THE MEMORIES THEY WANT. AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN THE CHAOS OF SIERRA LEONE

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The Memories They Want.
Autobiography in the Chaos of Sierra Leone

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RÉSUMÉ

Le choix de leurs souvenirs. Autobiographies dans le chaos de la Sierra Leone

Les habitants de Makeni en Sierra Leone racontent le chaos, l’incertitude et la terreur de leur vie durant l’occupation par les rebelles, en parlant de la qualité du temps en termes substantiellement différents de ceux qui décrivent celui de la vie ordinaire. Plutôt que de contextualiser leur propos dans le cadre de « ce qui s’est passé » et « quand », les narrateurs ont créé une communauté de mémoire mettant l’accent sur le « qui s’est passé ». Ils maintiennent ainsi le sens d’un temps suspendu et dépourvu d’espoir qui exprime leur abandon par le gouvernement. Cet article montre que les gens nient explicitement la prééminence d’une chronologie des événements faisant du temps un épiphénomène des relations sociales et refusent de dater la fin de la guerre, jusqu’au moment où le gouvernement fera enfin amende honorable pour l’occupation qu’ils ont subie.


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I was born in Lunsar. And what I remember… my family is there. My uncle was killed by the rebels and I had to run and tell my mom.
CB: When did that happen? I was a small boy. I was staying with my uncle and I had to come and tell my mother. And then we ran to the bush and stayed there, me and my mom.

I interviewed this young man in the town of Makeni, the capital of the northern province of Sierra Leone, in 2004. Though he was in his twenties at the time of our conversation and had vivid memories of the civil war that devastated his country between 1991 and 2002, he consistently ignored my requests to situate his experiences temporally. Instead of relating when certain events occurred, or how old he was at the time, he focused instead on the people who were central to these events. In the above passage, when he first mentions the death of his uncle, the narrator’s emphasis was not when his uncle died, but how he was going to locate his mother, convey the information, and survive their ordeal. Throughout his narrative, in which he related the near-death experience of being caught by the rebels and locked inside a burning house, of hiding in the bush, of running to the capital city of Freetown for refuge, events double back on each other, the presence of certain people is re-emphasized, and time and chronology do not exist at all [see also Hoffman 2011: 138-139]. Stating only that he was “a small boy” at the time, the narrator crafts a story that suspends his experiences in time, but embeds them firmly in people, specifically his mother. Together they survived the war, and she is the consistent thread that runs through a story that narrates chaos while being, in and of itself, a chaotic narrative.

Sierra Leone, a small country on the coast of West Africa, experienced a devastating civil war from 1991 to 2002. The rebel faction, the Revolutionary United Front (the RUF), along with the Sierra Leone Army and various factions of civil militias skirmished in the jungle and in towns, killing thousands of people and
creating hundreds of thousands of refugees. The RUF was known for its terror tactics, which included mass amputations, rape, and kidnapping of young children to augment their ranks. In 1999, the RUF invaded the northern capital town of Makeni, expelling the army and initiating an occupation that lasted for three years. Town residents experienced the occupation as a time of tremendous chaos, as various rebel and army factions fought each other to control the town, and would prey on civilians, seizing their homes and possessions and engaging in indiscriminate acts of torture and murder. The national government responded to the occupation by bombing the town, hoping to annihilate the RUF. The narratives I analyze here are drawn from this time of occupation, as patterns of thought, speech, and memory converged on the importance of emphasizing people, rather than the time dimension of experience.

