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Love and Betrayal: The Political Economy of Youth Violence in Post-War Sierra Leone*

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ABSTRACT

Youth unemployment is often presented as a security risk in post-conflict countries, yet the relationship between labour market exclusion and engagement in violence remains little understood. This paper opens up one aspect of this relationship, analysing how the employment aspirations of Sierra Leone’s marginal youth relate to their decisions to take part in political unrest. Telling the stories of urban youth involved to varying degrees in violent episodes shows how violence is used as a tactic to signal loyalty to political strongmen. Such loyalty is hoped to result in the establishment of relations of reciprocity that will offer a road to socially valued employment. Comparing the experiences of two groups of young people, similar in their socio-economic background and experience of violence but different in their collocation in political networks, reveals two things. Firstly, availability for violence was insufficient to achieve durable incorporation, as pre-existing social ties determined the nature of recruitment. Secondly, as even those embedded in politicians’ networks of reciprocity appeared ultimately unable to escape marginality, their experiences cast doubt on the expediency of using violence as a way into the labour market, making the exploitative nature of these relations starkly evident.

INTRODUCTION

Youth unemployment has increasingly come centre stage in policy discussions across the world. Economic adversity and a lack of jobs have

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placed young people in limbo, the symbol of a generation in crisis (Utas 2003; Vigh 2006; Honwana 2012). The need to create employment is often presented as necessary to quell a perceived risk to social stability presented by un- or underemployed youth. Population Action International dubbed young people as the ‘security demographic’ (Cincotta et al. 2003), in line with popular theories about the risk that a ‘youth bulge’ might pose in terms of the likelihood of civil war (Urdal 2004). In 2014, high unemployment and underemployment came second in a list of ‘global risks’, citing the concern that a ‘lost generation’ might increase the chance of social unrest (WEF 2014). Underlying portrayals of jobless youth as security risks is a concern with the availability of the unemployed for recruitment in different forms of violence, from civil war to electoral unrest, as actors on behalf of entrepreneurs of violence vying for power, the ‘infantry of adult statecraft’ (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999: 24), or as autonomous organisers of insurrection (see Collier 2003; Colino 2012; Suhrke 2012; Urdal 2012).

Sierra Leone was the unfortunate poster child of these narratives as applied to post-conflict countries. Its civil war, taking place between 1991 and 2002, was framed as a ‘crisis of youth’, with young people’s prominence in all combating factions strongly linked to their lack of economic opportunities, and especially jobs, in the years leading up to the war (Fanthorpe & Maconachie 2010). As the decade-long civil war drew to a close, a long process of reconstruction and peacebuilding began, focused on eliminating the root causes underlying the crisis. Despite Sierra Leone’s peacebuilding process having been hailed as a model for post-conflict countries, significant challenges were already evident before the outbreak of the Ebola crisis (Cubitt 2011). Encouraging surges in growth rates have not resulted in employment opportunities for the majority of Sierra Leoneans. Although labour market data remain sparse, estimates suggest youth unemployment may be as high as 70% (UNDP 2013). The unemployment challenge is especially concerning for Sierra Leone given the centrality of economic exclusion in narratives about young people’s violent roles in the country’s history. Episodes of violence, especially around election time, have been brought as examples of a still imperfect peace (ICG 2008). Employment is consequently framed as a pressing priority to ensure stability (PBC 2007; GoSL 2013).

Despite the urgency that these portrayals of youth as ‘ticking bombs’ add to the unemployment question, we still know ‘too little … about the relationship between labour market participation, institutions and
relations of violence’ (Cramer 2011: 2). This paper explores one aspect of this relationship, by analysing how the employment aspirations of Freetown’s economically marginal young people, and their tactics for navigating a labour market they perceive to be dominated by exclusive networks, relate to their involvement in electoral violence in the context of the 2012 elections. The paper draws on the experiences of young people who, in the absence of jobs and social safety nets, are forced to make a precarious living on the margins of Freetown’s informal economy. It follows Hoffman’s (2007: 404; 2011) intimation that we see violence as a form of labour and that we consider not only the destructive but also excessively productive role of violence as a ‘manifestation of the way economies and governmentality are organised in the contemporary period’. Freetown youth use violence simultaneously as an expedient and temporary form of work and as a way to cement productive relationships in the hope of breaking into an exclusionary labour market. The deployment of violent labour for electoral purposes can thus be understood as an attempt to enter into political strongmen’s networks of reciprocity in the context of a post-war political constellation characterised by insecurity.

The first section of the paper analyses how networks have structured labour markets and influenced the unemployment crisis in post-independence Sierra Leone. Secondly, the paper discusses how the term ‘love’, used by young marginals to denote relations of reciprocity and dependence between ‘big’ and ‘small’ people, is central to their individual plans to escape marginality by becoming sustainably embedded in relations of mutual obligation. The third section then shows how violence can come to play a role in these attempts to navigate exclusive labour markets. Based on life history interviews carried out between 2010 and 2014 with urban youth who have been involved in various ways in episodes of electoral violence, it discusses how they used violence to signal loyalty to political players in the hope of establishing reciprocal relationships. Far from being focused on immediate material incentives, these tactics involved calculations for the future grounded in young people’s understandings of networked labour markets as well as moral claims of reciprocity and a search for recognition.

