

“We Have Been Sensitized”: Ex-Combatants, Marginalization, and Youth in Postwar Sierra Leone

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ABSTRACT Civilians in Makeni, Sierra Leone, describe their relationship with the ex-combatants of the rebel RUF as a state of being “sensitized” to their presence. I argue that “sensitization” connotes civilians’ *acceptance* of ex-combatants living among them, while they refuse to *incorporate* ex-combatants into the social order. Civilians, although treating the war as a “state of exception,” refuse to grant ex-combatants the grace of belonging to this exceptional time. They question whether youth socialized to violence against elders ever belonged to the social world, thus the possibility of their reintegration is suspended. Ex-combatants’ assertive demands for social acceptance, adoption of reintegration discourse and development practices, and disdain for “useful” work mark them apart from “mainstream” youth, rendering them socially and economically marginal. They are threatening not because of the war but because they represent the vanguard of youth who disdain manual labor and elder control, a long-emergent social trend. [*Sierra Leone, states of exception, ex-combatants, youth, transitional justice*]

I sat in a café on a rainy day in June 2003 with Aminata, an ambitious student, discussing her family’s struggle to reconstruct their lives in the wake of Sierra Leone’s ten-year civil war. She wanted to go to university, but her father had decided that reroofing their home was a higher priority. Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels had stripped the roof after seizing and occupying the house for two years. Aminata went through a checklist of everything rebels had stolen or destroyed, “down to the tiles on the floor,” after which I solicited her feelings about ex-combatants choosing to remain in her hometown of Makeni after the war. She paused before answering and her wording was careful: “We have been sensitized that we must accept them.” Aminata said nothing more, and we changed topics. In noting her status as “sensitized,” she circumscribed categories of “us” and “them,” stating that she “must accept” former rebel combatants, even as their socialization and experiences during war and aftermath made them strange and threatening. *Sensitization* was pithy commentary on the complexities of accommodating individuals who embodied challenges to the prewar social order.

The phrase “we have been sensitized” occurred in many conversations I had with survivors, often prefaced by stories of atrocities, harassment, and the indignity of living under a brutal three-year rebel occupation of Makeni. Although the war was over and people spoke of it in the past tense,

with a sense of finality, the same was not true of the peace process and ex-combatants. Reintegration and rebuilding were ongoing and were contentious because of the opening they created for ex-combatants to call themselves and their practices “ordinary.” In this article, I argue that sensitization encapsulated the ambiguities of these processes, serving as a metonym for civilian mitigation of social interactions with individuals who, having been socially “spoiled” by RUF practices, embodied a refashioned social order that threatened the status quo. Combatants were socialized to violence as the “work” of youth during the war, work that gave them historically unprecedented power over their elders (see Ferme 2001:223; Hoffman 2001:34). In the aftermath they embraced their status as “war-affected” victims and “beneficiaries” of reintegration, further alienating themselves from civilians as they navigated foreign, rather than local, models of peace building. Militants were transformed into victims and beneficiaries through reintegration, contrary selves with no clear position in the social world. However, the fact that civilians treated “ex-combatants” as a larger problem than the war itself was because of more troubling trends they represented. Ex-combatants epitomized social struggles in Sierra Leone writ large, as increasing numbers of youth were rejecting rural life and gerontocratic values after the war. They instead flocked to urban areas for education and employment, agitated for increased political rights (Bolten,

forthcoming A) and chose urban unemployment over life under the rule of their elders in the impoverished countryside (Peters 2006:16).

Although the chaos of war was delineated in people's narratives as a "state of exception" to the normal social world (Agamben 1998, 2005), ex-combatants were denied the political amnesty of having their actions circumscribed within this time. Sierra Leoneans differentiated between a period of "not law" (2005:50) and the actors who participated in, perpetuated, and benefited from law's suspension. Noncombatants enunciated the possibility that, although war remained outside the context of daily life, those for whom this time was socially formative could not revert to a state of law, having never existed there in the first place. Ex-combatants threatened the return to the idealized prewar "normal" gerontocracy because they embodied a phenomenon, emergent before the war, where young people's potential for violence increasingly resisted cooption by elders. Rather than humbly embracing a subordinate, dependent social position, ex-combatants represented the vanguard of a mutant form of socialization, which, rather than being quashed after the war, gained converts among youth newly exposed to the possibilities presented by foreign aid. Civilians realized the necessity of "accepting" this shift in youth practices for the purposes of peace, delaying the implications of embracing them, which would mean embracing a transition to a different "normal" social world. Instead, through sensitization, they worked first on returning the world itself from the "nonplace" of war.

I illuminate the practices of sensitization in a spectrum of interactions between noncombatants and ex-combatants, specifically ex-combatants desiring forgiveness from civilians they abused, selling their retraining toolkits, and "giving" civilians agricultural projects. These examples illustrate common struggles over the emergent power of youth fashioned by development, war, and globalization, and their desire to dictate tenets of forgiveness and productive labor simultaneously as they strove to gain incorporation. This striving to be treated as "normal" represented further social danger, as ex-combatants assumed these aberrant prewar youth practices were rendered unexceptional by the war and reintegration. Civilians accepted ex-combatants as different rather than reintegrating them as familiars, resulting in their impoverished marginalization.

SENSITIZATION AND STATES OF EXCEPTION

Krecht defines sensitization as "community education programs, but also social marketing," implying that, more than a transfer of knowledge, people must be sold on the validity of projects (Shepler 2005:200). In Sierra Leone, NGO postwar sensitization involved extensive public relations campaigns and ranged from T-shirt distribution and radio jingles to community meetings and school visits. According to Susan Shepler, the success of WHO polio vaccination campaigns—determined largely by "sensitization" through T-shirts—led people in her research village to propose sensitization as the

solution to every problem plaguing society. When a question arose in a meeting about addressing the lateness of teacher salaries, "more sensitization" was suggested as the solution (2005:201).

Although sensitization may have been a productive way to promote public health initiatives, reintegrating ex-combatants was more complex a problem. During the ten-year civil war, mass amputations, widespread sexual violence, kidnapping, and slavery were among the RUF's documented war crimes. In spite of the atrocities committed, when reintegration was initiated in 2002, ex-combatants' return to the civilian world was approached—like vaccinations—as a fact of the peace process; the social marketing aspect drew on religious faith and people's fear of a return to violence. Interviews with civilians revealed that they "forgave" ex-combatants for God or because the government said so, and not on their own behalf (Ginifer 2003:46). Sensitization meetings were not forums where civilians could discuss the experiences and worldview of ex-combatants, indeed if combat-socialized youth would "fit" in communities at all. Sensitization training usurped discussion, replacing it with a discourse conveying the official contours of peace and informing people that between the political necessity of amnesty and the social necessity of forgiveness, objections to reintegration were tantamount to "disturbing the peace."

