

# Section One: Learning Across Cultural Boundaries

Journeys begin with a series of preparations, from studying maps, to buying tickets, to packing suitcases. Less carefully scrutinized than passports and suitcases, however, are the cultural assumptions travelers carry to a foreign country—often termed cultural baggage. Cultural baggage refers to conscious and unconscious concepts of the world based on the particular social location or background of the individual. This may take the form of assuming a single standard of values or universal ideas of morality. For instance, a number of the American students we met in the course of traveling to West Africa were incensed with the system of bribery that operated throughout the region, comparing this system with “honest people back home.” We were blocked at various junctures in the roads by small bands of youth who had put up a rope and wanted some change or cigarettes before lowering the barrier for our car to pass. Whether we describe this as an informal toll or highway robbery, the practice grew out of limited opportunities youth have to generate income.

A healthy dose of cultural relativism—evaluating actions, beliefs and practices relative to the specific cultural context in which they occur—is as important as immunizations when entering foreign countries. Too much relativism can produce cynical detachment from the problems of a society—or support pre-existing prejudices. For example, travelers may come to the conclusion that extreme poverty is “just the way it is” and stop short of probing for the deeper reasons behind wide economic disparities. Too little relativism means carrying an excess of certainty about one’s own cultural values. Maintaining the right balance between too much and too little relativism can be vital for learning.

Cultural relativism need not imply that all societal values are equally valid. It is possible to be critical of the practices of a society while attempting to understand factors that sustain particular ways of life. Further, cultural traditions are often contradictory in their effects. Polygamy, for example, commonly practiced in some areas of Africa, may both restrict women and grant them particular freedoms. Although this form of marriage, where men take multiple wives, does express male power over women, it also creates female communities with some degree of autonomy from men.

Whether as students or travelers, people carry with them images of foreign lands shaped by popular culture, e.g., television, movies, and music. In making the film, *Diamonds, Guns and Rice: Sierra Leone and the Women’s Movement*, we sought alternatives to standard media images in the United States. Many news reports covering the Sierra Leonean civil war during the 1990s portrayed the rebels as inexplicably violent and primitive in their methods. The primary rebels in the Sierra Leonean conflict were described as young black men brandishing machetes and carrying out atrocities, often amputating the limbs of civilians. In many media accounts, responsibility for the terrible suffering fell entirely on the rebels—what one Sierra Leonean woman interviewed for the film termed “the bad boys on the ground.” These reported atrocities added to preexisting racist images of African “savagery.” Wars in the less technologically advanced societies of Africa are more often cast as “dirty” and primitive in their methods. Military actions carried out by the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq, in contrast, are portrayed by the U.S. media as “clean,” with their surgical strikes and computer-generated targets.

This first section includes five lesson plans, establishing a portal of entry into the Sierra Leonean civil war. In preparing students to screen the documentary video *Diamonds, Guns and Rice* later in the curriculum, Lesson 1, “Sierra Leone in Context,” provides a brief history of Sierra Leone. Lesson 2, “Images of Africa,” encourages students to reflect on their own perceptions of Africa and how these are influenced by images in the media and popular culture. Caleb Heymann, co-producer of *Diamonds, Guns and Rice*, and a high school student at the time the film was made, tells how the videotaping changed his perceptions of gender. This experience also led him onto his current path in the field of filmmaking. Lesson 3, “Gender and War,” introduces students to gender dynamics associated with war and the reconciliation process. Lesson 4, “Conceptions of Youth,” features an interview with educator Susan Shepler, who discusses issues in cross-cultural research, such as cultural assumptions concerning the responsibility of youth for their participation in the violence of war. Lesson 5, “A Story from Emma Fofanah,” introduces Emma Fofanah, one of the Sierra Leonean women featured in *Diamonds, Guns and Rice*. Fofanah provides yet another entrée into the story of the civil war—one told from the perspective of a Sierra Leonean-American woman struggling to cope with the trauma of armed conflict in her homeland.

# Lesson 1 Sierra Leone in Context

Time: Approximately 30 minutes

Materials:

A world map or globe

For each student:

Handout: “Setting the Stage for Civil War in Sierra Leone”

Procedure:

Have students locate Sierra Leone on a world map, using either a globe or map in the classroom.

Distribute “Setting the Stage for Civil War in Sierra Leone.” Allow students time to read the handout.

Facilitate a class discussion based on the following questions:

**What factors does the essay introduce in establishing a context for the civil war in Sierra Leone? What are some of the difficulties in separating external (e.g., colonialism) and internal (e.g., indigenous practices) factors to explain the root causes of the civil war?**

**How might the historical context shape relationships between Sierra Leoneans and “helpers” from Western countries?**

**Sierra Leone has implemented a Truth and Reconciliation Commission and a Special Court to help the country recover from the civil war. What are some of the differences in these processes? How do you think each contributes to the peace process?**



## Lesson 2 Images of Africa

Time: Approximately 50 minutes

Materials:

For each student:

Handout: "Have Camera, Will Travel: A Student Perspective on Africa"

Procedure:

Ask students to generate a list of words or phrases they associate with Africa and Africans and write them on the board.

