Witchcraft and Blood Diamonds in Sierra Leone

Ellen Gruenbaum
California State University, Fresno
Paper presented for The Academy, Fresno, at the Downtown Club, May 19, 2008.

Acknowledgements: With special thanks to my Anthropology colleagues for their advice and help: Drs. Delcore, Ettner, Mullooly, O'Brien, and Pryor. Deep appreciation of UNICEF Sierra Leone for inviting me to conduct research in Dec. 2007-Jan-2008, especially to colleagues Adele Khudr and Maud Fortuyn, collaborators Rosina Conteh (UNICEF-SL) and Amie Tholley (Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone), and research assistants Ann-Marie Caulker, Rugi Turay, Hannah Koroma, Victoria Davies, and Sallay Sam-Sumana.

I suppose you are all expecting something like the "Sorcerer's Stone" with a title like that! Where's my black robe and wand?

Alas, no. I am bringing you a sad tale of the suffering of that is happening in too many of the countries of the world today, among members of our human family, and the courageous young people who are working to change things. I'll begin with a story.

This unfortunate young man (seen in the Powerpoint slide), just 18 years old, died from witchcraft after harvesting palm wine from the top of a palm tree. Palm wine is a delightful gift "from God to man," as the Sierra Leoneans say, fermented on its own in the tree tops, tapped into yellow plastic jerrycans and sold at local refreshment stations and taken to market in town. The witchcraft struck him at the side of the road as he prepared to carry his harvest.

My research team came upon him, suffering through his final hours, during our first day of research in the District of Koinadugu, near Kabala in northern Sierra Leone.

As we approached the small rural clinic, intending to interview the health care workers about their experiences with the practice of Female Genital Cutting in this small farming village, we came upon a crowd of people in front of the clinic, looking fearful and helpless. Rosina Conteh, my UNICEF colleague, and Amie Tholley, the national consultant working with me, quickly sized up the situation, and we spoke with the nurse and the medical assistant who were standing like the others, uncertain what to do. He had been bitten by a snake and brought to the clinic. A tourniquet had been applied to his swollen leg, along with a black stone that some say might be helpful, and someone was trying to comfort the man, holding him in a sitting position to help prevent choking as his throat became swollen.

A black mamba. One of the deadliest snakes of Africa, the mamba is fairly common in Sierra Leone, and its bite is often fatal. The tiny clinic had no anti-venom, but the nearest hospital was less that six miles away on the rutted dirt track we had driven in on that

morning. *(Slide 4.)* Why hadn't they sent for help on a motorbike, or arranged a litter to carry him there? Why were they just standing there, seemingly waiting for him to die?

My Sierra Leonean colleagues quickly learned the larger story and shared it with me. A witch hunter from Guinea had been holding meetings in the area. This woman, who claimed to have powers of divination from the spirit of her dead infant daughter who came to her in dreams and visions, had predicted two deaths would be caused by malevolent witches in this settlement. The unfortunate man at the clinic was the second person in two weeks to have been bitten by a deadly mamba. The first had died, and they were sure he was to be the second victim of witchcraft. It was obvious that people felt he was doomed—you might survive a snakebite, but probably not, if it was *witchcraft*.

One of his relatives asked us to drive him to the hospital, so we quickly arranged to violate UNICEF's rules about uninsured passengers, and Rosina and our driver Baber Mansary took the man, his girlfriend, and another relative in search of treatment in Kabala town. Rosina helped as much as she could, with a hurried search for a doctor and anti-venom, which we paid for, and left him and his relative at the hospital with a little money and returned to the village. Within two hours word reached us that he had died.

Later that day, when returning to town, we passed the man's home and saw that a large number of people were gathering to pay their respects to his family. I asked the driver to stop, so we could offer our condolences, but—much to my surprise—he refused and kept driving. Then I heard the chainsaws.

In the intervening hours, the witch hunter had indeed confirmed that the man was a victim of witchcraft, and she declared that the "palace of witches" was in the large cotton tree beside his home.

She demanded that it be cut down, and the local chief had quickly agreed and provided the fuel for the chainsaws. Our driver Baber wanted to be nowhere near the witches.

I had not gone to Sierra Leone to study witches, but I quickly learned that witchcraft is intimately connected with what I did go to study—female genital cutting.

Now witchcraft deaths may not show up on World Health Organization statistics, but Female Genital Cutting incidence and prevalence is a big concern, as is UNICEF's interest in the protection of children's human rights. So this is what brought me to Sierra Leone in December and started me on the road to learning more about witchcraft and blood diamonds.