The paper shows these dynamics by telling the stories of two groups of youth, similar in their sociological backgrounds and in their decisions to use violence as a route to their employment aspirations, but differently placed vis-à-vis strongmen’s networks. The first is a group of marginal young men engaged in informal trade who have occasionally made themselves available for violence, while the second is made up of
members of the so-called ‘task forces’, primarily composed of ex-combatants. Comparing the experiences of these two groups highlights the complexity in achieving and maintaining a relationship of ‘love’ with powerful politicians in this manner. To begin with, availability for violence was not enough to become sustainably incorporated into big men’s networks. The more systematic recruitment of parties’ task forces was in fact determined by their pre-existing social capital and their ability to effectively signal loyalty. However, the experiences of the task forces’ ex-combatants cast doubt on the effectiveness of violence as a navigational strategy, as incorporation in networks of reciprocity, even for those better placed within them, turns out to be unlikely to offer a bridge out of marginality. The ultimate ‘betrayal’ of task forces’ aspirations, as they remain stuck in relations of dependence rooted in their violent deployment, puts into question young people’s expectations that violence might offer a road to a better life, laying bare the reality of their exploitation by powerful political players.

NETWORKS AND STATE DECAY OVER TIME

Sierra Leone’s crisis in the 1990s was long in the making. Practices of colonial rule, speedy electoral decolonisation and two decades of state shrinking under network-based rule compounded each other in creating an economically and politically exclusionary system. In particular, informal networks were crucial in processes of state formation and decolonisation. The centrality of informal networks for understanding governance in conflict-affected settings has been emphasised by Utas’ (2012) work on ‘bigmanity’. He suggests that we look at informal network governance as a ‘socio-structural’ phenomenon, whereby webs with big men as nodes are alternatives to ‘weak or absent state institutions’ (Utas 2012: 4, 5). This section thus considers the historical development of an exclusionary labour market and of a contracting state where redistribution came to be confined to narrow networks. In so doing it highlights the importance of looking at how institutions and practices of governance develop over time in response to structural conditions at specific historical junctures, avoiding the common characterisation of network governance as a continental cultural deficiency (Mustapha 2006; Meagher 2010).

The centrality of informal networks in matters of government and in the labour market under colonial rule was characterised by the administration’s reliance on chiefs as intermediaries between the state and
its subjects, or as a cheap way to control Sierra Leone’s hinterland to generate revenue as the colony encountered financial trouble (Reno 1995). In what Reno terms an ‘elite accommodation’, informal arrangements between the state and local ‘big men’ favoured the side-lining of bureaucratic norms, as collaborators were given access to state resources and markets in exchange for their ability to maintain social order. In this system, chiefs’ power grew unchecked and they took centre stage in labour markets. They became key intermediaries in the mining areas after diamonds were discovered in 1930 and expanded their hold over their subjects, engaging rural young men in forced labour to support chiefly interests.

Fast electoral decolonisation meant that the main political party, the Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP) at the end of the 1950s relied heavily on chiefs to mobilise the electorate and never developed organisational strategies to engage the public (Cartwright 1970). Similarly, the socialist-leaning All People’s Congress (APC), founded by trade-union leader Siaka Stevens immediately before independence, depended on intermediaries such as hunting societies and Lebanese diamond dealers to court the votes of young men in the mining districts. After a tumultuous few first years of independence, the APC won the 1967 elections, paving the way to the establishment of a one-party state in 1978. Under Siaka Stevens, the colonial ‘elite accommodation’ took a new guise, as the President relied on Lebanese businessmen who bankrolled the state in exchange for free reign over the economy. During this time, Stevens focused his efforts on placing himself at the centre of increasingly narrow redistributive networks, so that political competition became a struggle for access to State House and the President’s personal connections. Diamonds were central to this new elite accommodation and the economy became entirely dependent on minerals, with young men’s labour moving away from agriculture towards the mining fields. Reno’s (1995: 126) reflections on the position of the average Sierra Leonean are indicative of the impact of an exclusionary political economy on their everyday lives:

In the long-term all seek meagre collaborations with elite networks for subsistence. Most of these activities put people in a position of obligation to some aspect of the network’s authority. … Social categories, such as illicit miner, security officer, rich merchant or frustrated entrepreneur became defined in terms of one’s level of access to the shadow state.

As Stevens retired in 1985, General Momoh’s rule further narrowed opportunities for access to state resources. In the midst of a global downturn
characterised by a dip in prices for natural resources compounded by International Financial Institutions’ structural adjustment conditionality, development spending dropped drastically. Economic chances for the majority of young people became dire, as even the mining fields no longer provided a livelihood. The new President’s attempts to nurture a new elite accommodation through deals with foreign companies were largely unsuccessful: the regime was losing control over access to resources. Even the state’s monopoly over the means of violence was soon to be challenged as the ten-year civil war was at the APC’s doorstep.

The war began in March 1991 as a rebel group, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), entered the eastern mining district of Kailahun. Over the next ten years, the rebels, government forces and civil defence militias were engulfed in a conflict that became notorious for the level of its atrocities, perpetrated by militants on all sides against civilians. After several failed peace accords, and after the succession of two military juntas and the return of power of the SLPP, the war was finally declared over in 2002. Dissecting the causes of war has given rise to heated debates. A key bone of contention is whether the rebellion can be seen as a political movement consciously aimed at the overthrow of a corrupt and exclusive system, or whether it was in fact a collection of opportunists attempting to get their share of the country’s resources (see Abdullah 1998; Richards 1998; Bangura 2004; Peters 2011). Despite their differences, all assessments point to a contracting state where redistribution was limited to narrow networks and an increasingly exclusionary market economy where young people’s socio-economic opportunities had been truncated. The sociological background of RUF recruits, regardless of their longer-term intentions or short-term calculations, points to a pool of disaffected youth created by years of marginalisation (Keen 2005).

