Shame as a Social Disease in the Sierra Leonean Civil War

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Analyses of violent acts reveal that they are often systematically perpetrated, yet the emotive origins of violence are less frequently investigated. From the perspective of violence as a rational course of action, it follows that it stems from dissatisfaction with social or political structures. The outbreak of war in Sierra Leone in 1991 and the brutalities committed by Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebel group have been analyzed as a logical progression of events that stemmed from Foday Sankoh's, Charles Taylor's, and the original members of the RUF's desire for political power. Following from Richard Gilligan's work, I disagree that the origins of the brutal, bloody, senseless ten-year war in Sierra Leone can be so simply diagnosed; I argue that feelings of shame lie at the root of the brutalities carried out by the original members of the RUF. Further, feelings of sociopolitical marginality among young men who originally joined the RUF caused this shame, which these rebels sought to reverse by demonstrating and gaining power through terror tactics.

The RUF was a diverse group of individuals, including radical university students angered by President Momoh's and the APC government's suppression of their politically-motivated protests, and unemployed and disaffected youth who had been socialized in a climate of violence, drugs and criminality, and adult men who possessed few opportunities for economic or sociopolitical advancement ("Revolutionary United Front"). The RUF promised these youth a place and an opportunity to address their perceived wrongs, to reverse the shame they felt at being sociopolitically repressed and undervalued as members of society. The vocalized and academically analyzed desire for political power, money, and property stemmed from their less-

frequently considered feelings of shame. This shame stemmed from experiences of disrespect and irrelevance, that they did not and could not attain the resources or the sociopolitical prestige that would enable them be valued or to value their own sociopolitical situation; When people do not "perceive themselves as having nonviolent means for becoming independent and being able to take care of themselves (such as skills, education, and employment), the activity and aggressiveness stimulated by shame can manifest itself in violent, sadistic, even homicidal behavior." (Gilligan 1167). The unjustifiable macabre violence, punitive amputations, sexual abuse, and rupture of social and family systems executed by members of the RUF that destroyed the lives of millions of Sierra Leoneans throughout the ten years of war reflect the endemic shame that the initial Sierra Leonean members of the RUF experienced due to structural violence. The widespread and extensive violence is symptomatic of underlying socially embedded disorder, but, because it is socially constructed, can be addressed and remediated through social policies, for the good of humanity.

James Gilligan's theory of shame is derived from his fifty-year career studying and questioning the motivations and causes of violence. People resort to violence, he posits, when they feel that the only way to wipe out their own shame is by shaming those who they think are responsible for their feelings of shame (Gilligan 1163). From a dynamic point of view, shame can be viewed as "a motive of defense against wishes to be loved and taken care of by others (which many people, especially men, experience as the state of being passive and dependent, as opposed to being self-reliant and taking care of oneself, or being active and autonomous)" (Gilligan 1167). Rebels who commit violent acts are often the "little people," i.e. those who are directly oppressed within their society or indirectly through oppressive and abusive societal structures, and consequently feel shame for their social insignificance; they resort to violence as

a way to reverse and wipe out their feelings of shame (Richards, xvii). By acting violently, people who feel shame discredit these feelings, repressing them by demonstrating that their will to regain pride transcends those desires to be valued.

The Republic of Sierra Leone was established in 1971, following the Dissolution of the Commonwealth of Sierra Leone. The adoption of a new constitution in 1978 created a one-party republic based on the All People's Congress (APC) in which "the head of state, or executive president, was elected by delegates of the APC, and there was a parliament" (Fyfe). Throughout Siaka Stevens' term as president, iron ore supplies became exhausted, and diamond smuggling became more common, simultaneously depriving the government of revenue and leading to the deterioration of the Sierra Leonean economy (Fyfe). While policy loopholes enabled Stevens' vulgarian supporters to make their fortunes, civilians grew restless; students protested, but government officials forcefully repressed their demonstrations (Fyfe). The number of unemployed and disaffected youth dramatically increased, concurrently with surges in inner-city climates of poverty, violence, and drugs ("Revolutionary United Front"). Joseph Saidu Momoh replaced Stevens as president in 1985, but his ministry was no more effective at guiding Sierra Leone to prosperity or raising civilian satisfaction with political action. As a result, government-sanctioned corruption persisted, and the economy continued to deteriorate (Fyfe).