By narrating one’s relationships, rather than a chronology of one’s experience, I argue that individuals in Sierra Leone undertake a social and political project that comprises two parts. First, they are focusing on and reaffirming their membership in the social world, as an individual in Sierra Leone is only fully human if he is embedded firmly in relationships of mutual nurturing and care with other people [Bolten, 2012]. Any person who lives alone, is selfish, focuses only on him or herself and his own experiences to the exclusion or detriment of others is considered “un-Sierra Leonean”, may be publicly derided for their anti-social ways, and may even be feared as a witch [Shaw, 1997: 856]. These people are forgotten quickly when they die, as though their existence was inimical to the fear and uncertainty under which people operate when confronted by violence. The civil war, which began as an incursion by rebels from Liberia, was characterized by the presence of multiple fighting factions battling to control territory. The RUF, the army, and civil defense forces comprised of village youth wreaked havoc on the countryside as they vied for control of resources, especially diamonds, and for political power [Gberie, 2005]. In 1997, a band of mutinous soldiers emerged as a fighting faction, joining forces with the RUF to overthrow the democratically elected government, and were only ousted nine months later. They escaped from the capital city of Freetown, hid in the countryside, and were responsible for invading Makeni less than a year later. Vicious terror tactics including maiming, rape, and amputation characterized the fighting, with thousands of people kidnapped, brutalized and displaced [Taylor, 2003].

Though the war had been raging in the south and the east since 1991, Makeni only felt the full brunt of the fighting when combined forces of RUF and mutinous soldiers invaded the town on December 23rd, 1998. For the next three years, residents endured the daily hardship and fear of living under occupation.
The anthropology of autobiography

Narrating the past, specifically by telling one's autobiography, is a culturally situated act that draws on people's social world, cultural cues, and understandings of the meaning of life [Jackson, 2002]. Autobiography emphasizes the aspects of life considered central to a certain social world, always connecting a person to that world and its values even if their story is particular or extraordinary. In the United States, for example, the home is a central symbol around which many stories revolve [Jua, 2009: 311], with extraordinary stories emphasizing loss or escape from the past [Byron, 2006: 109-111]. By focusing the listener's attention on their feelings of being terrorized, and how people remained valiantly loyal to each other in spite of the circumstances, residents who narrated the occupation stated unequivocally that the government was responsible for this suspension of normal life, and therefore one cannot treat it in such a normal way—gracing it with a sense of time—as one would ordinary times that might be punctuated by extraordinary events worthy of note.

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They attempted to avoid the various factions of soldiers and rebels who battled each other for control of the town, made dangerous treks into the fields and forest to find food for their families, and endured the insult of being branded “rebel collaborators” by the government, which never mounted an operation to liberate the town. Instead, the president decided in 2000 to send the nation’s only helicopter, armed as a gunship, on missions to eliminate rebels and collaborators. Many civilians were killed in these raids, prompting residents to narrate that they had been “abandoned” and “betrayed” by the government [Bolten, 2012: 44-48]. By focusing the listener's attention on their feelings of being terrorized, and how people remained valiantly loyal to each other in spite of the circumstances, residents who narrated the occupation stated unequivocally that the government was responsible for this suspension of normal life, and therefore one cannot treat it in such a normal way—gracing it with a sense of time—as one would ordinary times that might be punctuated by extraordinary events worthy of note.

is the moment initiating this radical change, a date that marked the government's betrayal of the town, and thus marked the loss of order itself.

The betrayal on December 23rd, 1998 and Makeni autobiography

So 1998, December 23rd, they came in Makeni, the rebels. They attacked. It was about 11 o’clock, midnight, they attacked Makeni and eventually by the next morning, the 24th, they succeeded in capturing Makeni, so we had to run away to the bush. So we were there, together with my family, and also had two adopted children, my cousin and another boy. During that time there are no government troops. We only lived through the rebels. We are in the rebels’ hands. They control us.

The reason Makeni residents emphasize the date of the RUF invasion, which resulted in an occupation that ended officially in 2002, is because it marks the date of the government’s first betrayal of the town. The cultural emphasis on relationships infuses all manner of connections with ideas of loyalty, nurturing, and betrayal, and a government’s relationship with its people is not excluded from this ethos. December 23rd marked the date of the RUF challenging the president to defend his relationship with Makeni, a challenge that he never answered. When Makeni residents narrated the events that began on December 23rd, 1998, they circumscribed a moment when everything they understood about their position in the nation and their relationship with its government changed. Many anthropologists have noted that, even in situations of radical change where people refuse to inscribe chaos temporally, individuals often pinpoint a date around which that change occurred, thus creating a sense of “before” and “after”, where an unimaginable event has rent the fabric of society [Van Boeschoten, 2007: 43]. In this case, a relationship was irreparably damaged, and thus did the time of chaos begin. With that relationship still waiting for repair at the moment residents offered their stories, they did not name a date that delimited the end of the war.