Divide the class into small groups (3-4 students). Ask students to discuss potential sources of such images in their groups.

Distribute "Have Camera, Will Travel: A Student Perspective on Africa." Allow students time to read the essay.

Facilitate a class discussion based on the following questions:

**How were the student filmmaker's perceptions influenced by his experiences traveling in West Africa?**

**What are your perceptions about where we get many of our images of Africa? How do these compare to the perceptions of Caleb Heymann?**

Homework: Write a one-page essay illustrating how the student filmmaker's perceptions of a group of people changed after visiting where they lived.



# Setting the Stage for Civil War in Sierra Leone

Ariel Ladum

Sierra Leone is a small coastal country in West Africa, bordered by Guinea in the north and east and Liberia in the south. In 1787 over three hundred “Black Poor” and about 100 whites left Britain to establish a British colony of Sierra Leone managed by the British Sierra Leone Company. Sierra Leone also has historical ties to the United States through the brutal legacy of the slave trade. America was a primary market for slave labor, and Sierra Leone was a prized region for slave traders bringing captives to build the plantation economy of the South. In 1792, 1,200 freed slaves seeking refuge from the American War of Independence joined the surviving settlers of the Colony—many of whom had died from harsh living conditions. This second influx established “Freetown” as the first permanent settlement. Sierra Leone did not become a Crown Colony of Britain until the 1808 downfall of the British Sierra Leone Company.

As the first modern political state in sub-Saharan Africa, Sierra Leone benefited from developments in infrastructure, although the indigenous peoples suffered under colonial domination. The British built railways and roads, as well as the first university in the region—Fourah Bay College. Improved intra-state transportation facilitated the exploitation of Sierra Leone’s rich natural resources, particularly diamonds. Colonizers started recruiting men to work in migratory labor camps, and many young men left their communities to seek their fortunes in the diamond mines. Soon, however, the fantasy of getting rich through mining for diamonds proved illusory. Whether working for paltry wages in the mines or sifting through the mud for a few crude stones, young men often returned to their villages as poor as when they left.

During the period of African anti-colonial movements after World War II, black Sierra Leoneans resisted British rule, and gained independence in 1961. Immediately following this victory Sierra Leone’s future looked bright—new roads were built and many hospitals, schools, and clinics opened. This hopefulness was short-lived, however. Sierra Leoneans struggled to survive under a series of corrupt leaders who continued to exploit the country’s abundant diamond reserves for their own enrichment. By the mid 1980s, the country was mired in rapidly expanding foreign debt, rampant inflation, currency devaluation, budget deficits, and declining exports fueled in part by a growing informal economy largely based on an illicit diamond trade. Faced with frequent blackouts, food and fuel shortages, and unemployment, Sierra Leoneans had reached a state of desperate crisis.

Some have offered singular explanations—such as greed over diamonds or unbearable living conditions—for the rise of a rebel movement in March 1991. Factors underlying civil war in Sierra Leone are complex, however, linked to

problems throughout West Africa—problems that, in turn, are tied to contemporary Western economic policies and the legacy of colonialism.

As the colonizer, Britain established an institutional framework for later economic exploitation of Sierra Leone. The British model of economic development in Sierra Leone consisted of exporting raw materials for manufacturing abroad; Sierra Leone itself had virtually no industry. In order to acquire raw materials colonial rulers manipulated the customary chieftaincy system—in which Paramount Chiefs acted as local government in provincial areas—transforming traditional leaders into agents of colonial power. Thus, rather than equipping Sierra Leone with a solid bureaucratic structure to provide strong governance, British colonialism left Sierra Leone with a de-centralized system of patronage in which citizens benefited more from alliances to local chiefs than from allegiance to the government in Freetown.

Post-independence regimes followed the example set by colonial powers. Successive governments continued to exploit traditional systems in order to sustain an export-based economy, granting cooperative Paramount Chiefs greater power, assets and wealth, overlooking particular smuggling operations, and awarding cabinet, civil service, and army appointments to certain ethnic groups. In turn, lower-level leaders granted favors such as land, mining licenses, and protection to their own supporters who provided political backing, manual labor, and social deference. Some supporters were financed entirely by local leaders, and naturally more loyal to them than to the more removed government.