Throughout the twenty-year period preceding the civil war, educated young Sierra Leonean men, hungry for change but denied the opportunity to freely voice their concerns, became increasingly and vocally disenchanted with the political system. These embittered young men lived in the slums of large cities in complete destitution, and, aware of the lack of opportunities to mediate their social and financial disadvantages, ultimately turned to criminality and drugs to escape the harsh daily reality of poverty and systemic oppression ("Revolutionary

United Front"). They were systematically shamed through means of structural violence. Shame arises when an individual feels the lack or deficiency of being wanted or valued by other human beings, or when a person's implicit trust that their dignity will be respected, and that they will have access to resources that enable them to meet their basic human needs is violated (Gilligan 1153, Potter 2006). As a psychological motive of defense, shame occurs as a consequence of committed and omitted acts that harm an individual's own self-respect; when expected mutual responses of respect and dignity remain unmet, and when people experience disrespect or feel dishonored, the victim feels that he is not valued by the other party (Gilligan 1167, Potter 2006). When humans find that their desire to be valued is not or will not be realized, their feelings of shame intensify, as well as their "fear that one will be abandoned, rejected, or ignored and will therefore die because one is so weak, helpless, dependent, unskilled, and incompetent that one cannot take care of oneself" (Gilligan 1168). This sense of shame can be experienced on an individual or group member level, and is often attributable to social, rather than personal, characteristics.

Structural violence is shame-inducing to individuals and groups of people, and in effect fuels physical violence. People who feel constant shame due to a perceived lack of deserved respect, marginality, and, as victims of structural violence, are painfully aware of their inability to meet their own physical needs. They typically attempt to diminish their feelings of pain in two ways: either by assuming attitudes of arrogance, self-importance, and boastfulness, or by diminishing their innocence, such as by becoming guilty of the most horrendous acts of violence or cruelty (Gilligan 1171).

> [Shaming] typically motivates them to move in the opposite direction by
> becoming active and aggressive, independent and ambitious… uneducated or
> even illiterate, unskilled or unemployed, poor or even homeless, or members of

ethnic or demographic groups that are subjected to systematic shaming by the rest of society [most commonly commit violent acts]... one [does not have] to be poor or discriminated against to become violent, but it helps; and being wealthy or belonging to the upper middle class does not absolutely prevent one from becoming violent, but that also helps - as statistics on the epidemiology of violence make clear. (Gilligan 1167-1168).

As demonstrated by the events of civil war in Sierra Leone, shame is powerful and pervasive, and central to the experience of many people who are predisposed to violence (Gilligan 1155). Social scientists have for decade studied and recorded the emotions and experiences that motivate collective perpetrators of violence. They have found that such behavior is largely committed by people who are so tormented by feelings of disrespect and shame that they are willing to sacrifice their bodies and own well-being to express opposite feelings of pride and self- respect. In other words, they respond by acting in ways they believe will earn the admiration of their allies and an ersatz form of respect from their enemies (Gilligan 1151).

The men who willingly joined the RUF exhibited several characteristics associated with shame, such as societal marginalization and disrespect for basic human needs. This contributed to population-wide devaluing of certain bodies and certain opinions, and a loss of self-respect among the impoverished and educated men who were systemically oppressed. Shame was endemic among members of these groups before the war due to sociopolitical factors oppressing the young men who agreed to join Sankoh's rebel forces. The Sierra Leonean men who willingly joined the RUF were impoverished, disenfranchised, and felt irrelevant in the existing political system; the opinions of college-educated young men who had protested governmental corruption had been forcefully suppressed ("Revolutionary United Front"). The sociopolitical systems in place before the war broke out were such that the people in the lower echelons of society had little chance of improving their life circumstances. Frustrated intellectuals and youth desired "the education the incompetent state denied them, and a social justice that Sierra Leone had never