In the midst of destruction, the potential for creative reconstruction was great. International donors and government partners have vigorously embraced liberal models of statehood, embodied by market democracies, believed to be the most conducive to the establishment of peaceful polities (Newman et al. 2009). Despite encouraging signs of economic growth and largely successful elections, some of the dynamics present in the decades preceding the war continue to characterise the country’s political economy. Fast growth has not been accompanied by fast job creation, and the large majority of young Sierra Leoneans continue to make a living precariously in the informal economy (UNDP 2013). The country’s economy remains undiversified, with growth being driven primarily by an extractive sector whose potential for creating jobs has not lived up
to expectations, especially for unskilled locals, and at the expense of other neglected private sector opportunities such as commercial agriculture (ADB 2013; Batmanglich & Enria 2014). International interventions starting with ex-combatant reintegration packages, in addition, have focused on labour supply and largely failed to match training with existing labour demand (UNDRRC 2002).

Similarly, concerns around the nature of citizen engagement and the fairly regular episodes of inter- and intra-party violence cast a shadow over democratic gains. The 2007 elections led to a watershed turnover of power, yet they also saw the concerning remobilisation of ex-combatants as security forces by both major parties (Christensen & Utas 2008; Kandeh 2008). As we shall see below, these dynamics did not disappear in the 2012 elections, despite these being described as the ‘most peaceful of the post-war era’ (Mitton 2013: 323). Despite considerable reform in the structures and edifices of democratic and economic governance, therefore, questions remain surrounding the ability of such reforms to fundamentally change the nature of state-society relations and in particular to engage meaningfully with informal institutions and elite networks (Brown et al. 2005).

**LOVE AND BETRAYAL: THE SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF LABOUR MARKET EXCLUSION**

Networks continue to be central to young people’s understanding of how labour markets work in post-war Sierra Leone. These understandings are a crucial step for our analysis of the role of political violence as one tactic to navigate the labour market towards the fulfilment of employment aspirations. A large number of young people in Freetown are involved in precarious and low-income forms of work in the informal economy, such as street hawking or commercial motorbike riding. Young people described these forms of work as ‘sitting down’, an expression used figuratively to define their waiting for something better. Achieving aspirations of proper ‘employment’, in the form of a white-collar job or a place in the mining industry, required finding a ‘helping hand’. Young Freetonians’ interpretations of labour market dynamics in the city revolved around the figure of the sababu, a useful person able to redistribute resources, including access to employment opportunities, within his or her networks. Inability to enter a sababu’s circles was seen as the central cause for their lack of acceptable employment. Being excluded from proper
jobs, therefore, meant not only being relegated to precarious livelihoods in the context of Sierra Leone’s political economy. It also implied having been excluded from productive social networks. Not having a job was as much about social marginalisation as it was about economic adversity.

The primacy given to the figure of the *sababu* in discussions of labour market dynamics revealed how expectations placed on big people to share their wealth defined young people’s tactics for achieving their employment aspirations. In this context, they often asserted that unemployment was the result of the lack of ‘love’. As Albert, a young commercial motorbike rider put it: ‘There is no love for each other, if there was love, when you see someone fighting that twenty-four hour struggle, you would pick them up’. In her work on social relations during the war, Bolten (2012: 3) defines love as a ‘Sierra Leonean concept of material loyalty – relationships forged and sustained in complex, often compassionate acts of resource exchange’. Conversely, ‘betrayal’ in this framework characterises individualistic accumulation that contradicts moral obligations between those who have become big and those who remain small.

Hoffman (2014) has critiqued Bolten’s use of the term love for lacking heuristic value. However, highlighting Freetown’s youths’ application of the word to articulate their expectations of reciprocity invites us to move beyond normative analyses of patronage systems, focusing instead on the fine-grained aspects and the ‘thick materiality’ (Hoffman 2014) of the social ties between big and small people. Young people’s notion of ‘love’ in the context of labour market dynamics presents an entry point to take seriously the moral economy that underpins these claims for incorporation. Challenges to the restrictive nature of *sababu*s’ circles that left many young people fending for themselves were in fact not critiques of dependence per se, but rather of ‘asocial inequality’ (Ferguson 2013: 233), that is, of inequality detached from hierarchies of dependence. Integration in those hierarchies was seen as the best way to escape marginality and ‘becoming somebody’ entailed a search to become embedded in such relations of reciprocity with those who acted as nodes in these networks. While ‘love’ was scarce in an exclusionary economy, being an insider was of crucial importance and competition for *sababus* was fierce. These mechanisms are pivotal in processes of recruitment for political violence in post-war Sierra Leone.
The experiences of two kinds of young marginals, one peripheral and the other central to post-war flare-ups of electoral violence, helps elucidate the role of reciprocity in explaining decisions to take part in political unrest in contemporary Sierra Leone. The first group is a collective of young men who survive precariously in Freetown through commissions from the sale of second-hand goods. They are frequently characterised as *rarray boys*, a pejorative term used to describe street youth. Given the impossibility of unemployment for the large majority of poor Sierra Leoneans, it is young men like these who are the subjects of post-war narratives surrounding the dangers of unemployed youth (Enria 2012). Focusing on one young man’s trajectory into violent politics in the months preceding the 2012 elections, this section considers how violence relates to employment aspirations, as it comes to be seen as a tool for navigating an exclusionary labour market. His ultimate failure to navigate out of marginality by engaging in violence reflects the difficulty for young outsiders to stake a claim for the ‘love’ of powerful sababus.