Sierra Leonean state leaders were also involved in their own patronage system involving arms traders in East Europe, the global diamond industry, and Western economic organizations. Government officials sacrificed the collective good of Sierra Leoneans to personally benefit economically from these international players. Government officials would turn a blind eye to diamond smuggling or establish unequal trading relationships in exchange for arms. They set very low buying prices and export taxes for diamonds and cash crops that benefited global markets, and cut spending on social services to qualify for more loans from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF).

All of these factors have been identified as primary in creating conditions conducive to the outbreak of civil war. By subverting traditional systems of governance and mismanaging Sierra Leone’s assets to serve private interests, political elites created a state of chronic deprivation and poverty for the general public. Divisions between a minority of rich political elites and very poor masses continued to grow. Few prospects for work, and limited health care, education, and other social services created deplorable living conditions. The powerful elites used brutal tactics—including





ing the death penalty—to silence any political opposition. The youths, abandoned by leaders who were unable to meet their basic needs, felt powerless to change their inhumane conditions and lost hope for a better future.

In the early 1990s the Liberian civil war spilled over into Sierra Leone and young men took up the fight to depose corrupt governments on both sides of the border. Fighters from the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), led by Charles Taylor, joined with disenfranchised, radicalized students and disillusioned elements within the Sierra Leonean Army (SLA), as well as foreign mercenaries from the Ukraine and fighters from Burkina Faso, to form the rebel group, Revolutionary United Front (RUF). After Charles Taylor became President of Liberia in 1997, the Liberian government supplied the RUF with arms and training in exchange for looted goods and diamonds mined illegally by the rebels.

The Lomé Accord of July 1999 between the RUF and Sierra Leonean government eventually brought hostilities to an end, but not before years of fighting took a tremendous toll on the country. The groups involved in the fighting—the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), as well as the rebel organization of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), the Sierra Leonean Army (SLA), and the Civil Defense Forces (CDF)—waged war not only against each other, but also against civilians. During the civil war an estimated 12,000 children were separated from their families and forced into servitude. Although estimates vary, of the 4.2 million citizens of Sierra Leone at least 75,000 were killed, over one million were displaced within the country, more than 500,000 became refugees, and in excess of 400,000 people had at least one limb amputated.<sup>1</sup> Although all fighting factions employed brutal tactics against the civilian population—including murder, mutilation, amputation, slavery, rape, and kidnapping—the RUF was found responsible for the largest number of human rights abuses.<sup>2</sup> In fact many critics insist that the Lomé Peace Accord was a terrible denouement to the bloody conflict because it rewarded the RUF; rather than punishing the military commanders, the negotiators granted immunity from prosecution as well as four ministry positions in exchange for demobilization of the rebel forces.

The Lomé Accord called for the creation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Purposes of the TRC included rebuilding relationships, preventing future conflict, and creating a balanced historical account of violations and abuses of human rights and international humanitarian law. Although formally established by the Sierra Leone Parliament in February 2000 by virtue of the Truth and Reconciliation Act, the TRC did not start hearing testimony until April 2003, issuing a final report in October 2004. In addition to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in January 2002 the United Nations and the government of Sierra Leone jointly created the Special Court for Sierra Leone to punish the worst human rights offenders and bring restitution to victims. The vast majority of people indicted by the

Special Court are Sierra Leonean. Many Sierra Leoneans, however, lay considerable responsibility for the conflict at the feet of Charles Taylor, the former Liberian President. On March 7, 2003 the prosecutor approved indictments against Charles Taylor and former AFRC leader Johnny Paul Koroma. Charles Taylor fled his country and sought refuge in Nigeria, where, as of 2005, he remains, fighting extradition. The CDF trial began on June 3, 2004, the RUF trial began on July 5, 2004, and the three AFRC accused were brought to trial in March 2005. As of July 2005, three leaders of the former CDF, three leaders of the former RUF, and three leaders of the former AFRC were indicted for multiple counts of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and other serious violations of international humanitarian law.

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<sup>2</sup> Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission. (2004, October). Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Overview, Chapter 2, and Chapter 3 retrieved July 2005, from United States Institute of Peace Web site: [http://www.usip.org/library/tc/tc\\_regions/tc\\_sl.html#rep](http://www.usip.org/library/tc/tc_regions/tc_sl.html#rep)


## Yatta Samah: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission



**Y**atta Samah is of the Mende tribe. She was born in Kenema town in the district of Kenema, located in the eastern region where the civil war initially broke out. She received a teacher's certificate from Freetown Teachers College, and when the war started in 1991, Samah decided to concentrate her energy on educating and mobilizing women. She taught women about their rights, how they could help maintain peace, and how to leave behind the atrocities of the war and focus on positive means of healing. Samah won the Women's Creativity in Rural Life gold medal laureate award in 2000 from the Women's World Summit Foundation in Geneva, Switzerland for working with rural women. In 2004, her work was recognized by FAO in Rome as the best women's farming organization in Sierra Leone. As a community activist Samah organized a women's farming collective that led to the Moawoma Rural Women's Development Association (MORWODAS). Describing herself as an ecofeminist, Samah works across different regions in Sierra Leone, helping the area recover from the devastation suffered on all levels during the civil war. Under Samah's leadership, the Moawoma organization continues to grow as a grassroots nongovernmental organization (NGO) for rural women's empowerment.