As I soon learned, FGC is conducted in Sierra Leone as a joyful celebration of a girl's initiation into the Bundu Society (or the Sande Society as it is called in Menda areas of the country. This initiation includes both secret rituals and public celebrations, and although I was only able to see short glimpses of the public celebrations, all but one of my research collaborators and assistants had been through such ceremonies. Throughout the country, initiation is traditionally a source of pride and pleasure as the girl is

becoming a woman. Most of the ethnic groups prefer for the girl to be mature, with full breasts, but they also initiate young girls. (One of my team members described to me her own initiation at the age of 17, at which time her younger sister, age 5, was also initiated.) It is a time when the parents, the would-be husband of the young woman, or another sponsor—such as a rich relative, a chief, or even a candidate for political office who is trying to establish an image of philanthropy—displays the ability to provide for their families or constituents through expenditures on food, drink, payments to circumcisers and chiefs, and new clothes. The weeks when the girls are in the bush the members of the society feast, sing, dance, and remain outside the control of men.

Now, as you may imagine, the girls are not always overjoyed to be circumcised. But they haven't necessarily heard about the cutting part of the initiation in advance. A fifth grade girl told us, "They normally tell me about the dancing and I like the way girls dress after initiation." Commonly they look forward to being included in the festivities—they have seen the public celebrations—being included in the secrets, and being part of the in-group of adult women. "It gives us liberty to move about the community. People listen you in meetings. You are not disregarded." This status is reinforced by peer pressure and mockery among girls and women. I was told the uncircumcised are mocked and ridiculed. In front of a younger girl, older ones might say, 'Don't sit there! An uncircumcised girl was sitting there!' Or they might say to an uncircumcised girl, 'Go away, we're talking about adult matters.'

People also said that for the previously initiated women, "That Society Bush is their own period of recreation, without the men. They can remove clothes and cook and dance. It is stress relief. Freedom. They get out of their tension." So it is a lot of fun, and men have no right to interfere or ask questions about it—it is a *secret* society, after all. And according to what we learned, witchcraft is very much a part of the secret rituals, serving to frighten the girls and impress upon them that the secrets of the society must be preserved. They are bound by blood sacrifice, and on pain of death—or worse—they must keep the secrets.

As in many other countries, female circumcision is considered part of their heritage—"We met it from our grandfathers, and it is our tradition"—and it was seen as reducing promiscuity, good for cleanliness, and a pre-requisite to marriage. One man we interviewed said, "I have spelled it out that I would never marry an uninitiated girl because it is my tradition and nothing can make me desist from it," but many others no longer think that is necessary for marriage. And there are many other reasons—but that is not my topic tonight.

But witchcraft is. And blood diamonds. So let me try to say a little more about witchcraft beliefs and diamonds in Sierra Leone.

First, Sierra Leone is a country in West Africa (see map) that has experienced a devastating civil war that lasted from 1991 until January 2002. About 2 million people—a third of the population—was displaced, many becoming refugees in neighboring countries, and many thousands were killed, raped, tortured, had their limbs

amputated. This war was fueled by the arms trade, funded by proceeds from diamond mining in the hands of rebel groups. As a result, the bloody suffering that ensued earned such diamonds the name "blood diamonds" (or more politely "conflict diamonds")

The Security Council of the U.N. became very interested in defining and contravening trade in conflict diamonds because of their role in wars in several countries, including Angola, Liberia, Ivory Coast, Congo and the Republic of Congo, and Sierra Leone. They are defined as "diamonds that originate from areas controlled by forces or factions opposed to legitimate and internationally recognized governments, and are used to fund military action in opposition to those governments, or in contravention of the decisions of the Security Council." Many of them were being laundered through the trade in Cote d'Ivoire in West Africa.

The illicit diamond trade involved smugglers, atrocious working conditions, enslaved miners, and horrifying consequences of the arms trade, brutal murders, forced service of child soldiers made high on cocaine, and large-scale displace of populations through violence, rape, murder, and the destruction of normal life. Activists estimate that 3.7 million people have died in conflicts fuelled by diamonds in Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, and Sierra Leone alone.

Eventually the international outcry against the illicit trade in diamonds grew. Young people in wealthy countries who were aware of the problem and who did not want to contribute to bloody wars, began to choose other sorts of stones for their engagement rings or look for some sort of proof of origin for diamonds.

The international diamond industry went on the defensive, working with the United Nations, non-governmental organizations like Global Witness and Partnership Africa Canada to create, in 2003, what was called the Kimberley Process Certification System, which is supposed to keep conflict diamonds out of the supply chain and provide warranties to consumers that their diamonds are peaceful, I suppose we could say. The industry claims a "zero tolerance" stance toward conflict diamonds, and claims to have reduced the percentage of diamonds from conflict sources from 4% to about 1%.