At the time of our conversations, Siaka was twenty-four years old and had grown up in the street after his mother died and his father emigrated. His interest in politics had begun at an early age, but it was in 2012 that he came close to power as he was approached, together with a handful of friends, to campaign for a prominent politician running for the flagbearership of the SLPP. The SLPP convention in July 2011 was marred by confrontations between supporters of the various candidates. Siaka’s encounter with one of these candidates and his subsequent role in the convention fracas crucially highlights the processes involved in becoming a politician’s supporter. Siaka recounted being called into the candidate’s office by a man previously unknown to him. The entry of this intermediary was, for Siaka, an informal offering to enter a network, in which the candidate was a ‘node’.

After a long period of waiting around the candidate arrived and began his courting of Siaka and his friends:

He told us: ‘I’m ready to take care of young people, I have a big house that some guys can take care of’. Then he said, ‘Now first we have to go into the convention and win.’

The politician then ‘pulled money, about Le 250,000’. Siaka admitted that once they arrived at the convention, he took part in the physical confrontations that took place between supporters of the most
prominent candidates. His engagement was however no more than episodic. After the brief encounter, he never saw the politician again, something that he expressed with frustration. ‘He just forgot about us’, Siaka argued with resignation. This firstly points to the volatility of the types of networks Siaka was embedded in around election time; and secondly to the fact that these encounters gave rise to more significant expectations than simply immediate remuneration. Siaka reflected on his making himself available for party violence as a way to be recognised in the political game so as to enter a politician’s networks hoping that in the future something might come of it. In this context, being violent, or at least showing the potential for violence, can be a powerful signalling mechanism. Putting oneself at risk shows the extent of one’s loyalty, and, as we shall see below, certain elements of the post-war political constellation make the ability to call on a pool of personal enforcers desirable for political entrepreneurs.

In Siaka’s narrative becoming an enforcer was described as a key step in entering a particular politician’s graces in order to achieve a position where violence was no longer necessary. It was a stepping-stone, with the real rewards expected in the longer-term. One’s protection and solid support would hopefully translate into a strong bond with a sababu who would then provide a respectable job. Reflecting on his failure to establish a durable relationship with the SLPP candidate, Siaka spoke of his plans for the next election emphasising his need to step up his efforts to be individually recognised. His thoughts are worth quoting at length:

I am a young man, so life is going. What I am trying to say is that for [the 2018 elections] I am an SLPP man, but I’m not just going to shout ‘SLPP, SLPP’, I mean I’ll go with them, but there is a point where I need to get somebody who is a strong one inside the SLPP, who I will link up to see if after the election I can find my own place to hang. So before this next election I want to get someone who is a big one to link with. I want somebody who can recognise me as: ‘This is my vigilant man around’. Like, you can go there and they can pull Le 5,000 or 10,000 to give us, but if I have somebody who I link up with and they recognise me, they must fight to put me in the kind of position that people will then look at me and say ‘This man can be in that position’. I will be inside.

Siaka’s calculations are indicative of the importance of recognition, and in particular of being recognised as a ‘vigilant man’. He spoke of his vigilance in reference to his physical strength, something he took much pride in: ‘Sometimes my friends come around and say, ‘If you were in a different country, like Gambia or something, you would make
money because you have a good body, you are vigilant!’ Vigilance in Siaka’s eyes was thus an attribute that he hoped might grant him the necessary recognition to become successfully ‘attached’ to somebody. Siaka’s words also reflected his sense that he deserved to have somebody acknowledge his worth and his ability to take up a respectable position. When discussing how his vigilant body would take him places if he lived abroad, he added ‘Sometimes I can sit down and think that this time is just wasted, because the business that we do is not something that means something is going to happen, I should be on a higher level’. This emphasises the ultimately social meaning of work, indicating the importance of being ‘on a higher level’ for determining one’s social worth. Secondly, as argued above, finding a sababu is not simply expedient to finding work and to developing a trajectory towards one’s own ‘bigman-ity’; relations of dependence and reciprocity also reflect that one is well-integrated and not alone.

The efforts of Siaka and his colleagues to secure the ‘love’ of a powerful sababu by using violence as a signalling mechanism were therefore ultimately unsuccessful in eliciting the obligations they had hoped. This was expressed through feelings of having been ignored, or being invisible and forgotten. Siaka’s friend Abbas gave an example of when he had forced his way through a crowd of traders in order to make space for a rally due to pass along a busy street in central Freetown:

The Councillor told us: ‘These people are stopping us from passing, make us pass!’ So we bulldozed the place, we scattered people’s market. We bulldozed [them]! People started running in all directions and as the police started catching people and the Councillor just said it wasn’t him we were fighting for. … After the fights come, and they beat you good in prison, if you go to the politician and tell him: ‘Papi, it’s for you that they beat me in prison’, they will just tell you: ‘Get out you idler, you are drunk, you are crazy!’