The official training and discourse silenced discussion on atrocities and simultaneously guaranteed the ability of rebels to live "peacefully" in spite of their embodiment of a world ruled largely by youth through their monopoly on violence—in contradistinction to the traditional gerontocracy—and their subsequent monopoly on the dividends of peace. Most RUF rebels had been kidnapped into the movement as teenagers and were socialized to manhood through the brutality of combat and ritual violence. Parental authority and "good training" were replaced by informal "adoption" by other combatants and "bad training," which encouraged disrespect for elders and produced socially "unsalvageable" beings (Shepler 2004:33). Many of my interlocutors in 2004 described ex-combatants as *pwɛl*, "spoiled." Within Makeni, ex-combatants socialized mainly with each other and, as the examples below illustrate, lacked the ability to converse with civilians respectfully and humbly, further solidifying the popular notion that they were uncivilized. The concept of "reintegration" assumed that ex-combatants came from and could return to the mainstream social world, an idea that civilians continually questioned through their own sensitization practices.

Noncombatants in postwar Makeni embraced neither the "powerful rebel" nor the "war-affected beneficiary" personae embodied by ex-combatants. The "bad training" that encouraged seizing power through violence, rather than acquiring it through age and experience, placed ex-combatants at odds with the gerontocratic social order that politicians and elders scrambled to reassert in the wake of the war (see Archibald and Richards 2002; Hanlon 2005).

Simultaneously, their embrace of victimhood fit poorly with the local emphasis on *usefulness* as a tenet of positive social personhood (Bolten 2008). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which promoted public truth telling and forgiveness as social healing (see Kelsall 2005; Shaw 2005) lacked the scope to ask whether an ex-combatant desiring forgiveness possessed the qualities of social personhood enabling his integration. The skills training offered ex-combatants during reintegration was poorly designed and executed (Peters 2006), leaving them unable to compete with or be employed by local master craftsmen and rendering them unable to prove their usefulness. Many instead leveraged their NGO experiences to initiate development projects, placing them in uncomfortable power struggles with the communities with whom they purported to cooperate. As ex-combatants' social selves were fashioned in an alternative world, the shifts initiated during the transition to a postwar world amplified, rather than dissipated, perceptions of their difference from other people.

SOCIALIZING YOUTH BEFORE AND DURING WAR

The prewar social world in Sierra Leone was the culmination of a century-long process of change resulting in an impoverished, politically marginal, and infrastructure-poor countryside (Bolten 2009). Formal education, the discovery of diamonds, and colonial administrators' emphasis on exporting cash crops shifted the emphasis in rural areas from extended family and chiefly organized collective rice production to smaller units of labor centered around a woman, her children, and available men (Leach 1994:93). Young men often migrated to urban areas to attend school or to the diamond-rich south and east to earn money (Kilson 1966:40–42), and those who remained in the villages concentrated their resources on cash cropping. In spite of these demographic shifts, however, the tenets of the transition from childhood to adulthood remained essentially intact: a gerontocracy, with youth living under the control of elders for whom they performed labor and whose authority was unquestioned. Youth achieved adulthood once the investment of their elders—in return for their labor—provided them with the resources to marry and start families. A successful adult was obligated to provide for his elders in their old age (see Ferme 2001).

In theory, these practices could absorb economic and demographic shifts, with youth always under the control of elders and working to provide for family, both natal and affinal. A cash cropper acquired land through traditional means, and although money improved his mobility, it did not erase his obligations to his elders to provide for them. Young mining migrants served as “tributors”: they were fed and accommodated by landowners in exchange for their labor and received pay only if they discovered diamonds (Fanthorpe and Maconachie 2010:263). School migrants were under the absolute authority of foster parents and teachers, and were expected to labor in the house and support the schooling of other children with their suc-

cess (Bledsoe 1990:71). Young men pursuing alternative economic paths only achieved adulthood by securing the resources to marry. They were always beholden to elders who controlled access to women (Peters 2006:35). Young men funded the required society initiation of their future wives and were required to provide accommodation and rice for their families (Ferme 2001:99). Whether acquired through farming, mining, or waged labor, the elements of the transition to adulthood remained, along with their attendant obligations.

However firmly circumscribed were youth paths to adulthood, young men were routinely socialized to violence, as each historical moment contained eruptions of conflict during which elders needed youth participation. The earliest historical records of Sierra Leone note the recruitment of youth for chiefly and mercenary warfare, followed by their use by elders in rebelling against colonial taxation and corruption (see Shepler 2004:27–28). Both before and after the war, the young, urban lumpenproletariat were habitually used to fight political battles, whether as the notorious Special Security Division of dictator Siaka Stevens in the 1970s (Rashid 2004:72) or as a “union of youth groups” organizing strikes to topple local politicians accused of corruption (Bolten 2008). The common thread is the circumscribed nature of youth violence: organized within the dirty work of politics, with youth playing the role of hired thugs and dupes for politically powerful elders. Simultaneously, much of the appropriation of youth violence was also in response to the potential threat that disenfranchised, unco-opted youth posed. The possibility of youth rebellion was quelled through purchasing their violence; youth accepted the extant social world as they became invested in reinforcing it.

In spite of the assertions of many analysts that a “crisis of youth” precipitated the mass recruitment of youth to fighting factions (Abdullah 1998; Gberie 2005; Peters 2006; Richards 1996), thus rendering their decisions logical and defensible, much research among youth—in Sierra Leone and elsewhere in Africa (see Uvin 2009:178; Finnström 2008)—reveals that mass marginalization does not prompt widespread recruitment into insurgencies. Bangura noted that most Sierra Leonean youth did not join the rebels when confronted with raids on their villages (1997:120), instead fleeing with their families. Abdullah and Muana (1998) argue that youth who joined the RUF readily in the first six years of the war were the “semi-literate village school dropouts” who hated authority and longed to invert the social order (1998:178–179). The early RUF benefited from recruitment among those representing the vanguard of youth disillusionment, for better or worse. All recruits were eventually indoctrinated in this world, whether they volunteered or were kidnapped, and were socialized to its values.