Clearly, the industry has had a major public relations issue on its hands as a result of this. I suppose that may have something to do with the diamonds-are-a-girl's best-friend style of advertising we've seen so much of lately: "He's been to Jared's!" "Every kiss begins with Kay!" I don't know.

But the controversy was greatly intensified when the popular film "Blood Diamond" came out a couple of years ago. Leonardo diCaprio, Jennifer Connelly, and Djimon Hounsou starred in the 2006 adventure film you may have seen, depicting the bloody war, amputations, family separations, child soldiers, slave labor, violence, destruction, refugee suffering—and the search for diamonds. Set in the Sierra Leone civil war in 1999, the film depicts the brutality of both governmental forces and rebels of the RUF. The plot centers around an unusually large diamond, that has been found by fisherman who was forced into mining for the RUF, and the intrigues of the diamond company. The

main characters are the mercenary, a journalist, a child soldier, and suffering civilians and refugee, along with assorted bad guys that you'd never want to meet.

My students warned me not to see the film before I went to Sierra Leone last December, fearing I'd be horrified. But as luck would have it, it was playing on my flight—so I did watch it. I also read Ishmael Beah's book *A Long Way Gone* about his experiences as a captured child soldier forced to serve the government forces, where he participated in brutality that equaled the rebels'. (There is a recent controversy about this book I can tell you about later.)

And what a view of the war these gave! Amputations were common as punishments, and rape and killing were weapons to drive people from their homes or scare them into staying in forced labor in the diamond pits, and cocaine and other drugs drove the ferocity of the fights.

So when you see Sierra Leone, you wonder how the people can find the peace they do, crowded in closely in a minivan with strangers, driven by a rehabilitated citizen who may have been involved in killings, with an upbeat slogan on the back in English or Creole: "Diving Favor Tours," "The Truth Prevails," "Trust God," "Hard Life," "Father Allah," "Surprise dem," "If God Gree, We Go Succeed," "Good Sababu Pass Money," and "God Bless the Owner." And of course "MAN UNITED" showed up a lot in this soccer/football crazy country. But there they are—shopping, cooking, farming, selling things, buying cures from traditional healers, walking to school in uniforms, and going to worship at many different flavors of religions establishments: Catholics, Wesleyans, Assembly of God, Mormons, Sunni Muslims, Shia Muslims, Baptists, and all manner of Pentecostals. Revival meetings and traveling preachers are constantly advertised on roadside banners and the deep poverty is made invisible on Sundays when women dress in their colorful dresses and head scarves to sing and shout for two or three hours at church, or on Fridays, when immaculately dressed Muslims go to prayers.

Sierra Leone is a multi-ethnic country of about 14 ethnic groups and people of many religions. Most are Muslims or Christians, though some follow traditional African religions or are "free-thinkers," as one teacher put it. For the most part, the Muslims and Christians have included some traditional beliefs into their understandings of Islam and Christianity—a common process that anthropologists of religion talk about as syncretism.

I have seen how syncretism works, but somehow I thought the strong Christians and Muslims—at least the clergy and imams—would see witchcraft as some sort of superstitious holdover from the olden days. But no. Every single minister, teacher, imam, I asked, even those who were very well educated, said that the power of witches was very real. Evil, yes. Something to be avoided and disavowed by good Christians, according to the Pentecostals. But certainly real. I was assured that they had magic they could do that would shoot a bullet that could even kill me if I were to go home to America. So I should be very careful.

How, I wondered, could such beliefs survive in wartime. The war was so brutal, and it surely must have made people see through the flimsiness of their beliefs in spirit-based and magical protections!

For example, Rosina told me a funny story that is supposed to have happened to a relative of hers during the war. He had a special coat made by a witch doctor that was supposed to render him invisible. So when the rebels had entered his town and were approaching his neighborhood, he put it on and hid under a table in his house. Meanwhile his nephew loaded up a backpack with some food and a few valuables and was heading out to run to the forest. "Uncle, aren't you coming?" he shouted to the man under the table. "What! Can you see me?" he replied, momentarily puzzled. Then scrambling out to follow the nephew, he cried, "I'm coming—wait for me!"

The sacred groves in the forest where the men's secret society initiations and rituals are held are said to be protected by powerful witchcraft. I had been warned to stay away from the women's "Society Bush" for the same reason. These places are taboo to the uninitiated, and harm will surely come to trespassers. So another story I heard was that during the war, when rebels were known to be on their way to attack another village, the leaders decided that before they fled, they would hide the valuables they couldn't take with them when they eventually would have to flee—the generator, the TVs and radios, and other special possessions—with the sacred objects in the sacred grove, where they would be protected by supernatural power. Any boy soldiers or other intruders would not be able to enter, they were sure.