Abbas felt he had been betrayed after having made significant sacrifices for a politician. Significantly, failure to be recognised was symbolised by politicians’ emphasis of the young men’s marginality and the stigma that goes with it (‘… you idler, you are drunk, you are crazy’). Failed navigation tactics, in other words, amounted to remaining stuck in one’s current socio-economic predicament. A frequently expressed reaction was the promise to disengage in the future; violence was only seen as worthwhile if it resulted in recognition. K-Man recalled telling his companions to stay away from violence in 2012 in these terms: ‘I told my boys to keep cool, because the politicians don’t know you, at least they don’t know you much’.6
Both main political party offices in Freetown are bustling places with supporters and hangers-on coming in and out all day. Behind the main buildings, hidden from sight, one can also find a different kind of congregation spot, one that is inhabited by the so-called task forces. Here drinks are sold, marijuana is cut and political discussions ensue. Delving deeper into the occurrences of political violence in post-war Sierra Leone makes it clear that these places are essential building blocks of the story. Task forces have played a crucial role in the unfolding of various violent incidents, since their establishment during the second peacetime election in 2007. Christensen & Utas (2008) have eloquently discussed the establishment of these groups in both major political parties, analysing the dynamics of recruitment and positing continuity between the logic of war and that of peacetime politics. This section situates task force members’ recruitment in a discussion of labour market dynamics, linking their more systematic and durable engagement in political violence to their own attempts to leverage notions of loyalty and personal connections to demarcate the boundaries of mutual obligations with political sababus. It discusses the nature of reciprocal ties from the point of view of ‘insiders’, similar to Siaka and his colleagues in their aspirations and chosen tactics, but seemingly better positioned that other would-be supporters to stake claims of reciprocity in the context of Sierra Leone’s post-war political constellation. However, probing deeper into the realities of this much-aspired-to incorporation questions the ultimate success of seeking a better future by eliciting dependence through violence.

Political party task forces are security details to the party. While a limited number of bodyguards for the highest cadres are paid regularly, most task force members act informally as volunteers, though they are given ‘incentives’ for specific missions and are occasionally provided with daily sustenance. The task forces are organised like military groups, with a hierarchical structure starting with the Task Force Commander, followed by Deputy Commanders and Operations Officers. They are party supporters and mobilisers and they secure the party office as well as being taken on tour as protection during political campaigns. Task forces’ role in politically motivated violence was chronicled in discussions with individual members through reference to a series of incidents seen to reflect the force’s purpose. Specific events can be broadly categorised as follows: attacks on party offices; attempts on the lives of senior politicians; and intra-party skirmishes. Some recent examples were the 2007 looting
of the SLPP office hours after the swearing in of President Koroma; the 2011 stoning of SLPP flagbearer Julius Maada Bio, during a tour of the Southern town of Bo and the consequent arson at the local APC office; and intra-party clashes in 2013 over accusations of embezzlement within the SLPP.

Understanding who these task force members are and how they are recruited reveals what differentiates them from the young men of the previous section. The most important differentiating trait lies in the nature of the two groups’ social networks. The task force can be seen as a case study into the deployment of violent labour through networks based on obligations of reciprocity. The majority of established task force members were ex-combatants from different factions of the civil war. Their entry into the task forces, as exposed by Christensen & Utas (2008), was through the remobilisation of wartime networks as politicians recruited those they knew for their wartime reputation, or with whom they had fought or had contact with during the war. In addition, as ex-combatants became remobilised, they brought their former colleagues with them into the political arena. The SLPP task force, for example, was made up primarily of former AFRC and West Side Boys soldiers, while the APC’s drew from ex-RUF recruits. The task force had been called into existence, members argued, in the run-up to the 2007 elections as senior politicians personally approached them requesting their engagement. A number of them had been jailed during the 2000 state of emergency and appeared in the controversial domestic trials against the AFRC and RUF (cf. Anders 2014). Their release from jail was the first step in the reactivation of the networks that led them into the political domain.

Remobilisation was depicted as an attempt on politicians’ side to redress the ‘suffering’ that ex-combatants had been through in the aftermath of war, a way of recognising their struggle, especially for those who had been jailed. Amadu, a founding member of the SLPP task force recalled that: ‘They approached us and said “Now we have done you bad, we made you suffer, so for that reason we would like you to get involved in politics.”’ What is clear from their recollections is that the task force members had strong connections with powerful sababus who promised them future support. It is important to contextualise task force members’ trajectories in order to understand their mobilisation as a form of navigation. Apart from various personal reasons for entering politics, a common narrative reflected the experience of failed reintegration processes, whereby ex-combatants had not been able to make a living from the training they had received. Those who had been
jailed had not been offered the opportunity to train and, as Alex, an
SLPP task force member, put it: ‘All I know in this country is the gun’,
adding that in any case his reputation as a former West Side Boy made
him reluctant to attempt job applications.9

Many ex-combatants therefore shared a starting point of economic
marginality with their counterparts in the previous section, yet what dif-
ferentiated them was the inclusion into political networks. To put it dif-
f erently, they were a step further up the ladder in the sense that
although they remained, by their own admission, ‘small’, they had
access to prominent sababus that other youths did not have. Pre-existing
social capital and task force members’ embeddedness into durable per-
sonal relations of reciprocity is central to understanding the mobilisa-
tion of violent labour for political purposes. An elucidation of the
nature of these relations, and the expectations and exchanges involved
is equally key to rooting this discussion in a broader understanding of
a moral economy of reciprocity and dependence. Before turning to
this discussion, however, it is important to ask why the violent labour
of task forces is necessary.