Ex-combatants demobilized from the RUF were socialized to violence that masqueraded as elder control while simultaneously inverting it, a social world similar enough to make sense to young people. As Shepler noted, these children were the product of ritual initiation that imitated their

rites of passage in the “normal world” but did so through the destruction of the family and the inversion of age hierarchies (2004:4–5). Many children were forced to witness the murder of family members as part of their induction into the RUF (Bolten 2008) and, being otherwise alone, became the “little brothers” or clients of the same commanders responsible (see Murphy 2003:62). The only “Pa” was Foday Sankoh himself, the leader of the RUF. Boys associated with their RUF “brothers,” were armed, and carved out powerful positions for themselves within their cadres, beneficiaries of a more egalitarian meritocracy (Peters 2006:69).

Children were ritually incorporated into the RUF in ways mimicking the transformation to adulthood through secret societies (see Richards 1996:30), and they received an “alternative education” in the bush, including combat techniques and rebel philosophy. As one ex-combatant reminisced, “My commander was kind to me . . . he was like my big brother! He gave me good advice, that I should take time to fight the war, and I should take time to handle civilians, not to kill innocently, not to put fire on a house, that I should concentrate on my enemies.” Kidnapped aged 15, he soon gained a reputation as an effective fighter. His education prompted his promotion to “brigade adjutant.” He wrote correspondence for commanders, managed an arsenal, and coordinated logistics, essentially ordering ambushes of army convoys to supplement supplies. The war was an exhilarating meritocracy, and, like many of his compatriots, he lamented the loss of authority and pride that came with disarmament (see Ginifer 2003:47).

Young combatants understood the significance of their wartime social world; many refused to disarm because of the inevitable loss of adult respect accompanying their return to civilian life and wanted guaranteed education and jobs (Peters and Richards 1998:187), although most adults lacked these advantages. They embodied the will to engage in violence to refashion, rather than reproduce, the pre-war world. Their position is not singular to Sierra Leone. In Guinea-Bissau and Liberia, young ex-combatants are “different” from other youth. They band together because of their common experiences and stigmatization (Vigh 2006:19), and their bearing and dress, the hip-hop swagger, and disregard of mainstream social values resonates more clearly with urban youth subculture in the West than it does with prior ethnographic accounts of youth in West Africa (Utas 2003:5–6). This youth subculture is ubiquitous in Makeni, where ex-combatants are often indistinguishable from other youth who embody this meritocratic drive and global focus, whatever the nature of their experiences with the war.

THE SOCIAL WORLD AND ITS ALTERNATIVES

In counseling acceptance of ex-combatants, sensitization did not address whether RUF socialization practices comprised part of the war as a “state of exception,” which would revert once disarmament occurred, or if their refashioned social world was just different enough to constitute a viable threat if embraced unequivocally through calling them “nor-

mal men.” This problem was especially salient considering the official reassertion of the social hierarchy in the wake of the war, with the government proclamation that peace would be ensured by making all “marginal” youth “mainstream.” In 2003, President Tejan Kabbah released the National Youth Policy, which emphasized putting young people under the guidance of elders, giving them access to “appropriate information,” rekindling “the dignity of labor,” and creating a “responsible citizenry” (GOSL 2003). Acceptable youth practices were narrowly circumscribed, with avoidance of violence, upholding laws, and promoting security comprising the majority of their responsibilities. Although ex-combatants were not explicitly mentioned, unemployed youth and school dropouts were cited as “marginal” youth requiring special attention, encompassing the dangers of unproductivity indexed in the person of the ex-combatant and posing emergent threats to the gerontocracy.

Sierra Leonean sociality emphasizes the importance of relationships to individual survival (Ferme 2001; Jackson 2011). Relationships must be visible and involve active nurturing, with participants contributing to each other’s survival as a way of gaining security and wealth (see Hoffer 1974:175). Through their wealth in people, over time individuals rise in the hierarchy, aiming to achieve the status of “big” people with many loyal clients. Whether or not someone becomes “big,” with success comes the expectation to nurture those who initially invested in them, usually family members. If an individual withholds resources from a relationship partner, if they are greedy or *wicked* and attempt to put their own interests ahead of others, their actions are branded immoral and sometimes condemned as inhuman (see Jackson 2011:138). Individuals wage constant battles against greed in themselves and others, as it threatens not only their own well-being but also the latticework of relationships itself. In the poverty that gripped Makeni after the war, these issues came to a head as people struggled to survive; with noncombatants emphasizing in their interviews that even as it was more difficult to nurture others with the limited resources, so was it critical to everyone’s survival as social beings that they continue to engage in these practices (Bolten, forthcoming B).

The RUF was a paradox in that social relations within the movement appropriated, parodied, and inverted basic sociality at the same time. Their recruitment strategies of killing parents and other family members forced young people to join by destroying their primary relationships. However, relationships similar to extant practices of child fosterage and clientalism emerged within cadres (see Murphy 2003; Shepler 2004). The rigid hierarchy of family was simultaneously replaced by a fluid assortment of “brothers” with whom one received his social “training,” mimicking the cohorts that previously moved through secret society initiation (see Ferme 2001), while refusing to solidify the social preeminence of the initiators. Everyday practices of harassment, looting, rape, and theft were encouraged as a way of sowing terror (Richards 1996: xvi) and constituted

wickedness—direct attacks on the primacy of nurturing to a functioning social world. Combatants' ability to advance through the RUF's loose social hierarchy through violence-as-labor—often taking the form of murder, torture, and violation of adults—completed the trifecta of social mutation.

The ex-combatants' social world mutated further with the introduction of reintegration discourse. According to a United Nations Civil Affairs Officer, reintegration language highlighting ex-combatants' identity as "beneficiaries" of DDR was necessary to inculcate trust among combatants that they were not being duped into identifying themselves for legal prosecution by registering for disarmament. Taking cues from their involvement in DDR and related NGO programs, ex-combatants adopted this language, referring to themselves in conversations as "target beneficiaries" of reintegration, as "war affected," and in some cases, adopting the "discourse of abdicated responsibility," namely that because they were underage for much of the war, they were not responsible for their actions (Shepler 2005:197). This discourse stemmed from a western human rights perspective that characterized childhood as a time of innocence and lack of responsibility, in contradistinction to Sierra Leonean conceptions of children as potentially possessing powerful agency, although they are socially unfinished (Ferme 2001:197; Shepler 2005:200). For someone who embodied the fully realized dangers of young people acting as adults, to claim victimhood and even innocence—often done by men in their twenties—made their ability and willingness to perform the everyday responsibilities of personhood, let alone adulthood, seem remote.