The theme that dominated most accounts of survival during the war was “my people”, and whether an individual was lucky enough to be with family, or had the misfortune of being separated from them. This description is typical: “During the war I am with my people, running up and down, going to villages if they attack the villages where we are at, we come to the towns.” In the cases where people marked time as part of a discussion of their survival, time was an epiphenomenon of relationships, that a general idea of “when” only mattered in how it circumscribed a relationship, but rarely were dates involved once they had cited December 23rd as the beginning of the violence. Most interviews involved an ebb and flow of relationships, with individuals citing the good times as those when everyone they cared about was together and healthy, and the bad times as those when either family members were ill, injured, or “scattered.”

Rarely would an individual admit to being completely alone—being a victim of social death—but in the narratives where this emerged, it was always in the context of some evil committed against the person by the rebels or the government. These narrators often hazarded a guess as to when these disastrous times occurred, but this was never done to indicate an exact chronology of events. Rather, it was to mark the fact that their social death was in a distant past, and was unimportant because of the number and quality of people that the narrator had cultivated in the interim. The distant past could mark someone’s helplessness, if they were in a better place at the time of the interview. When describing the fighting that occurred between factions of the RUF, narrators often became exasperated if I asked to know when the infighting occurred; they insisted that the record reflect their helplessness in the face of unpredictable and ongoing violence; again this was a rebuke against a government that accused them of collaborating with the rebels.

Days were marked by their quality rather than by their position in chronology. “That was a great day, this day I made the decision to act” was the description of time given by a trader who, after the death of her daughter from malnutrition, joined together with other female traders to demand of the RUF leadership in Makeni that they be allowed to re-open the market and buy and sell food. She had described her daughter’s suffering as “endless” and resulting from the government blockade of the road to Makeni, a move designed to starve out the rebels, which was causing mass hardship for civilians. Though I could have easily looked up the dates of the blockade in the archives to understand exactly how long people coped with starving children before the market opened again, it was inimical to her story of the hopelessness of waiting for government action, and her emphasis on marking only...
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The non-temporal use of time also characterized people’s descriptions of the “infights,” a word that describes the various factions of the RUF and mutinous soldiers fighting amongst themselves for control of the town. Early in my research, I was still concerned about the factual chronology of events, and would push people to situate the infights chronologically within the occupation. One exasperated man tried to explain to me that the chaos was ongoing: “At any time they would attack! Attack in the morning, attack in the evening, any time they became annoyed with each other they would attack, and we civilians were just caught in the middle.” He then described the fear that governed his daily life, as he moved around town offering to perform domestic labor for rebel commanders in exchange for food. Not a day passed when he did not witness an act of violence, or was himself a target of robbery or assault. A refusal to circumscribe chaos with the order of time was about maintaining the dignity of a mnemonic community that had formed around residents’ complete helplessness in the face of ongoing violence. The only comment this particular man made about when the infights started was that they began occurring after the RUF first invaded Makeni: “The rebels first came on December 23rd, 1998. That was a terrible day. Everything, everything bad that happened in this place happened after that day.”

Unlike the date that marked the beginning of the occupation of Makeni, no date was ever given by Makeni narrators to signify the end of the war. It was both socially productive and politically expedient to craft narratives around the day the government abandoned Makeni to the rebels, with everything that occurred afterward marking the maintenance of good relationships among residents, the generation of new relationships, and their endurance as a community in a time of perpetual war. December 23rd, 1998 was the day the government abandoned the town, stopping ordinary time and initiating suspended time as people coped with their situation together. In the period people narrated their stories to me, from 2003 to 2005, the government that had abandoned Makeni to the rebels was still in power, and was consistently denying the town similar humanitarian and development funds as it granted the rest of the country. People argued that the government was still resentful of their ability to survive occupation, calling them “rebel collaborators,” which was why it also sent a gunship to bomb the community during the occupation. Until the government repaired that relationship with money for social programs and infrastructure, time was still effectively suspended, and there was no date by which residents marked the end of the war.