The first justification lay in the widespread lack of trust in the state’s
security forces, reported by task force members and politicians alike.
Despite significant efforts to restructure the security sector by inter-
national and local statebuilders, parties and individual politicians contin-
ued to find it necessary to rely on their own trusted security details for
protection. A spokesman for the APC Youth League elucidated this
vividly as he argued that someone close to the party was more likely to
be trustworthy, comparing the party to an individual:

Inasmuch as people may attempt to give you security, you as an individual
are more mindful of your own security. Normally when politics reaches its
peak, security officers are not trusted, and a man’s best servant is him- or
herself.10

This lack of trust in the state’s security apparatus also reveals a sense of
insecurity that pervaded discussions with political actors. Remobilised
ex-combatants, and the task forces more generally, arguably derive
their relevance, or even necessity, from this insecurity attached to the
business of politics in post-war Sierra Leone. One important source of
insecurity can be understood through the lens of what Ferme (1999:
160) terms the ‘dialogics of publicity and secrecy’. Ferme points to
the accepted division between public and secret spheres in Sierra
Leone, that is, the widespread assumption, made both by politicians
and their electorates, that politics happens in different spaces, some
public and some secret, and that covert strategies play a fundamental role in the workings of politics. This makes for permanent ambiguity of political intention, something that she frames as ‘one of the defining features of postcolonial subjectivity in Sierra Leone’ (1999: 161). Performance is key in mediating secret and public domains, as ‘power is seen to work in secret covert spheres, whose existence is tantalizingly evoked by the use of polysemic symbols in the public domain’ (Ferme 1999: 183).

These dynamics were manifest in parties’ evocation of insecurity and, consequently, in their deployment of task forces. An especially illustrative case was the SLPP’s allegations, made both before and after the 2012 elections that the APC was secretly arming their supporters. In 2014, for example, a member of the opposition youth when asked why task forces were necessary, pointed to alleged covert tactics and the urgency of addressing the feeling of insecurity provoked by these rumours:

We are seeing that the APC passed a bill to legitimise the sale of arms, and they spent five million dollars to buy arms and ammunitions, right? And they are using their tribesmen, taking them to [Kambia District] and giving them trainings. A good number of them are becoming OSD, but these are just disguised APC, hoodlums who want to use the OSD to impose violence on our people. But they are making a great mistake in failing to realise that we are already trained. We don’t have ammunitions, but we have to buy ours ... that is what I am going to advise my youth, to go out there massively and purchase their ammunitions, get your AK-47s …

In this climate of ambiguity and insecurity, the task forces play not only a protective but also a symbolic role. The mere presence of task force members at the party office, or standing behind politicians at rallies, is a powerful performance of strength, one that signals readiness and strength in the face of covert, violent challenges. This spectacle is made especially evocative by the fact that many task force members are renowned ex-combatants; they are symbols of the recent past, linked to the ‘historical genealogy of the state’ (Ferme 1999: 183). Their role is embedded in the history of strong-handed rule in the 1970s, yet today this history is recast through a lens far more powerful to the present-day observer, that of the civil conflict. The dialogue between public and secret, whereby a multiplicity of meanings coexist in the political arena, can help shed light on the apparently incongruous phenomenon of the deployment of task forces made up of ex-combatants and the commitment, perennially vocalised on all sides of the political spectrum, to a new peaceful politics. Public exhortations to abstain
from violence were therefore paralleled by unspoken, but equally power-
ful spectacles of might, which, through the evocation of powerful
symbols, sent signals to opponents.

Insecurity provides a useful backdrop from which to understand how
and why ‘big’ people may choose to incorporate task force members.
However, understanding the nature of these relations also reveals how
these structural conditions give rise to specific obligations and norms
of fairness, within a bounded community whose contours are defined
by pre-existing social capital.

Relations of reciprocity with political players were characterised by
expectations that by showing loyalty one would be taken care of.
Loyalty was seen as a way to establish the contours of a moral community
based on ‘love’, the ‘thick materiality’ of social relations amongst
unequals. This was both an expectation that loyalty would be materially
rewarded but also, more fundamentally, relied on notions of fairness
whereby those with more access to resources ought to redistribute to
those who showed them loyalty and commitment. Occasional incentives
were seen as secondary to the longer-term hopes that political sababus
would ultimately provide jobs and better livelihoods. As Alex explained
in reference to his political sababu:

He is my boss, I am a security to him. I am a soldier, he is a soldier. I worked
with him [during NPRC times]. … Whenever we go anywhere, he gives us
something or if he goes he leaves for us, but it’s not a basic salary. But he
has a plan for us. When he will win anywhere else, he will never leave us
behind. We rely on him because he is our leader.¹⁵

Being someone’s protégé however, also required fulfilling one’s side of
the equation. Recognition for one’s loyalty was not a one-off achieve-
ment granted by pre-existing networks, but needed to be maintained.
Loyalty was key to sustaining incorporation into these informal political
networks. The mechanism linking loyalty to reciprocity was concisely
summarised by another task force member, Tejan:

That’s why [the politicians] say: ‘Risk, Recognise and Reward’, you can
come and do something without salary so they will say, ‘Look this person,
he really works hard oh!’ … They will recognise you and say you are some-
body who is good to them. The reward is what I get if the party wins.¹⁶

Taking risks for no immediate benefit, according to Tejan, was a way to
show commitment to a sababu for the promise of future reward. It is at
this point that relations of reciprocity and violence interact. The
taking of risks referred to instances of violence committed in the past,
as well as the ability to withstand attacks in order to secure the party
and its leaders. Justifications for having been actively involved in violent incidents usually centred on the importance of being loyal to a leader and emphasising that what had been done, was done for them. Tejan himself, for example, said he had been directly involved in an act of arson on the opposing party’s office and the injury of various bystanders. He argued that this had not been specifically mandated, but that it was his duty to his leader: ‘If you are with your boss and you see something going on, something that is not fine, you have to react for him!' Here in particular, ex-combatants played up their comparative advantage as experienced fighters suggesting that their ability to fight made them more valuable task forces, and that this, together with their pre-existing ties, was what gained them more recognition than other youth.

