

Hoffman, Danny. 2011. *The War Machines. Young Men and Violence in Sierra Leone and Liberia*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. xxii + 295 pp. Pb: \$24.95. ISBN: 9780822350774.

Danny Hoffman worked as a photojournalist; he documented the military conflicts in Africa in the 1990s and conducted his ethnographic fieldwork in Sierra Leone and Liberia after the war was officially declared over in both countries. The monograph provides a rich and complex account of the warfare on both sides of the Mano River, the border between Sierra Leone and Liberia, which spans the period from 1989 to 2003 and treats the war on both sides of the border as a single continuous war.

The title of the book is somewhat misleading, for its chief subject is not child soldiers (the topic most popularly associated with this war), and not even young men, but rather it is an account of how war is produced (rather than reproduced) between the state and the individual inflicting the violence on the ground and what subsequently happens once the state officially draws an end to a conflict.

The cover of the book depicts a faceless person in a traditional shirt with a machine gun in (assumably) his hand. This, however, illustrates more what the author later describes as the popular interpretation of the term “war machine”, the physical male body inflicting mindless violence. In his analysis, Hoffman transcends the popular understanding by applying the term “war machines” as coined by French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari, which serves as an ‘interdisciplinary toolbox through which to break apart theorising a turbulent, troubling, but potentially liberating time’ (p. 7). As such “war machines” are not simply instruments for producing war, but rather they reflect the relationship between the state and the social actors perpetuating the violence on the ground. The direct conflict between the state and the war machine is what results in actual taking up of arms, and is thus fought according to the logic of the state. Moreover, the interplay between the state and the war machine results in active and inventive dealings that result in economic surplus. This emphasis on war as a creative and experimental market process is what makes Hoffman’s inspection of violence unique, placing it more within the realm of political economy rather than the comfortable anthropological category of “culture.” By looking beyond the cultural explanations for violence, the author attempts (and succeeds) to globalise our view of African warfare.

The monograph consists of seven chapters. The first provides the history of what the author entitles the Mano River War (the continuous war in Sierra Leone and Liberia from 1989 to 2003), which provides an excellent resource for those interested in understanding violence in West Africa. Chapters Two and Three detail the development of the *kamajors*, the ethnic Mende grassroots community defence (originally hunters’) group, into a national militia that forms part of the CDF (Civil Defence Forces), the Sierra Leonean pro-government paramilitary movement. Here, the author is interested how various (often mythical) representations of the past were used to strategically create new futures for the kamajors as well as how the institutionalisation of the organisation prepared it for both war and economic activity such as diamond mining. Hoffman argues that as kamajor troupes became diamond-digging crews and security forces at the same time, they simultaneously participated in both military funding and fighting.

Chapter Four describes the patronage relationships that characterise the social interactions in the region and extend into military life. The author argues that as violence is a way of life for these men, the whole fabric of the kamajors' social lives has become militarised. It is via patronage networks that men without resources (clients) gain access to the economic means of survival be it a diamond or fighting field. Hoffman goes on to demonstrate that while there is little personal freedom for the clients, they still manage to implement various strategies for survival. Chapter Six expands on the urban space as a locus for 'experimentation and creative bricolage' (p. 163) and its links to militarism via the spatial concept of "barracks," the complete social arrangement by which violence is 'contained and deployed' (p. 169). The author insists that this conflict should not be viewed as a 'bush war,' but rather the war that 'made the city' and is 'made by it' (p. 165). The kamajors, who were originally from the countryside, played an important role as both protector and menace to inhabitants of Sierra Leone's capital city, Freetown.

Chapter Six is by far the most ethnographic of all the chapters as it presents a day-to-day description of life in one of the "barracks" – the Brookfields hotel in Freetown, where many of the kamajors resided illegally until they were evicted in 2003. Chapter Seven addresses the occult dimension of the conflict by examining the practice of "bullet proofing" the body, which was allegedly part of the kamajor initiation process and, in the author's view, presents an inventive defensive practice in the context of war.

All in all, the book provides an impressive array of information for understanding the kamajor role in the Mano River War and creates the sense of what complicated economic and military concurrences are in motion across the region. As a photographer, the author provides outstanding illustrative material of 50 photographs and a brief reflection on what the increasing visualisation of the African conflict means. It is my impression, however, that there is too much information about this little-understood conflict for the author to accommodate into a book of barely 300 pages, which in turn means that the parts of the book are too dense for those not familiar with the conflict to grasp easily. An addition of a table of main acronyms and a timeline of the key historical events would have been helpful for non-Africanists. Further, the author insists that this is a narrative-driven ethnography. However, the absence of a section on methodology obscures exactly how the information was extracted. While the author must have had to be quite creative under the circumstances, a more open discussion of the methodological challenges would have been appreciated. Last but not least, this reviewer observed much unused potential for gender analysis that was foreshadowed but never implicitly analysed in the book. War has historically been a gendered activity. Considering the author's adeptness in offering innovative insights, this issue would have made for fascinating reading. In conclusion, this monograph offers a perceptive examination of the actors who perpetuate violence in West Africa and, as such, it is a must read for anybody invested in understanding the region or the global nature of violence in it.

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