Of course, the boy soldiers, high on cocaine, amphetamines, and the brutality of their war, turned out to be not the least bit afraid of spirits or magic, and they raided the treasure trove with impunity. Many believers, my friends told me, began to lose their faith in the taboos and the secret societies as a result of such experiences. Like amulets that could not stop bullets or machetes, spiritual protections were no match for the violence of war.

But just as believers in god-based religions often hold onto their faith even when the all-powerful God doesn't lift a finger to help them out of some dilemma, there were still many who did not give up on the secret societies, taboos, and witchcraft-based covenants.

Social customs were a serious casualty of the war years. During the war, children witnessed rape and sex, or were themselves victims of rape. It demystified many of their old beliefs. For example, young girls, even before being initiated into Bundu, used to be told that a string that was ceremoniously tied around their waist was never to be removed, and that if a man touched it, the girl would get a swollen belly and die. She would have to remain a virgin until marriage. But experience taught them that sex did not result in death. Indeed, it might be a way to get protection or some financial benefit or food to help one survive. And it might be fun, a consolation in a time of total social disruption and loss.

As a result of the war, parents lost much of their traditional control over their children. Whereas some still believe that a girl will be ashamed to have sex before circumcision—because without having the tip of her clitoris cut off, it would be like going "penis to penis" with a man—most know that it has begun to be common for school girls to have sex before marriage and before initiation. And when we asked adult men if they wanted to marry a virgin, they just laughed. There is no such thing as a virgin anymore, some claimed.

Parents said their children won't listen to them anymore, but they still hope the initiation into the secret societies will help to make them decent adults. It seems to be something that is happening at younger and younger ages, at least in some areas. And it may be that there is a significant trend against the societies, stemming from the growing popularity of the various Pentecostal groups.

Conclusion

In conclusion, blood diamonds have been used to create wars that result in incredible social dislocation and suffering, resulting in huge numbers of refugees and asylum seekers scattered to many countries, including our own. These wars have undermined so much of traditional ways of life and social structures that it is hard to imagine how the fabric of social life can be rewoven. Yet a tradition of secret societies, based on witchcraft beliefs, offers a degree of social cohesion for a society struggling to rekindle a sense of stability and pride. UNICEF and many other organizations are working with the government to ramp up the school attendance rates of children, including special incentives to help girls attend school. Health conditions, housing, and infrastructure have suffered great setbacks and are getting attention.

Secret societies have a place in all of this, but it is a complicated one. Some of them have become almost gang-like in their vigorous enforcement of their brotherhood and their rules. Some religious movements are encouraging young people to eschew them. The University of Sierra Leone has a major struggle against student clubs and have intense hazing and cult-like features. In the labor market and workplace, some people have found that club and secret society membership works dangerously against equal opportunity. Teen pregnancy and the exploitation of girls is reaching troubling proportions, yet a higher percentage of children that ever before are in school (64%), calling each other on their cell phones. Though still living in poverty, they aspire to the international standard of living and safety that their emigree populations have and to which they feel entitled as citizens of the contemporary world.

Refreshingly, Muslims and Christians get along well, and there does not seem to be the intense interest in theocracy in Sierra Leone that other countries have suffered from. Perhaps this is a benefit of the close bonds of secret society membership, where Muslims and Christians both join together as blood brothers or blood sisters. But I sincerely hope they can figure out a new ritual, that does not involve the blood scarifice of cutting children's genitals.

Finally, let me say a word of thanks for the fellowship and stimulating conversations and lectures I have shared with all of you as a member of the Academy. I have always thought our May meetings were the best—since we have so many spouses and guests. I will miss you all.

Bibliography

Note: The information for this report was based on extensive readings of unpublished reports, books, published articles, internet sources, and my own research in Sierra Leone. I have chosen just a few sources to list here that are easily obtained by an interested reader. More information is available upon request from elleng@csufresno.edu.

Beah, Ishmael, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.

Global Witness, "Blood Diamond Action" /www.blooddiamondaction.org/ accessed May 18, 2008

IMDb, "Blood Diamond (2006)." www.imdb.com/title/tt0450259/, accessed May 19, 2008.

United Nations, "Conflict Diamonds: Sanctions and War." www.un.org/peace/africa/Diamond.html, accessed May 19, 2008.

World Diamond Council. "Conflict Diamonds." www.diamondfacts.org/conflict/index.html, accessed May 19, 2008

Warner Brothers, "Blood Diamond." Film by Warner Brothers. 2006

Warner Brothers, "Blood Diamond" website. blooddiamondmovie.warnerbros.com/ accessed May 19, 2008.