■ The living and the dead: remembering Rugiatu Kanu

One time there was a pregnant woman who was walking down Rogbaneh Road. When the gunship came she tried to run, but the gunship saw her. It just dropped the bomb, and she was killed. The lady was cut down the middle. She was lying one side, and the baby was lying on the other side, both of them dead. The gunship flew, and people were trying to escape from the hands of the rebels. And this created panic.
This passage describes the death of a woman called Rugiatu Kanu, who was the victim of a government gunship attack on Makeni. More than fifteen people narrated her death in similar terms, though only two were present when it happened. Rugiatu Kanu was a keystone of Makeni’s mnemonic community of occupation remembrance, as the brutal death the government inflicted on her and her unborn child created a story around which other narrators crafted their collective experience of terror, and of the occupation as the suspension of normal time. It was important for the people I knew in Makeni to take me to see her family and visit her grave, as this was the only way I could be brought to the understanding of how the war’s suffering had not ended. In contrast, graves of “strangers” to Makeni, who had also been buried in the same place, had no one to remember them and incorporate them into a community of memory. In contrast to Ms. Kanu, they were vulnerable to becoming “scattered”: lost to memory and subject to oblivion, because they were not anchored in relationships.

When an acquaintance brought me to the site of Ms. Kanu’s death in 2005, people began to gather, many with stories of the tragic day, others with memories of the woman herself. Her husband approached with pictures of her three surviving children, whom he was struggling to support on his own. As we talked, I sensed that I was standing on a flat stone, and

Remembering: picture of Rugiatu Kanu (Photo Catherine Bolten).
casually looking down, discovered that I was in fact on top of a grave marker. Unlike the dirt, greenery, and upright markers that characterized most graves, this was a marble plaque marking the grave of a British colonial administrator. Arthur Christopher Carless Swayne had died in 1946 while on duty in Makeni, and had been buried there. We cleared the grave to see it properly, but people were confused. They did not know who he was, and were adamant that no one in the neighborhood, even the elderly, had memories of him. Someone offered to cover the grave again. We returned to the subject of Rugiatu Kanu, and I listened to her husband, who crafted his own story of suffering as he described the loss of his beloved wife. He handed me pictures of her that were barely legible, so many times had they been handled. Her absence hurt every time he was lonely, every time he struggled to cope with raising three children on his own. His war was not over.

I returned to see the family again in 2012, bearing a copy of the book I had written about the occupation of Makeni [Bolten, 2012]. Rugiatu Kanu featured prominently in my analysis, and I had included in the book a copy of the photograph that her husband had shown me the first time we met. His daughter read it voraciously, but was near tears as we spoke about her mother. “It is just so pathetic, this experience of my mother. I was just small when she died, but my father misses her so much, it is like that day will never end for us.” A neighbor suggested that we collectively petition the government to set up a fund to help the survivors of gunship violence, as a whole generation had been affected by its reign of terror. Someone mentioned that it was a new administration in power, and the president was in fact helping Makeni. The Kanu family had missed their opportunity for justice, and therefore for peace. But they were happy about the new administration, and thought that perhaps, as Makeni was the president’s hometown, he would be personally sympathetic to their plight. People spoke animatedly of his election in 2007, of the “new day” that began with the hated previous government’s ouster; it seemed this was the year in which the occupation and abandonment of Makeni finally ended for most residents. This was small comfort to the Kanu family. As Rugiatu had become so central to the community’s memory of the occupation, they all bore the burden of her continual re-inscription into memory and thus local history. No one else’s loss was so public nor recounted on so many occasions.