Thus, ex-combatants' ability to align themselves with an aberrant time of war was made problematic. In defining the "state of exception," Agamben writes, "[it] is not the chaos that precedes order, but rather the situation that results from its suspension . . . the exception is *taken outside* . . . and not simply excluded" from the political order (1998:18). Noncombatants treated both the war and the horror of its events as a "state of exception." In concert with Agamben, who states "the private citizen who acts during the [state of exception] neither executes nor transgresses the law" (2005:50), it was *not* ex-combatant actions during the war that mattered. Rather, DDR granting ex-combatants amnesty from social sanctioning by attributing their actions to this time of "not law," rather than preceding the war, was contested by civilians. RUF sociality was, by appropriating, mocking, and inverting sociality, constantly referring to and in a relationship with its "parent" social world, while simultaneously threatening it. Rebel sociality constituted a fully realized mutation of the practices of dispossessed youth extant in the interstices of the prewar world as its antiauthority school dropouts and unemployed urban migrants, precisely those youth who were historically systematically commandeered by elders as warriors in the service of gerontocracy. The RUF as an organization marked the end of the gerontocracy's ability to completely co-opt and quash these youth, unleashing them on their elders in the service of a

new system, one that aimed specifically to destroy the "rotten system" existing before. It was therefore generated in prewar social turmoil rather than a phenomenon outside-but-belonging-to the world.

THE RUF AND YOUTH IN MAKENI

Although the war in Sierra Leone began with the incursion of the RUF from Liberia in 1991, Makeni did not experience an RUF attack until December 1998. The town was seized and occupied until the war ended in January 2002 and the RUF was officially disarmed. The ex-combatants I interviewed averaged 19 years old and four years with the RUF at the time of invasion. For three years, Makeni was the RUF's official headquarters, and these combatants took on powerful roles within the administration of the town. Civilians were forced to coexist with rebels, which resulted in the rest of the nation accusing residents of collaboration. Although Sierra Leoneans outside the town posited a ready acceptance of rebel control of Makeni, the experiences of residents revealed that clear lines were drawn between youth who "became" rebels and those who "joined." The latter handled looted goods to feed their families, thus morally aligning themselves with the social order (see also Jensen 2008:174), while the former plundered for themselves and their "brothers."

Most Makeni youth went to great lengths to maintain their moral distance from the rebels, even resisting joining. As one student recalled, "We the civilians had no means of surviving, so that led to people joining. For me . . . I sat down and decided that I am the only son that my father and my mother have, so if I am to . . . kind of join these people, though it a struggling situation, you can find other ways of ensuring your survival. One time I sat down and started to read the Book of Exodus. I remembered when the people of Israel were subjected to bondage and one day they were liberated. So I said, 'I am not going to join, this will not last forever.'" His classmates endured terrifying confrontations with the RUF, although most explicitly avoided joining. Several were forced to carry loads, wash clothes, and cook for rebels who occupied their homes, while others fled with their families when threatened with death for refusing conscription.

In spite of the blurred boundaries of cooperation with the RUF, Makeni residents readily circumscribed categories of "rebel" and "civilian." Although many youth "joined" the rebels in taking advantage of looted goods, one's ability to self-identify as a "noncombatant" emerged from one's faithful adherence to the social world. One youth befriended a rebel cadre to gain access to looted rice with which he fed his ailing mother. Another brewed palm wine for rebels for small change to purchase baby formula for his daughter. It was acceptable to court rebel interaction as part of a survival strategy that reproduced the social order, as long as one did not participate in acts of violence against other Makeni residents. Most RUF in Makeni were strangers to the area and had no familial relationships to which they had to refer in

assessing their actions. Those youth who were kidnapped as children elsewhere in the country thus embodied the alternative social order in their complicity with the harassment and intimidation of town elders for food and money, whether or not they were responsible. In the aftermath, a “real rebel” was demarcated by his willingness to take advantage of disarmament and reintegration benefits. Local youth on good terms with their elders were immediately reincorporated, while those who had been dislocated from home and family for many years had little choice but to submit themselves to the reintegration process. Whether or not they were willing adherents to RUF ideology, their lack of postwar alternatives was proof of their belonging to a world that mocked mainstream sociality.

THE DISSONANCE BETWEEN REINTEGRATION DISCOURSE AND PRACTICE

The literature on postwar reintegration in Africa highlights the link between security and the success of combatant reintegration programs (see Kingma 1997:151; Metsola 2006:1120; Njeru 2010:29; Schafer 1998:207; Utas 2005:144), namely that reintegration failures can lead frustrated ex-combatants to threaten renewed violence. The National Commission on Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (NCDDR) took the threat seriously and designed sensitization to reassure civilians that ex-combatants were “normal” and should not be treated as criminals. Public sessions in Makeni highlighted that ex-combatants would receive skills training and would thus be “self-reliant” and rehabilitated. The public transcript emphasized that reintegration programs existed to “make sure combatants disarm and return to the community to live in peace and harmony” (Anonymous 2001:3). Sensitization emphasized that DDR ensured “peace” by disarming and training ex-combatants, thus giving them all the tools necessary to reintegrate as civilians.

UN-sponsored disarmament began in earnest in 2001, and over 4,000 RUF combatants were demobilized in Makeni, a town of 200,000 (GOSL 2002). Reintegration required a combatant to undergo official registration, at which point he received a demobilization allowance, basic supplies such as blanket and bowl, and admittance to a retraining program. Retraining involved six months of classes in skills ranging from computer software to carpentry or driving. Ex-combatants received regular allowances to encourage their faithfulness to the process. After six months, they were supposed to receive tools appropriate to their skill and a certificate of completion, at which point they officially became civilians. NCDDR representatives admonished civilians that they were not to call DDR graduates “ex-combatants” (Anonymous 2001:3). As one man who attended sensitization training explained, “we were made to be aware that the process was about turning combatants into ex-combatants, and turning ex-combatants into civilians. So once a man agreed to be disarmed and go through the training, he was just a man again. Just an ordinary man.” The discourse explicitly disregarded the possibility that a com-

batant could not be made “ordinary” through disarmament and skills training.

