

# HOME COMING OF THE CHILD ASSASSINS

*by Peter DeBartolo with contributions by Teddy Warria*

*More than any conflict where children have been used as combatants, in Sierra Leone, child combatants were initially abducted, forcibly recruited, sexually abused, reduced to slavery of all kinds, and trained often under the influence of drugs, to kill, maim, and burn. Though feared by many for their brutality, most if not all of these children have been subjected to a process of psychological and physical abuse and duress, which has transformed them from victims into perpetrators.*

The United Nations<sup>1</sup>

The civil war in Sierra Leone ended six years ago with the signing of the Lome Peace Agreement. But thousands of former child soldiers—children as young as six who were kidnapped from their families and forced to serve in the brutal, bloody campaign—continue to be plagued by the physical and emotional scars of the war. According to Yawa Ossi Essiomle, a Ph.D candidate at the Free University of Berlin who has conducted extensive interviews with these former child soldier conscripts in Sierra Leone, the country’s future depends on the successful reintegration of these children into society.

## ***Dangerous and Deadly Child Soldiers***

During the civil war, both the government and the rebel groups resorted to using child soldiers, who were often commanded brutally to massacre other children. This was commonplace throughout the last decade, effectively robbing an entire generation of its childhood. Some of the most dangerous and deadly child soldiers belonged to the “small boy units,” which included children as young as six years old. According to

Essiomle, “If they were not loved by their parents, they would be loved by their commanders.” These young killers were so lethal because they would blindly follow any command, murdering without question.

As part of the initiation process, the child soldier would be forced to kill members of his own family, even his parents. This type of extreme mind control

was possible because many of the children came from poverty-stricken backgrounds, and commanders would promise them food and other luxuries if they would fight for them. Other commanders simply threatened the children with death if they would not obey, slaughtering reluctant “recruits” in front of their peers to make an example of them. Drugs were also used for purposes of sedation and control. Sayo,<sup>2</sup> a former member of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), described being forced to use drugs as a child. “When you refuse to take drugs, it’s called technical sabotage and you are killed,” he said.<sup>3</sup> In order to ensure obedience and to numb children to their actions, the children would be cut and drugs would be rubbed in their wounds before they were sent into battle.<sup>4</sup> These different strategies employed by the commanders had a devastating effect on the young person, according to Essiomle, “cutting the identity process” of the still developing child and replacing it with an identity full of hatred and murder.

Female children who were abducted and forced into service faced a different fate than their male counterparts. Essiomle explains that girls were usually forced to be “wives, cooks, or spies.” While some were in charge of finding food for the camp, many others were used as prostitutes for older soldiers and would act as the “wife of many commanders.” Some girls were used as sex spies, sent into enemy camps for special “one-night stands” or for several months to sleep with the adversaries in the hope of gathering information. Typically, a sex spy would be a girl between fourteen and fifteen years old, who would be used as long as she proved useful. A female child soldier named Isatu, who was abducted by the AFRC at the age of fifteen, described her situation in *War Children Tell Their Story*, “I did not want to go; I was forced to go. They killed a lot of women who refused to go with them, when they capture young girls, you belong to the soldier who captured you.”<sup>5</sup>

### ***Traditional Healing and Western Methods***

In an attempt to disassociate themselves from what they were doing in battle, child soldiers would adopt new names, often blaming these other identities for their atrocities.



A Revolutionary United Front child soldier in Makeni, Sierra Leone.

Photo by Lutz Kleverman - www.kleverman.com - www.newgreatgame.com

“They talk in the third person,” Essiomle says, “and they don’t think they’re that person.” On one occasion, an ex-child soldier, speaking of murdering his neighbors, told Essiomle, “It’s Silver that did this thing; it is Silver and not me.” The assumed names and identities make it very difficult for the child to accept responsibility for what has occurred. Essiomle described a situation where a child soldier, participating in an attack on his aunt in his home village, demanded, “Give us all your food or we’ll kill you!” His aunt asked, “Why do you want to kill me, *Timange*?” which was the child’s real name. At that moment the young boy came out of his trance-like state and dropped his gun in shock. But the process of rediscovering one’s real identity is normally not as easy or complete as the example of Timange.

Child soldiers are traumatized by their experiences, their psychological development stunted. They suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and the recurrence of its symptoms, such as night terrors and bed-wetting. They need conventional “Western” counseling and therapy on an individual basis, but they also need to be reintegrated into the very communities they attempted to destroy. To achieve these ends, Essiomle proposes that Sierra Leone pursue a combination of traditional healing methods and the West’s more institutional approach to psychotherapy.

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Some Western doctors dismiss traditional healing techniques as too primitive. Essiomle disagrees. She believes that in a culture where village elders are viewed as the true “hand of the community” and traditional healers are the trusted physicians, a purely “Western,” impersonal method of reintegration will not be effective. Customs and ceremonies often trump the suspect knowledge of the West. For most Sierra Leoneans, “a psychologist is a stranger,” argues Essiomle. “How could you help me? You don’t know me.” To be effective in Sierra Leone, “to gain the trust of the people,” as Essiomle puts it, requires integrating these approaches, utilizing the faith that each community puts in traditional healers. “If you don’t believe in the methods, they won’t work.”

While traditional reintegration ceremonies vary from clan to clan, there are several common elements them. For example, one ceremony calls for the traditional healers to wash the feet of the child soldier, washing away his sins. Afterward, the parents drink the water. “It’s a symbol to the community of repentance,” Essiomle explained. The parents take the sins of his child into themselves. This event is emblematic of an African cultural value: that parents are responsible for the sins of their children until the age of sixteen, because they are still minors. If a child sins, it is representative of poor upbringing and is the fault of the parents. Historically, throughout African societies, parents would have to compensate with cattle or goods for the sins of

their offspring.

Other ceremonies absolve a child soldier of his sins through the use of fire and exorcism. One ritual requires the healer to cover the child with leaves, put him in a hut, light it on fire, then remove the child while the hut is burning. It is said that the evil spirits are left in the house to burn, and the child is freed from them. In another ceremony, the parents of the former child soldier must buy kola nuts for the traditional healer. Essiomle explained that, “He calls the spirit out of the child, calls out of the child what they did when they were in the bush. Using the juice to speak to the spirit, he uses a supernatural speech, ‘Spirit take this juice and go away,’ he shouts. He spits the juice into the air to the spirits, and the evil spirits goes into the juice of the kola nuts.” After this, the child is accepted back into the community. As Essiomle describes it, these traditional methods help people “bleach their sins.” The physical washing of feet and burning of a hut, when recognized in their social and psychological contexts, become powerful tools for healing.

In her doctoral work, *Community Aspects of The Reintegration of Former Child Soldiers*, Essiomle argues for a revolutionary “holistic approach to the reconstruction of society” in Sierra Leone. The strategy she advocates is one that meets the basic needs of former child soldiers by leveraging all community resources—traditional healers, elders, local mental health professionals, the media, and schools—in a culturally sensitive way. If the social trust and sense of normalcy that once existed in Sierra Leone can be again resurrected in this way, a more comprehensive reconciliation and reintegration of child assassins may become a reality.

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1 United Nations: Report of the Security-General on the establishment of a Special Court for Sierra Leone. S/2000/915, 4 October.

2 Not his real name.

3 *Sierra Leone: Childhood - a casualty of conflict*. Amnesty International. <<http://web.amnesty.org/library/print/engAFR510692000?OPENDOCUMENT>>

4 Ibid.

5 *War Children Tell Their Story*. Amnesty Magazine. November/December 2000: 7.