

CHRIS COULTER. *Being a Bush Wife. Women's Lives Through War and Peace in Northern Sierra Leone*. Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2006. Pp. 432. ISBN 91-506-1887-3.

In the introduction to her Ph.D. dissertation, Chris Coulter writes that UN and NGO reports “are among the most important actors in the production of knowledge about the war-torn and post-war societies and are not easily dismissed” (p. 30). However, as she subsequently recognises, thereby setting the tone for her own approach, “[f]rom an anthropological perspective such data records and illustrates but does little in the way of providing a deeper understanding of the war and people in it” (p. 32). The people in her particular study are Sierra Leonean women who were abducted, raped frequently and forced into slave labour, fighting and marriage, thus becoming so-called ‘bush wives’. The problem which the author sets out to investigate is how to best (and most sensitively) understand their role in, and experiences of, the civil war, which is otherwise well documented in popular works such as Ibrahim Abdullah’s *Between Democracy and Terror* (2000). Convincingly presented through the local social (as well as historical) context of women’s war experiences in Sierra Leone, Coulter shows that ‘humanitarian discourse’, which the West—and the Western media—applies in the framing of women’s roles in the war falls short of explaining their wartime experiences and their self-understanding of the world in which they live. Hence, as she notes:

An understanding of Sierra Leonean women’s war and post-war experiences is not augmented by positioning them in this dichotomy of victim/perpetrator, because, of course, all rebels were not evil, nor were all commanders rapists, and rebel base camps were not fenced death camps. While many girls and women managed to escape, others remained and made the best of the situation they found themselves in. (p. 218)

This important argument is given substantial evidence and justification through the author’s carefully selected research method and approach to ethnographical fieldwork. To this end, Chapter 4 (‘When he do me—I only hold god and sit’: Abduction and everyday rebel life) and Chapter 5 (‘From rape victims to female fighters: women’s participation in the war’) are frighteningly compelling. To be sure, most of the bush-wives were victims of not only the war but also the traditional hierarchical masculinist social order (as investigated in Chapter 3) which, to no small extent, shaped the conflict. In this way rape was embedded into the structure of war, rather than being a by-product of it, as Coulter demonstrates. Although a lot has been written about sexual violence in the Sierra Leonean war, Coulter contends that the reasons for the large-scale abduction of women were not solely based on male sexual fantasies of power and the need to dominate these women. Beyond these factors were two other aspects: first, through rape the rebels were able to control women’s productive labour which was essential to the war system. Second, particularly pornographic rape was used as a way of social control of the countryside. The way these rapes were carried out in an organised manner aimed at breaking the fabric of the traditional mechanisms of social control, which stemmed from hierarchical systems of kinship.

Yet, despite the mass victimisation of the women in the conflict, it is also recognised that they were not without agency, however limited. As always in all human conflicts, there are many who suffer and some who benefit from war and violence. In Sierra Leone many

bush-wives had access to goods and food stuffs they had never seen or tasted before and enjoyed it, even if they reeked of blood.

By detailing women's life in the bush Coulter greatly expands on the knowledge of women's everyday life in this conflict. The picture of everyday life appears as shades of grey, rather than black and white as in humanitarian discourse, Coulter contends. Particularly valuable in this research is her placing the notions of women's victimisation vis-à-vis their participation in the rebel forces into the local context. Here it emerges that these women "were not considered by their communities to be 'innocent' victims" (p. 217).

The last three chapters of Coulter's study comprise her examination of the transition from war to peace; from disarmament, reconciliation, national healing and economic survival to reintegration. It is these last three chapters which make the most valuable contribution to the wider literature on war-torn societies. Here Coulter demonstrates how humanitarian discourse and the way in which it is practically applied in the field was hardly sufficient in helping the process of transition. Although in places her argument is a little repetitive, it nevertheless is convincing. For example, the Sierra Leonean notions of healing through public memory-work (so prevalent in the West which is hyper-occupied with the Holocaust and its memory) were hardly sufficient, possibly counter-productive:

From the point of view of local culture, coping with memories of pain, humiliation, and violence was often a private and not a public event ... To publicly express pain or shameful practices has negative connotations in local Kuranko culture. (p. 276–277)

The dominant force in transition was not the process of working through war memories but economic survival. Most crucially, the way in which bush-wives were stigmatized (or not) in the post-war society was directly related to their ability to generate an income. If all else failed, 'girlfriend business' and prostitution remained options. If during the war the women had to use their bodies in their survival strategies, there were certain continuities in the post-war society as in many cases it was better for these women to use their bodies to earn wages than to be ostracized by their kinship groups for not contributing to the running of a household. Indeed, as Coulter's final chapter investigates, the success of women's domestication after their time in the bush was primarily dependent on the ability to bring material resources into a household and secondly on the way in which the presence of these women affected the social status and reputation of the head of the family. In terms of war-to-peace transition, the significance of Coulter's findings is the way in which the dichotomy between war and peace is broken down; in terms of social order and the normative structures of society, the return to peace did not herald a new beginning, but fostered a pre-war social system which was viewed as safe: "[A]s long as an abducted girl or woman (...) behaved well and complied with 'traditional' norms, and the effects of her wartime experiences were not too obvious, people were more inclined to accept her." (p. 345)

Overall, as Coulter's thesis clearly shows, the local notions of the war, abduction, rape, victimhood and the ways and means to recovery were widely different from the notions of humanitarian discourse. Thus, the general value of the book lies not only within academia, but in its usefulness for the humanitarians. As it has emerged in the study, the abducted women were "failed by both the international community and their own society. They could not count on the massive apparatus of humanitarian assistance, nor could they relay

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on the comforts of tradition.” (p. 286) The challenge, then, is how to incorporate the two very different views on the meanings of wartime experiences and the postwar transition.

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