The first problem sensitization could not address was ex-combatants’ unwillingness to return to their natal communities. Ex-combatants who had lived in Makeni for three years often wanted to pursue economic opportunities that were not available in the remote, rural villages from which they hailed. They also had their closest and most trusting relationships with other rebels. Of the 30 ex-combatants I interviewed in 2005, 28 were rooming with other ex-combatants in homes they either rented from absentee landlords or in which they squatted. Some had started families with local women in the financial flush of reintegration but were abandoned by their wives when the money evaporated and they could not find jobs with their desultory training (Bolten 2008, Coulter 2009:10). As ex-combatants lost the ability to contribute, civilian willingness to integrate them—even for their own purposes—vanished.

The second problem was ex-combatants’ trust that their faithfulness to reintegration doctrine would eventually result in social integration. Just as civilians were told they had to accept ex-combatants in the town, so were ex-combatants told that they would be reintegrated if they undertook their own reconciliation work. As long as they lived “peacefully,” attempted to find employment, and possessed a “community orientation,” reconciliation was possible (Ginifer 2003:46). Some participated in the TRC, which promised ex-combatants that truth telling was a necessary reconciliation activity (Shaw 2005:4). Among the TRC participants I interviewed, most volunteered because they believed going through the process would inculcate the reconciliation that would initiate civilian life. After six months to a year of adherence to the doctrine and practices of reintegration and reconciliation, they began to treat civilian status as a reality, rather than a possibility. More than one former rebel spoke of Makeni as “our town,” bemoaned the government’s foul treatment of the town as a “place of rebels” (Kargbo 2001), and wished for more attention to, “we, the suffering residents of Makeni.” Sensitization, reintegration training, and truth and reconciliation created a discourse of forgiveness adhered to faithfully by ex-combatants, resulting in their complacency in addressing the actual rifts in the social world.

The willingness of the rebel who spoke of “our town” to be a Makeni man was not indulged by residents. I had found this man through his friends, also ex-combatants. They lived together, socialized with each other, engaged in mutual aid, and struggled with their marginalization in the town. It was not that they felt people were hostile; it was as though, as he said, “people just don’t want to know about us. They won’t look at our certificates when we apply for jobs, they don’t help us, they don’t talk to us.” His statement regarding his treatment by civilians echoes practices engaged by Tutsi survivors of the Rwandan genocide, who adopted “the antelope’s strategy” of avoiding and evading the people whose presence signifies not just the demons of past memories but

also the unaddressed rifts in the present (Hatzfeld 2007). In eastern Sierra Leone, people spoke of carrying the invisible burdens of unacknowledged wrongs committed against them for a decade since the war, eluding both the past and those within their communities who wronged them by severing old ties, sometimes moving away (Hoffman 2008:134), or through the daily work of avoidance, even of eye contact (Terry 2011).

These practices proved fundamental to being sensitized: noncombatants accepted ex-combatants' presence, allowing this parallel social world to function alongside their own but through daily practices of avoidance, evasion, and the prevention of public confrontation that might "disturb the peace," prevented both the possibility of violence and the possibility of incorporation. In this respect, "sensitization" resonated with Sierra Leoneans' treatment of other potentially disruptive issues. With politics, for example, the work of often-violent competition for power occurs outside the public sphere. Thus, the performance of consensus can be maintained publicly, avoiding the possibility of large-scale eruptions of conflict (see Ferme 1999:164). Only in the interstices of public space, in the rare one-on-one encounters between ex-combatants and civilians, did the violent emotions of the war emerge in full relief. In small, managed confrontations of rebuffing ex-combatant social advances, civilians kept them in their place on the margins, avoiding large-scale conflict, keeping the peace.

DEMANDING FORGIVENESS AND SOCIAL INCORPORATION

Two interpersonal interactions between civilians and ex-combatants in their neighborhoods in Makeni in 2004 and 2005—immediately following reintegration—illuminate how noncombatants accepted ex-combatants' presence in their community while refusing to incorporate them. In both cases, the noncombatants had had specific terrifying experiences during the occupation precipitated by a combatant whom, now officially rehabilitated through the DDR program, was adhering faithfully to reintegration doctrine in asking for forgiveness. In both cases, the noncombatant refused to grant forgiveness, thus denying their prior tormentor valuable social connections from which they might derive and contribute nurturing, which would remove one stumbling block to integration.

The first example involves an elderly man I call Mr. Kamara, a lifelong resident of Makeni who owns a large, prominent house. Mr. Kamara was a high profile politician in prewar Sierra Leone, with social connections all over town. During the occupation, several rebels assaulted him as he moved the body of his deceased sister from the hospital to his house. The rebels kicked her body in the gutter when they discovered Mr. Kamara had no money, and then beat him and threw him on top of her corpse. His wife and children witnessed his humiliation from their porch and were too terrified of attracting more unwanted attention to intervene. The family eventually escaped from Makeni, however on

their return in 2002 found the same rebels had inhabited the house, vandalizing it and leaving graffiti all over the walls. Mr. Kamara was beside himself. "This house was made into a toilet," he said, "and I have been told that I need to accept these men in my community, and with no consideration from the government or the NGOs to us and our struggles." His requests for assistance from NGOs was denied on the grounds that he was not a "target beneficiary," and so he refurbished his house as he was able to find money. It took him two years to purchase enough paint to cover the insults on the walls. Mr. Kamara then noticed that the same rebels who had harassed him and destroyed his house had moved across the street.

"Look at them!" he exclaimed, waving his hand with a flourish as we sat on his veranda one sultry afternoon in 2004, "They don't work, they just sit there all day and smoke marijuana. You know one of them came to me the other day?"

I acknowledged my surprise in hearing this. I glanced across the street at three young men, doing as we were, relaxing under the shade on a hot day. They passed a cigarette between them.

"He came to the door, and he wanted forgiveness. He said, 'The war is over and I want to be your friend. I want you to like me.' Can you believe that? I told him, 'I don't want your friendship. I only want my wife liking me!'"