known," and were aware that the Momoh regime and the APC did not undertake the fulfillment of those objectives in any way (Brittain). Shame was deeply embedded in the mentality of certain classes of young Sierra Leonean men, and membership in Foday Sankoh's RUF, which claimed to be motivated by a "radical intellectual" philosophy. For the young men, the RUF was attractive because it presented itself as a viable means of erasing their shame by effecting fast, forceful change, and was a group where they felt that their concerns and desires were valued. Most of them were not seeking membership in the rebel forces because they wanted to terrorize their fellow countrymen; rather, they entered believing that short-term violent behavior would enable them to seize political power and improve their own quality of life. They desired to value and respect themselves, and in the process obtain respect from their comrades and from those who they, as soldiers, would necessarily harm in the process of taking down the APC. However, the composition of the soldiers in this group was far from hegemonic in demographics or motives; the main RUF recruits were drawn from Freetown slums, where poverty, crime, drug use, and violence were serious issues, and whose experiences of systemic shaming had already provoked most of these young men to past violence ("Revolutionary United Front").

By 1991 Momoh recognized that his one-party political system was quickly approaching complete failure. Ever-intensifying political pressures, a crumbling economy, and growing agitation led Momoh to announce a return to multi-party politics, and he planned to hold general elections in 1992 ("Revolutionary United Front", Fyfe). However, his announcement spurred two individuals, Foday Sankoh and Charles Taylor, to action. Foday Sankoh was a corporal-turned-photographer who had played a part in a failed coup against Stevens in 1971. Charles Taylor was a power-hungry Liberian politician who had a stake in "the destabilization of the Sierra Leonean government, which firmly supported international peacekeeping efforts in Liberia," consequently

interfering with his political ascendency, had other plans (Richards 2). Momoh's announcement

spurred them to seize power and gain control of resources, and Sankoh, backed by Taylor, led

the RUF into eastern Sierra Leone in March of 1991 (Richards, xvi). Though small, the rebel

group quickly acquired control of a significant amount of territory, and began recruiting young

disillusioned Sierra Leonean men to their forces (McHugh).

The RUF first targeted ethnic groups, murdering over 100 Fula, Madingo, and Lebanese

traders between March and May 1991. Although these brutalities never incited an ethnic divide,

they did incite fear among bewildered civilians ("Revolutionary United Front"). The RUF began

amputating civilians' hands in 1994, initially to warn women against producing the rice harvest,

but eventually to warn against participating in the 1996 presidential elections. Sankoh employed

and encouraged "the kind of twisted logic reserved for madmen and zealots," literally preventing

civilians from "join[ing] hands for the future of Sierra Leone" (Brittain). The RUF at this time

had begun to splinter into smaller groups, and more bloodthirsty factions eagerly took up

Sankoh's reasoning (Brittain). As time went on, it became clear that the RUF could not easily

attain political power, and they directed their attention to the diamond mines. As of 1994 they

had "systematically eliminated many rural workers in the country's diamond-mine areas, and by

year's end thousands had been murdered and half of the country's 4.6 million people had been

displaced" (McHugh). By early 1995, the rebel forces had grown to be several thousand strong,

and had commandeered nearly all of Sierra Leone's economic resources (McHugh). Incredibly,

four years into the war, the public had little to no understanding of the RUF's operating

principles, and could not determine whether the RUF was fighting for or against the people

(Brittain). That same year, the RUF released its manifesto, 'Footpaths to Democracy: Toward a

New Sierra Leone,' which "decried the country's 'state sponsored poverty and human

degradation' created by 'years of autocratic rule and militarism' and stated the RUF's goal of creating 'equal opportunity and access to power to create wealth' through armed struggle" (McHugh). Sankoh was captured in 1997 and was sentenced to death in October of 1998. In response, the RUF declared the start of "Operation Kill Every Living Thing," dismembering and murdering thousands of civilians, and vandalizing homes, shops, and towns throughout the country (McHugh). On January 6, 1999 RUF forces entered Freetown, executing, maiming, and brutalizing up to 6,000 civilians before troops from the West African States making up the Economic Community Cease-Fire Monitoring Group could force them out (McHugh).