Some jobs did materialise for a few members, seemingly confirming the success of navigational strategies characterised by violent political mobilisation. Unsurprisingly, the ruling party was better placed to offer positions to those that had shown them loyalty. In the APC’s second term, for example, a National Youth Farm was established. While the farm was officially open to everybody, recruitment for the farm was not by application and the majority of those involved, at least in the first few months of operation in 2014, had been active task force members. Opposition task force members were less lucky, and were sorely disappointed by their party’s defeat in the 2012 elections. Nevertheless, one project was often brought up, namely temporary employment as security contractors in Iraq.

In 2009, the Ministry of Labour in collaboration with an international private security company established a project, aimed at creating ‘overseas youth employment’, that recruited ex-servicemen to act as security forces to the US forces in Iraq. Although the project was intended for former government soldiers, a large number of recruits were former rebels (Christensen n.d.). According to one SLPP task force member and former AFRC/WSB combatant who spent two years in Iraq, it was the SLPP national executive that facilitated their recruitment by writing a letter with their names on them directly to the Ministry, and by providing funds for acquiring passports and medical checks. The Iraq experience did not, however, live up to the expectations of just reward. The participants were only paid $250 a month for work in conditions of extreme hardship. Upon return, while they were expected to have become rich, they quickly returned to their previous situation of dependence on political sababus. Arguably, rather than having used their connections to transition into socially sanctioned adulthood, those who went to Iraq simply became temporarily entangled in global
networks of exploitative work which ultimately brought them no further than they had been before. The apparently better-placed APC supporters, similarly continued to remain dependent on their benefactors, whose ability to satisfy their clientele was in turn contingent on their remaining in power.

Although task force members were better able to become incorporated into the close circles of powerful *sababu*s, this form of inclusion may be better characterised as ‘adverse incorporation’ (Hickey & du Toit 2007). The notion of adverse incorporation emerged as a response to the analysis of poverty as a sign of ‘social exclusion’, which, as Hickey & du Toit (2007) point out, often ignores how it is the way in which individuals are included that may be problematic. Significantly, adverse incorporation allows us to acknowledge that rather than being helpless victims, those with less power may be ‘obliged to manage this vulnerability through investing in and maintaining forms of social capital which produce desirable short-term, immediate outcomes and practical needs’ (Wood 2000). At the same time, considering the adversity of incorporation makes starkly evident the inevitable frustration of task force members’ aspirations.

Indeed, as we have seen, both those outside and those inside these networks view incorporation as a navigation tactic, and actively take steps to establish or nurture personal relations that can provide both everyday subsistence and hopes for work in the future. Clientelism, then, ‘may provide a more secure form of political engagement for the poorest people, at least in the short-term’ (Hickey & du Toit 2007: 13). However, the adverse incorporation framework also makes it possible to take into account the fact that while there may be a rationale in ‘playing the game’, these relationships can be immediately exploitative as well as undermining opportunities to shift power balances in the future, as shown by continued dependence even after having entered the labour market. Continued dependence characterised by the deployment of violent labour is central to strongmen’s attempts to cement their power through the mobilisation of notions of insecurity and the interplay between publicity and secrecy. Incorporation in this case then is adverse both because establishing dependence to escape marginality requires taking very real risks but also because it is improbable that these relations, thought to be panacea to escaping socio-economically defined youthhood, will in fact deliver their promise.

The adversity of this form of incorporation was compounded by its volatility. Apart from the obvious risks involved in violent clashes, there are also substantial hazards inherent in placing one’s fortune
and expectations on a single, albeit powerful, individual. The precariousness of such arrangements was poignantly reflected by Amadu’s story. As discussed above, he was recruited into the SLPP task force as he was freed from jail after the AFRC/WSB and RUF trials. A year later, during a by-election in Kailahun District he was called up to take part in one of the contenders’ security detail. Amadu had fought with the candidate, a former Lieutenant Colonel in the SLA, during the war and said that was the reason he was recruited: ‘he called the main boys with whom he fought, because they understand him and they are used to him’. After the former Colonel was elected District Councillor, Amadu was made ‘revenue collector’, that is, he was in charge of a checkpoint for produce taxation in the district. Before the 2012 elections, however, his boss cross-carpeted and joined the APC. Amadu received the news with shock and concern, but the Councillor reassured him and his colleagues that it was a good move ‘in the interest of the people’. He recalled being welcomed by APC task force members, many of whom he knew from the war and their years in prison. Amadu’s initial concerns however proved to be founded, as in January 2014, the Councillor died. His death shook Amadu particularly because of the rumours surrounding it. ‘They killed [him] in Kailahun!’ Amadu asserted, pointing to strange behaviour on his leader’s part prior to his death, suggesting that he may have been poisoned in revenge for having switched parties. Amadu’s sudden loss of his sababu was traumatic: not only did he now fear for his own life, he had also lost the object of his loyalty and consequently, his future. As he put it:

I have lost many family members and I never cried, but I shed tears like a baby for that guy, because he is my future. My future has gone. I had hope because if he had got a good position he would have helped us, he took care of us. Some of us have become destabilised.

As we spoke in March 2014, Amadu had resigned as revenue collector in Kailahun because he was afraid that his connection with the former Councillor would put him at risk. He was unemployed and unsure of his next steps.