We visited the graveyard one last time, and I querie the neighbors about the curious grave of the British administrator. Seven years had passed since I stood accidentally on his marker, and the landscape had changed. Rugiatu Kanu’s grave was still there, but there were new graves that confused my sense of where Arthur Swayne’s plaque was located. I pointed to two headstones and a woman shook her head, “This is the grave of my grandfather, and that is of my mother.” I described the fine marker of the stranger that had once stood on the same spot, and she shrugged her shoulders, answering, “It is scattered.” To be scattered, in Sierra Leone’s lingua franca Krio, is to be like dust in the wind. One may as well have never existed at all. If there is no one to remember you, if you were alone, you had no time at all worth mentioning. One can only have time ascribed to you, even of chaos and radical change, by being loved and missed. When the British administration abandoned Arthur Swayne to the ignominy of only a grave marker, they effectively severed their relationship with him. The Swayne stone was like Makeni itself, abandoned by the government when it “scattered” the peace and stood by while the RUF occupied the town. It was suspended in time.
that fail to include dates and time, as they give greater insight into an individual and community's historical reality [Young, 2003: 278]. He asks why dates matter so much to academics when people, in describing their experiences of horror, spend much of their time describing the not knowing, the confusion of fear, and the inability to control one's life and therefore one's understanding and use of time. One of my interlocutors insisted that I knew more about the war than did he: “I can tell you these things but you know them better than we do. You were over there but you probably saw them on your satellite, but I only know what happened to me, to my family and in my area.” I insisted that I wanted to know his own story, following Young’s assertion that recorders of the past have a duty to be true to the “not knowing” in order to create an accurate picture of chaos, fear, and loss. Thus reassured, he told a story resonant with others in his community, from December 23rd to Rugiatu Kanu, mentioning the infights and embedded firmly in his life with his girlfriend, who was a nurse. She anchored his story, as she lived with him, cooked the food he gathered, fled with him after the first gunship attack, and returned with him when the place became “a bit cool.” Much of his story focused on the present, how his girlfriend was working at the hospital and they were about to have a baby. It was a nearly imperceptible shift when his narrative left the war and entered the present, but with his girlfriend as the keystone of his narrative, time was unimportant.

In his analysis of Japanese memories of World War II, Philip Seaton argues that people compose a past that they can live with [2006: 58]. Memory and autobiography are not about the past, rather, they are about the present, and that composing the past in a specific way creates for individuals and a community the present that they want for themselves, whether one based on suffering and resentment, forgiveness and oblivion, or something else entirely. All memories are selective, and there were many details that I could never know because they had been, accidentally or purposively, forgotten or omitted. As Marc Augé argues, “One must know how to forget in order to taste the full flavor of the present” [2004: 3]. The community’s memories were selective narrations of their own selective memories.

By citing adamantly the date of the RUF invasion, refusing to assign chronology to events during the occupation, and bringing time into the present through people and in the absence of a date on which the war ended, residents of Makeni were, during our conversations in 2004 and 2005, stating that they could not live satisfactorily with the past until the government made amends for abandoning and then bombing its own people. The memories they wanted were those that reversed the betrayals of the occupation, and until a government apology and reparations occurred, they would hold on to these memories. Jackson asserts that stories must actually break free from the past in order to create a new understanding. The official government narrative, which focused on the intricate details of how long residents survived with the RUF, is only rebuked by focusing on the intricate details of how long residents survived with the RUF.

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Residents of Makeni, Sierra Leone narrate the chaos, uncertainty, and terror of their town's occupation by rebels by speaking of time in ways substantively different than those used to mark ordinary times. Instead of “what happened” and “when,” narrators have created a mnemonic community emphasizing “who happened,” and maintain the sense of suspended time and hopelessness that define their story of abandonment by the government. This article shows that people explicitly denied the preeminence of event chronology, making time an epiphenomenon of relationships, and refused to name a date in which the war ended until the government made amends for allowing the occupation.

Keywords: Sierra Leone. Narrative. War. Time. Mnemonic community.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Ausgewählte Erinnerungen. Autobiographien im Chaos von Sierra Leone