After these atrocities, the Lomé Agreement was signed in July 1999, to propose a new plan to divide power (McHugh). This agreement stated that Sankoh (who had escaped from prison) and the RUF would have a role in the government, in exchange for the disarmament of the RUF affiliated factions (McHugh). The ever-unpredictable RUF forces agreed to the terms, yet continued to attack civilians and the UN peacekeeping forces who arrived in November 1999. Sankoh was recaptured by governmental forces in May of 2000, and greater numbers of UN and British troops deployed to rebel-controlled areas. This allowed governmental forces to secure territory and negotiate disarmament with the rebels, which officially began in May 2001 and resulted in the end of the war by January 2002 (McHugh).

I hold that the civil war conferred no benefits upon the people of Sierra Leone. The RUF claimed to be motivated by a political idealism, which its members hoped would enable them to effect social change. Instead, it revealed itself to be more effective at accumulating a legion of bloodthirsty barbarians who were adept at hacking off civilians' limbs and destroying the social networks and livelihoods of their victims. However, it is naive to attribute the origins of the war to a desire for power, or to claim that dissatisfaction with social or political structures motivated

people to carry out punitive amputations and methodically rape women and children. The violence, rooted in shame, began long before March of 1991; displays of collective physical violence often stem from anger with structural violence and a desire to break away from government-mandated oppression at any cost (Gilligan 1996, 111). Shame is a powerful social force, and is endemic in certain groups, such as unemployed people, uneducated individuals, those who are forcefully repressed from speaking or acting in certain ways, and those lacking viable means of self-sustenance (Gilligan 1168). When shame is concentrated in a group, acts of mass brutality inevitably follow. The pathogenic, or violence-inducing, effects of shame can be stimulated by the presence or absence of feelings such as guilt, anger, and resentment (Gilligan 1996, 111). Yet the rebels in the RUF who committed the worst atrocities, such as hacking off the limbs of infants and toddlers who were unable to vote and therefore posed no real political threat, and officers drugging and arming drugged children to carry out their own dirty work, were not consistently motivated by the shame they had experienced prior to the war. The rebel's actions were not "the actions of madmen or mindless savages. Once a decision to resort to violence has been taken, hand cutting, throat slitting, and other acts of terror become rational ways of achieving intended strategic outcomes" (Richards xviii). There is no justifying their actions. The aftermath of the war was horrible and reparations are an ongoing issue; what then, if any, helpful insights could be taken away from such an abhorrent series of crimes against humanity?

The events that occurred prior to, during, and after the Sierra Leonean shed light on how important it is to invest in national leadership and social systems that promote justice and prevent the development and sustainment of inequalities. People who are uneducated, unskilled or unemployed, poor or homeless, and members of ethnic or demographic groups are more

frequently and more intensely systematically shamed by the rest of society. The Sierra Leonean civil war provides a particularly compelling example of the fact that systemic shaming has the potential to harm all members of a society, not only the people who directly experience shame. Structural violence leads to perpetuation of unjust and discriminatory behaviors and policies that shame the marginalized individuals and groups, and not uncommonly leads to collective violence incited by the shamed individuals. However, because shame-induced violence is rooted in social realities, it can be addressed and perhaps prevented. It is helpful to consider that violence is a symptom of the social disease of shame. Careful restructuring of the social systems that infect groups with shame can help to prevent shame and shame-induced violence. Thus, policies that reduce homelessness, raise employment numbers, increase the number and quality of educational opportunities, and reverse housing discrimination would certainly be feasible approaches to treat deeper-rooted issues of shame and shame-induced violence. Once it is understood that the origins of violence-producing shame are contained within societal structures, it becomes obvious that violence is a social disease that can be prevented, and that proactively preventing the formation of unjust social systems that bring about shame can decrease both the quantity and quality of violence in communities around the world.

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