The first striking aspect of this interaction is the young man's boldness in approaching an important older man and phrasing his request in Krio, the lingua franca of Sierra Leone, as "*Ah wan fɔ bi yu padi*," which comes across as a demand. A humble, peaceful request from a younger to older person would be phrased as, "*Bo duya lef mi bi yu padi*," or, "I am requesting your friendship." He prefaced this demand with a stock phrase, "*Di wa dɔn-dɔn*," (in English, "the war is over"), which was repeated to combatants as they underwent demobilization, and to civilians in their sensitization training, as a way of emphasizing that people had to move past the war for peace to prevail. Simple acts such as an aggressive choice of phrasing signal to noncombatants the "bad training" of former fighters, who "*fit yay*," or are impudent and disrespectful to their elders. Beginning such a demand with reintegration language signaled the other facet of the ex-combatant's subtle alienation from the noncombatant social world, where he did not have to apologize for his actions nor attempt to initiate a relationship through nurturing. This nurturing would have been something as small as a token gift of food. Instead the ex-combatant invoked a state of exception, noted its end, and claimed membership in the ordinary world.

By refusing to grant his former tormentor friendship and signaling the person to whom he wants to be associated, another noncombatant in the form of his wife, Mr. Kamara drew a line between acceptance and integration. He did not address whether or not the ex-combatant had the right to live in the community; however, he refused to grant the forgiveness that would pave the way for social

entrée to the town. Instead he stated outright that he rejected his neighbor's overtures of friendship, thus denying the ex-combatant a valuable social connection. For an ex-combatant, entering a friendship with a "big man" who possessed many relationships would have created the possibility of other relationships within the neighborhood, and from there the social foundation from which to build a productive life. By denying the ex-combatant this key connection, Mr. Kamara was refusing, on a visible, high level of social respectability, to incorporate him.

The second example involves a student, a well-spoken and charming teenager I call Ibrahim, who was forced at the threat of the murder of his pregnant mother to do drudge work for the RUF. Three drugged-up rebels broke into and squatted in his absent neighbor's house, and spent the occupation harassing and beating him. Ibrahim expected the rightful owner of the house to return after the war, which never occurred. The trio, having undergone disarmament and their own reintegration training, continued to occupy the house. They associated mostly with each other, and Ibrahim recognized that they were unemployed and idle. In our first conversation in which they arose as a topic, Ibrahim repeated the fact of his own sensitization, and we moved on. Months later, they came up again in conversation, as one passed by the porch where we were sitting. It seemed that ex-combatants emerged in conversation only as they literally brushed up against daily life.

This time, Ibrahim explained that he had considered revenge but valued peace and did not want to encourage violence to return by engaging in it. He expressed his continuing trauma over the ex-combatants' constant threats to his vulnerable mother during the occupation, which visibly affected him every time he saw them. Their actions were so outside the boundaries of the social world that they were beyond Ibrahim's own power to forgive, thus rendering their bid for social incorporation impossible:

They sit most of the time on their veranda, doing nothing. One day one of them saw me taking a bag of rice to the kitchen for my mom, and he approached me. He said he was sorry for beating me up, and he wanted me to forgive him. I put the rice down and I pointed to the sky. I said, "It is not left with me to forgive you. It is left with God." And then I closed my ears and my mind to him.

Rather than telling the ex-combatant, as Mr. Kamara had, that he rejected the idea that the individual could be reintegrated socially into the community, Ibrahim instead questioned the ability of token calls for forgiveness—part of the ex-combatant's DDR social world—to bridge the social inversions the ex-combatant embodied. In essence, he felt that he could both peacefully accept the presence of his neighbor and maintain the boundaries of the noncombatant social world through refusing to allow him to undo an interpersonal wrong so easily. By stating unequivocally that only God had the power to judge the actions of an ex-combatant, Ibrahim was questioning the arrogance of the peacemaking enterprise to protect ex-combatants from tackling the ill fit of their deeply problematic socialization. The fact that any-

one could presume the power to engineer a postwar social world in which this ex-combatant was told that he was just like everyone else and his sins would be forgiven was galling. That was the job of a higher power. Ibrahim accepted the presence of his neighbors but refused intentional interaction with them.

In both cases, ex-combatants requested forgiveness from individuals with intimate experience of RUF terror. Mr. Kamara and Ibrahim framed their personal trauma that stemmed from these events in terms of RUF attacks on sociality. That rebels could harass a man handling the corpse of his sister or threaten a pregnant woman meant they were capable of any transgression against the social world. These acts struck at the heart of all that was good and sacred in Sierra Leonean sociality, specifically the primacy of honoring and nurturing family. The memories caused both men to feel *wam at* [warm hearts], a flare-up of angry suffering recognizable to Sierra Leoneans as a physically dangerous but common reaction to traumatic memory (see Young 1997:246). They became agitated recalling the stories—Ibrahim burst into a sweat—and only became "cool" when we moved to other topics. These traumatic memories were voiced and enacted through the bodily suffering of *wam at* (Das 2000:205), a suffering considered socially dangerous because it reopened the space for violence (Shaw 2005). Like the avoidance ex-combatants experienced from civilians who "didn't want to know" about them, managing *wam at* meant these confrontations, and their retelling, while perhaps not rare, were rarely public and were managed quietly, individually.

The refusal of both individuals to entertain interpersonal forgiveness was framed powerfully by their perceptions of the continual unwillingness of both ex-combatants to embrace the tenets of positive personhood embodied in the noncombatant who was productive, nurturing, and loyal to family. Their descriptions of their interactions with ex-combatants, that they were idle, unemployed, and lived and associated only with each other, speaks to their condemnation of the wickedness and uselessness of ex-combatants, specifically their refusal to engage earnestly in life-giving labor. Both Ibrahim and Mr. Kamara acted in defense of their social world, however, their refusals were precisely what was preventing ex-combatants from negotiating a transition to a more socially functional postwar existence.

USELESSNESS AND THE HARD WORK OF REINTEGRATION

"Useless" is one of the worst insults one can use in Sierra Leone, as challenging one's motivation to be productive is equal to challenging one's ability to be a nurturing, connected social being, and thus one's will to be human. A useless person is a social outcast, as he demonstrates only his will to consume, a direct threat to the sanctity of relationships and the social world itself (Bolten, forthcoming B). Many noncombatants evoked sentiments similar to those enunciated by Mr. Kamara and Ibrahim when describing ex-combatants, that they were "lazy," "useless," and "idle."

