmental narrative can hardly explain why, after finally reaching a “survivor” position in Guinean exile, Bintu ventured back into the Liberian Civil War. Indeed young women in this war transgressed far beyond the position of survivor by taking up arms and becoming soldiers and thus in some sense, abusers. Social navigation defies linear travels by drawing its strength from haphazard detours in the social topography. In this way, Bintu’s journey makes sense as a continuation of pre-war patterns of social navigation. She knows the dangerous topography of the Liberian social zone, and she makes good use of it in her manipulations of her social surroundings, whether in the form of using ties with boyfriends, “mates,” commanders, civilians or peacekeepers, in “girlfriending,” or even in the taking up of arms herself. War can be socio-economically empowering for young mar-

ginalized people such as Bintu, and active participation in war can be preferable to passive life in a refugee camp. Yet this navigation is also clearly dangerous. Life itself is often at stake.

ENDNOTES

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²Paul Richards has noted that female participants in the NPFL seldom were as young as their male counterparts (Richards 1996).

³National Patriotic Party (NPP) was established as the political party of the NPFL rebel faction and won the democratic election of 1997 (see below).

⁴It should be noted however that the social positions women commanders held during the war was generally reversed as disarmament took place (see Arnfred 1988 on this issue in Mozambique), and most young women were re-marginalized alongside their male colleagues (Utas 2005).

⁵Fieldwork was conducted in Monrovia between December 1997 and June 1998 and in Ganta, Nimba County, between June and December 1998.

⁶But skin colour and gender also played central roles in other interviews with girlfriends of youth combatants that my assistant conducted.

⁷At the time of my fieldwork in 1998, most observers believed that we had seen the end of a seven-year-long civil war (1990-1996). However, since mid-1999 Liberians have experienced the birth and growth of two new rebel movements and several governmental militias. A rebel movement with the acronym LURD, Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, was formed in Guinea. LURD launched its first official attacks in July 2000. Since then, Liberia experienced sluggish but intensifying levels of warfare until the spring 2003 when LURD and a splinter movement named MODEL (Movement for Democracy in Liberia) that operated in the south of the country began to gain permanent control over larger parts of Liberia, thus limiting the former NPFL-leader and then-president Charles Taylor and his defense to the capital Monrovia. Through military force, political pressure from the region and international diplomacy, Taylor was subsequently forced into exile in the summer of 2003. In late 2004, the situation in Liberia still remains unpredictable, with "peace" resting on a fragile interim government and a UN peace-keeping force yet to prove its capacities.

⁸Stephen Ellis (1999) has argued that the death toll was considerably lower. Not surprisingly, statistics from war zones tend, at best, to be skilled guesses rendering quite approximate figures.

⁹On young urban women see Utas (1999) and Fuest (1996).

¹⁰President Doe was wounded, but caught alive, and was later tortured in front of a running camcorder. The footage was later distributed as proof of Prince Johnson's military success. For a lengthy discussion on the video of the Doe torture see Utas [forthcoming(c)].

¹¹Americo-Liberians are the descendents of liberated slaves from the US and the Caribbean islands that settled on Liberian territory from 1822 and onwards. In broad colonial fashion the Americo-Liberian settlers dominated politics and trade up until the 1980 coup that

brought Samuel Doe to power (see Liebenow 1969, Tonkin 2002). Partly of Americo-Liberian origin, President Charles Taylor (1997-2003) was often accused of having brought Americo-Liberian rule back to Liberia.

¹²Here we see some of the main ethnic cleavage lines in the Liberian conflict. However, taking the full picture into account, it is quite clear that the conflict did not find its origin in ethnic differences, but was rather loosely ethnified. Other socio-political factors were primary.

¹³A telling example of looting euphōria is a female informant's story of her NPFL boyfriend and a comrade who washed their car in beer after a successful looting mission.

¹⁴As noted above a large movement like NPFL had institutions for both legal and police matters. However, their function was rather arbitrary. In remote areas, such performance was next to non-existent.

¹⁵The core where modernity rules according to the meta-narrative of modernity (see Fergusson 1999, 2002).

¹⁶I have discussed the term *kwii* in relation to young girls elsewhere (Utas 1999).

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