The volatile nature of relationships was similarly shown by Alex’s reflections on a perceived ‘betrayal’ of the moral obligations attached to loyalty shown through violent mobilisation. As I returned to Freetown in 2014 I looked for Alex at the SLPP party office but was not able to find him. Eventually I was told he had not been around the office for a while, and I ended up finding him in a small abandoned opened space, in the midst of rubble from nearby construction work,
where he and his friends had built a makeshift shelter overlooking the sea. Alex felt that his sababu had not done his part in nurturing his security detail and argued that because his loyalty had not been adequately reciprocated, he had decided to withdraw his services: ‘We are no longer suffering for a person who doesn’t know [our] suffering’, because, why ‘should you die for somebody who doesn’t know your concern?’ Alex had been disappointed by the lack of opportunities for betterment since his first entry into politics in 2007 as well as being dismayed by his leader’s apparent forsaking of him in times of need, such as when he had been jailed in 2013 and allegedly tortured without anyone bailing him out of prison. His disappointment with his leader’s betrayal of their bond of reciprocity was illustrated especially vividly by Alex’s assertions of how his sababu should have behaved:

When people love you, you too should love people. When they have a problem, you are supposed to have concern for those people, because they love you. You cannot just love your family, when people will sacrifice for you, no! When you want to be a leader you can love everybody that made you a leader, is that not so? When you don’t love this person, then you have discriminated people.

CONCLUSION

This paper has considered how involvement in electoral violence in Sierra Leone relates to young people’s employment aspirations and their tactics for navigating an exclusionary labour market. Transposing Hoffman’s (2011) commitment to seeing war as a form of labour entangled in the mechanisms of the world economy onto the post-conflict setting, the paper has situated political violence in a larger story about work in Sierra Leone. This allows us to see violent labour as a form of survival but also, and more importantly, as a strategic attempt to secure a future in the job market. Central to the deployment of violent labour in contemporary Sierra Leone are social networks rooted in the specific structural conditions of the post-war political economy. As jobs continue to be scarce, and as insecurity and ambiguity characterise the business of politics, attaching oneself to a prominent sababu, eliciting reciprocal obligations by manifesting one’s loyalty through violence is seen as an avenue for escaping marginality. Inclusion into political networks as enforcers parallels broader labour market dynamics, whereby economically marginal youth aspire to become incorporated into powerful sababus’ networks in order to step up the social ladder and achieve social standing.
Comparing two groups of young people, both marginal but differently situated in relation to strongmen’s networks, helped us delve deeper into the dynamics of incorporation. This reflects several things. Firstly, both groups were incentivised by economic exclusion and both used violence in an attempt to enter and maintain these exclusive networks, but those with pre-existing social capital were more systematically recruited and were better able to establish themselves as rightful dependants in relations of reciprocity. Availability for violence, in other words, is not enough to guarantee durable incorporation in the networks of powerful sababus. Secondly, the fact that even those who are better assimilated in these networks, a step further in their cementing of relations of dependence, were unable to effectively transition into valued jobs is telling. The ultimate betrayal of task forces’ aspirations starkly exposes the inevitably exploitative nature of these relations and casts doubt on the expediency of this form of violence as a road out of poverty.

As the dynamics of political power in post-war Sierra Leone continue to necessitate the deployment of violent labour, an evident dissonance emerges between marginal youths’ role as cogs in political machinations and their future aspirations. Violent acts disappear into the realm of secrecy and ambiguity, behind the public face of democratic and peaceful politics, and with it the demands on young recruits are easily forgotten. If even those seemingly better positioned to elicit the ‘love’ of a sababu through violent loyalty were unable to find a bridge to employment and status, these young men’s stories lead us to consider both the difficulty of shifting the profound power imbalances inherent in these relations characterised by dependence and the challenges of achieving aspirations by ‘playing the game’. Jackson (2004: 62) notes that ‘whoever attains high office must perforce divide his energies between nurturing [the] illusion of a better future and defending his hold on power’. Such authority, Jackson continues, is necessarily frail, and Alex’s abandonment of the party office suggests that illusions cannot last forever.

NOTES

1. This article is based on data predating the Ebola outbreak, which has significantly exacerbated the country’s economic challenges (see UNECA 2014).
2. Vigh (2006: 4) defines navigation as the process whereby ‘agents seek to draw and actualise their life trajectories … in a shifting and volatile social environment’.
3. The interviews have been made anonymous through the use of pseudonyms throughout this paper.
5. The following is based on a life history interview carried out on 31.3.2014.
7. The West Side Boys were a rebel splinter group of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) that was a major player in the war between 1999–2000.
8. Amadu, APC Task Force Member, Freetown, 25.3.2014.
9. Alex, SLPP Task Force Member, Freetown, 18.3.2014.
10. APC Youth Wing Representative, Freetown, 18.3.2014.
11. The accusations that the APC had bought arms in view of the 2012 elections was a cause of significant controversy that prompted the UN ERSG, Michael van der Schulenburg to ask the government for clarification regarding the shipment, which he referred to as a ‘worrying sign’ (Security Council Meetings Coverage 2012).
12. In 2012 Sierra Leone’s parliament legalised the possession and use of arms, ammunition and light weapons by civilians.
13. The Operational Support Division (OSD) is the armed auxiliary of the Sierra Leone Police.
14. SLPP Grassroots Wing Representative, Freetown, 17.3.2014.
15. Alex, SLPP Task Force Member, Freetown, 5-3.2013.
16. Tejan, SLPP Task Force Member, Freetown, 31.3.2014.
17. Tejan, SLPP Task Force Member, Freetown, 31.3.2014.
18. Project Manager, Youth Farm Project, Freetown, 3-4.2014.

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