This was unacceptable because of the advantages that DDR had supposedly conferred on them: money, training, NGO connections, and tools. The expectation among UN employees and noncombatants I interviewed was that ex-combatants had suitable foundations for reintegrating themselves into civilian life, without questioning whether or not civilian acceptance of their presence translated into pathways into the heart of social life. As the ex-combatant who complained that “civilians just don’t want to know about us,” ex-combatants were socially invisible except where their behavior was condemned for failing to conform to expectations of “normal” sociality. Aside from the arrogance of their quest for forgiveness, the primary example of this was their uselessness.

Uselessness was a topic of constant conversation in Makeni in 2005 because of a worrying trend that it represented among all young people to leave school and remain unemployed and idle, waiting for the government or an NGO to nurture them with jobs and programs (Bolten 2008). “Idleness is the devil’s work” was a common refrain among adults concerned about a spike in criminal activities in Makeni immediately after the war, a fear that encompassed all unemployed men without families. Ex-combatants were the synecdoche of this new era of arrogance in their embrace of aid and NGO programs as entitlements. This resulted in their failure to undertake the difficult work of pursuing productive relationships among civilians, which required they give something back. In reality, the status of ex-combatants as marginal social beings was what drove them to accept socially suspect solutions to their lack of productivity, further solidifying their embodiment of a mutant social world. The iconic example of the mutual constitution of perception and reality in creating uselessness and solidifying marginal status is the toolkit received by many ex-combatants to mark the end of their reintegration program.

According to a master carpenter in 2004, “The UN gave them training and allowances, and then gave them toolkits when they finished their training. And if you look at these guys just a few months later, most of them had sold their toolkits and were just sitting idle. They were grasping for money and so they sold their toolkits! They are useless.” Multiple civilians echoed this sentiment when I queried whether ex-combatants were finding artisanal jobs in town, using consumption metaphors such as “thirsting,” “hungry,” and “grasping” to describe ex-combatants’ attitude toward money. A toolkit, an iconic symbol of one’s productive ability, served as especially critical commentary on uselessness. The importance of a toolkit to a Sierra Leonean artisan cannot be overstated as craftsmen only hire employees who have their own tools (Peters 2006:125). An artisan without tools was no artisan at all, thus an ex-combatant who sold his tools was advertising his will to be useless.

However, conversations with ex-combatants reveal that hunger and unemployment, and not idleness, prompted the selling of toolkits. The quality of the training was not standardized, as the UN contracted NGOs to implement

the training on its behalf, resulting in, according to one UN employee, “the carpentry trainees spending six months hammering nails crooked.” Their training was not sufficient to secure employment with local artisans. Stated one ex-combatant I call Mohamed, “Everywhere I went to look for a job I took my UN certificate, and they said, “No, no, no, your training is no good. We will not hire you.” They told me the UN training was not enough. I had no one to vouch for me. If people know you are RUF, they will refuse you openly!” Artisans typically also only accept an apprentice when someone can vouch for his skills and work ethic, and as strangers and UN trainees, ex-combatants had neither. Mohamed was penniless and had not eaten in three days, so he sold his toolkit. “You have to eat,” he explained, “otherwise when you die from hunger they can bury you with your tools!”

The toolkit revealed the double bind reintegration created for ex-combatants. It was the only route to gainful employment, yet it existed in tandem with a certificate advertising poor training and lack of social connections. Hungry, unemployed, and disdained, ex-combatants were further marginalized when they sold their tools, as many civilians interpreted this act as shedding the will to be useful. Like the impudence and aggressiveness that characterized “bad training,” uselessness was a rubric around which civilians interpreted the subtle differences between themselves and ex-combatants. As they failed to be absorbed in town life, destitute ex-combatants formed community organizations of their own, hoping to draw on their NGO connections to find income. Most donors required cooperation between ex-combatants and communities as a prerequisite for agricultural funding, which brought the differences between non- and ex-combatant perceptions of productive labor into sharp focus.

“WE HAVE GIVEN YOU THIS PROJECT!” EX-COMBATANT NOTIONS OF WORK

As they had come from the south, most ex-combatants who disarmed in Makeni lacked local land claims. They therefore had no recourse to agriculture if their efforts to become artisans failed. However, operating on the belief that “coexistence” between ex-combatants and civilians would promote peace (see Chayes and Minow 2003: xx), many bilateral donors required ex-combatant participation in community projects as a condition of funding. Ex-combatants drew on their status as “target beneficiaries” to cultivate relationships with local NGOs and pursue funding, and wrote grants on behalf of their partner communities. However, many treated the grant writing itself as “hard work” and their main contribution to agricultural projects. This caused friction with civilians who viewed grant getting as an unacceptable manifestation of productivity and yet another example of how ex-combatants were lazy, power-hungry, and entitled. In this example, an ex-combatant-formed community organization received a grant in 2005 for collective agriculture in a village near Makeni. The project nearly fell apart because of

ex-combatant refusal to contribute labor or wages toward the communal plot.

The grant itself laid out a clear division of labor and benefits. The grant provided seed rice, tools, and bush clearance for the individual plots of each participating farmer. In exchange, several farmers loaned land to form a contiguous plot for the “communal farm,” from which the organization would generate an income through the sale of surplus rice. Farmers would labor individually on their own plots and collectively on the communal plot, reaping the harvest of only their own plot. The communal plot harvest was divided between seed for the following year and a surplus to be sold to support the organization, in essence the ex-combatants. The ex-combatants were providing no labor on the plot and yet were reaping the benefit of the farmers’ own labor on their own land.

After a few months it was clear the farmers were working on their own plots but had done scant work on the communal plot. The president of the organization, an ex-combatant, was astonished when the women farmers demanded payment to work on the communal farm, and he organized a meeting to address their complaints. The leader of the women stepped forward, and was succinct, “You must work this land yourselves, or you must pay us to work on this plot.” The president was aghast, “We will not pay you; we have given you this project!” The women stood firm, arguing that the ex-combatants were not contributing to the collaboration and therefore could not expect to receive any benefit from the project. The president then outlined the labor that he and his fellow board members had already undertaken, arguing that had they not initiated the partnership, written multiple grants, and succeeded in securing money, there would be no seed, no tools, and nothing growing on the individual plots, let alone the communal plot.