In an interview focused on women, economics, and the peace process, Jan Haaken asks Yatta Samah about her own experience in organizing a rural women's farming cooperative.



Haaken: Your approach to the peace process focuses on building new economic opportunities for youth, as well as giving testimony to what people experienced during the war. Could you describe your rural organizing project and how this work is related to the peace process?

Samah: The Moawoma Rural Women's Development Association (MORWODAS) is an indigenous non-governmental organization that first started as a community-based organization in April 1995, during the height of the civil war. While interviewing women in Kenema I found that most of them were the breadwinners in their homes. The men were staying inside because they were afraid of being accused of collaborating with the enemy by the various warring factions. I initiated the idea of cooperating across differing ethnic groups, as women, to stabilize our situations for survival and economic empowerment. This effort has grown to become a large women's cooperative organization that operates not only in Kenema but also in other districts. We have established the Association based on the desire for a program that would draw urgently needed attention to the plight of rural women, who produce about 60-80 percent of foods consumed in Sierra Leone. Its programs include agricultural and other sustainable income-generating activities, skill training, promotion of health and sanitation, and education on the civic rights of women and children. To build a strong foundation MORWODAS has made long-term investments in food production, training staff, and constructing buildings.

MORWODAS is the first and the only Association that has won two Gold Medals: the first in 2000 from the Women's World Summit Foundation and the second from the Food and Agricultural Organization in 2002. The Association is different from other economic development projects in that it is the first owned and managed solely by women. The women come from five adjacent chiefdoms (counties): Dama, Koya, Gaura, Tunkia, and Nomo. Located behind the Moa River in the Kenema District of Eastern Sierra Leone, these five chiefdoms are referred to as the Moawoma Community.

Central to the MORWODAS mission is serving and empowering women, especially those living in the Moawoma Community. Since its conception, membership in the organization has soared to over 10,000. The Association brings women together through their traditional work as farmers, as well as in new ways across ethnic lines, for example, in building on common spiritual principles across Christianity, Islam, and Animism and in finding how respect for women, working for peace, and a healthy environment are all connected. MORWODAS helps rural women rehabilitate themselves, alleviate their poverty, and effectively integrate into society in the spirit of mutual aid and self-development.

Haaken: In many countries, women are either excluded from or reluctant to participate in Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs). What was this process like for the women in Sierra Leone?

Samah: In Sierra Leone's Truth and Reconciliation program, there was no discrimination on a gender basis. All participated freely and equally. Women who had been sexually abused gave testimonies on camera. They vented their experiences to release the stress in them. After their testimonies, they were able to overcome their trauma. The TRC also gave recognition to the treatment of women, and how the poor status of women in society made women victims to terrible human rights abuses.

Haaken: Some feel that the TRC is a better procedure and some feel the Special Court is better in addressing the injustices of the war. What is your view of these two procedures?

Samah: If we are able to forget the past, we will be in a position to start rebuilding our battered lives. The TRC told us that we have to move forward and to "forgive and forget," but the Special Court just incarcerates people. Although it is important

to prosecute the leaders involved in human rights violations, we have not seen benefit yet from the Special Court. The TRC opened the wounds of the war by getting testimony, but the TRC also encouraged dialogue and programs for healing. The Special Court opens old wounds and leaves them open. For example, if I was raped and tell my story or if I say what happened to my sister and they do nothing about it, I am just re-traumatized. That is what has happened with the Special Court. So it has not so far been a good thing for us.

Haaken: Whether people are able to forgive depends on how they understand why the rebels committed the atrocities. It has been difficult for many people outside the country to understand why these young people often came back to their own villages to attack their own communities, and sometimes their own families. How do you understand that?

Samah: The war was basically a youth war. More youths participated than any other age group. Most fighters were below the age of twenty. The youths often came back to burn down houses in their own villages, sometimes attacking their families, because they had been treated very badly and abused by their elders. Sometimes the young men fall in love with the wives of the elders and have no resources to marry, so they resent the older men. These boys would face fines imposed by the elder men in their villages, maybe for having relationships with women who were in forced marriages. So the girls, too, went to the bush and took up arms because they were angry over their bad treatment. Many of these girls do not want to go back now to their villages because they were forced into marriages, denied an education, and treated very badly.