The disparate notions of what constituted “work,” and therefore who was being useful, were revealed in this interaction. Although the ex-combatants took advantage of status and connections they had nurtured during reintegration, they felt they had contributed amply to the final effort by putting in the detailed and difficult work of securing a grant. They became the administrators of the project, while the farmers were its labor. As far as the civilians were concerned, the grant merely provided the tools by which one became useful, and no real work had been performed until the visible manual labor of farming had been undertaken. If the ex-combatants insisted on being the project’s managers, rather than participants, then they could pay the participants, rather than using them as unpaid labor.

Indeed, the farmers’ negative reaction resonated with the comments many made on their own sons, who were school migrants and after several years of “book learning” refused to return to their villages and farm. Mothers described their children disparaging farming as the work of backward and illiterate people. These youth preferred to be unemployed in town, waiting for an office job that matched their notions of their abilities and expectations of “dignified”

work, such as securing grants (see Metsola 2006:1121). The tendency of young people to chafe against the guidance and control of elders and demand incorporation into a meritocratic order of education, wages, and global engagement was emergent in prewar Sierra Leone. However, the radical shifts occurring during the war allowed these trends to be unmistakably captured, commented on, and marginalized in the figure of the ex-combatant.

Seven years later, the ex-combatant is still the primary icon of the RUF’s explicit mutation of the social world, their marginality defined as much now by criminal danger as by lazy unproductivity. Even the most positive legacy of RUF notions of egalitarianism and unity are transformed socially into negative—even dangerous and threatening—practices, even as they are undertaken by youth who want to be productive and successful. The ex-combatant is now inextricably linked to *okada*—a rider of the ubiquitous motorcycle taxi—though unemployed youth of every background flock to commercial riding as one of the few avenues of income in Makeni. However, in the minds of adults I interviewed, it is “the ex-combatant” who rides a bike because, like NGO-related agriculture, it was one of the only avenues of ex-combatant self-employment during rebuilding. Harassed by police for being unlicensed and unregistered, earning “just enough to sustain life,” and constantly in danger from both road accidents and the judicial system, many riders describe *okada* as “soldier work.” Said one, “You always have one foot in the police station and one foot in the grave.” Riders have formed their own associations, collecting dues to help members navigate life on the margins, from bailing each other out of jail to purchasing new bikes, always defying attempts to criminalize them out of existence. The economic situation in Makeni is so dire that many students ride part time to pay school fees—negotiating multiple socially ambivalent practices together—or to feed their families, a practice that would otherwise be lauded if not for the taint of its origin.

Okada is thus a peacetime echo of the RUF, one that replicates the relative powerlessness of youth, the violence of their work, and the necessity of bonding for safety and survival if they transgress the gerontocracy. The stain exists even as they may engage in transgression as a way of, paradoxically, reinforcing the social order by supporting loved ones. If, when, and how these youth find more than “acceptance” in postwar Sierra Leone remains to be seen.

CONCLUSIONS

The popular discourse around sensitization revealed that the reintegration fashioning undergone by civilians and ex-combatants respectively could not establish a world where both could be “just ordinary men.” Ex-combatants represented a threat to the social world through their bad training in the RUF and their reintegration exposure to international aid and discourse. This discourse specifically usurped proper etiquette in interactions between young and old, and introduced “development” as a factor confounding notions of work and usefulness, and thus of Sierra Leonean

sociality itself. The emphasis of sensitization training—that ex-combatants were “normal” men whose original membership in the social world was beyond question, therefore rendering reintegration also beyond question—rested on the notion that the stirrings of intimate intergenerational turmoil, previously managed and now fully realized in the violence of war, were an integral part of sociality. In accepting but not incorporating ex-combatants, civilians defied this notion, challenging their youth to conform to a particular set of social behaviors that once again rendered their potential co-opted, banishing them to the margins of the social world if they resisted. However, there was just enough contact and acquiescence—ex-combatants lived in homes in town, were not harassed, and could go about their daily business undisturbed—for the program manager of one NGO tasked with sensitization training to conclude in 2004 that it had been successful. The emergent youth threat was consistently managed in the interstices of public space, creating the appearance for the government and donors that Makeni residents were unified in their commitment to peace.

Using the example of the refugee child from Rwanda (1979), Agamben argued that only a “sacred life”—one that can be killed but not sacrificed—could be made into the object of aid and protection (1998:133). He drew heavily on Hannah Arendt’s musings on the refugee, namely, “The conception of human rights, based on the assumed existence of a human being as such, broke down at the very moment when those who professed to believe in it were for the first time confronted with people who had indeed lost all other qualities and specific relationships, except that they were still human” (1979:299). The question driving civilian treatment of ex-combatants after the war was thus: with their bad training, their socially “unsalvageable” beings, and their threatening, ungerontocratic social world, were they still Sierra Leonean? DDR imagined ex-combatants as possessing innate, recognizable humanity rendering them eligible for assistance. However, the intricate, subtle, and pervasive marginalization reveals ex-combatants in civil life as the *converse* of Arendt’s refugee and Agamben’s bearer of “sacred life”: a figure that could be socially sacrificed but not killed. Civilians thus emphasized the ex-combatant’s political salience while questioning his essential humanity.

The ex-combatant is literally a political animal, a category of being Sierra Leoneans themselves wrestled away from DDR and the international community through their own sensitization practices. The being of the ex-combatant was thrust by these practices into a metaphysical place where, unlike the refugee, his existence cannot call into question the fundamental limits of sovereignty, or in this case, social humanity. In fashioning the ex-combatant this way, non-combatants buttressed the social world in the face of a threat more dangerous than war. Through acceptance and managing ex-combatants in the interstices of public space, civilians transformed sensitization from an international exercise in defining the parameters of peace into critical commentary

on foreboding trends in the prewar world, one that they would not allow reintegration processes to render ordinary.

However, at the same time, the marginalization of the ex-combatant took place quietly, away from spaces of large-scale public confrontation that had the potential to reignite violence. The unanimity of “we have been sensitized” signaled large-scale conformation to a history of maintaining public consensus, especially in the face of deep underlying divisions. The dirty work of fashioning a postwar world that recognized and managed the threat of emergent youth socialization took place diffusely, in a range of situations straddling public and private domains (Ferme 1999:164). Quiet marginalization was part of the process of achieving public peace and created the possibility of people working out in time, without another explosion of large-scale violence, the contours of a future world that will look different from the prewar world and also from the world that exists now.

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NOTES

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FOR FURTHER READING

(These selections were made by the American Anthropologist editorial interns as examples of research related in some way to this article. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the author.)

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