

THE AMBIGUITY OF *BIKE RIDING*

A STUDY OF POLITICAL ORDER AND POSTWAR PATRONAGE-NETWORKS IN CONTEMPORARY SIERRA LEONE

Abstract

Based on a fieldwork among ex-combatants in Makeni, Sierra Leone, this article intends to explore the relationship between the creation of political order and patronage-networks that have evolved as a direct consequence of the civil war in Sierra Leone. It shows that the frequently examined channels of agency expressed through institutionalized and legal processes in social science only have minor impact on the creation of political order in contemporary Sierra Leone. Accordingly, the political order observed in the post-war Sierra Leone society must primarily be understood and examined through alternative processes. This article argues that post-war patronage-networks are important in shaping short-term political order in a post-war setting. They do so in the midst of everyday life by providing a certain extent of predictability, stability and social security and by offering a platform for obtaining short-term social and political agency and sustaining hope for a better future in a local setting. However, at the same time the article argues that the same patronage-networks also have the potential to generate long-term political disorder due to their temporality and labile characteristic as well as their lack of potential in generating broader and more radical political impact and changes. Empirical findings indicate that these networks simply carry too little sociopolitical changes in the society at large and in the long run might end up accumulating frustration in different levels of the patronage-networks which may lead to political disorder.

This article gives high priority to anthropological descriptions. And taking its point of departure in the empirical findings of new types of patronage-networks, the paper intends to extrapolate the everyday practice of social and political agency outside established institutions and to shed light on the complexity and ambiguity of these practices.

Introduction

Arriving at Makeni town, central Sierra Leone, one of the first things that caught my attention was the “pimped” colorful motorcycles which seemed to be everywhere. Soon I became aware that the primary way of transportation in Makeni was taxi-motorcycling. Locally, the taxi-motorcycles are called *okadas* or *hondas* and the chauffeurs are called *okada-men* or *riders* (consequently, I will make use of these local terms). They transport customers from one place to another in the town for a price of 1000 Leones.

The entire community of Makeni is, in a sense, based on this commercial transport, as both economic and social activities seem to be depending on this means of transportation. During my own fieldwork in Makeni in the fall of 2009, I was also dependent on this type of transportation facility as I spent many hours riding the pillion of a *honda* driving from one place to another on the bumpy roads.

The *okada* - phenomenon developed immediately after the civil war as the *hondas* replaced the 4 wheeled taxi-cars used before the war in most cities of Sierra Leone (in Freetown the taxi services

offered both cars and *hondas* due to larger distances)ⁱ (e.g. Bürge & Peters 2010). *Bike riding* was primarily established by ex-combatants. During the war, the combatants were in control of the transportation sector (including the *honda-bikes*) due to their work at the borders. As the war came to an end, they had easy access to the *hondas* and knew how to maneuver them. Accordingly, the already well-established combatant networks were transformed into an *okada*-transportation network in several cities in Sierra Leone. Today, “only” one third of *the riders* are ex-combatants, as it has become common for men with no active military background to enroll in this occupation due to the lack of other available jobs.

Most *riders* do not own their own *honda* and it is common practice that they rent it from a more wealthy man, in several cases a commander who did well after the war (ibid.). These interest-based rental-agreements are of non-contractual form and rely on patronage relations. The majority of the *riders* have organized themselves in a sort of a working union called “the Makeni Bike Riders Association” (MBRA). According to the MBRA, the prime function of the MBRA is to enhance the conditions of the *riders*.

The *okada*-phenomenon and the derived self-made arrangements can be described as an example of a new and noticeable development in the Sierra Leonean society. Recent ethnographical literature in Sierra Leone reveals that several interest-driven arrangements among young people have developed in the post-war local political stage (e.g. Peters 2007, Rincon 2010). Some commanders did well out of the war and they established new networks related to different activities such as transportation, mining etc. In this way, they paved the way for a restructuring of these activities to the benefit of the local society (e.g. ibid., Peters & Bürge 2010). These “new post-war arrangements” have been particularly noticed with respect to their ability to include marginalized young people (ibid.). The recent violent conflict in Sierra Leone has been portrayed as a *crisis of youth* stressing how young people embraced the conflict in an attempt to escape a continued state of marginalization and poverty (e.g. ibid., Fanthorpe & Maconachie 2010). It is argued that these “new networks” hold promises in the form of “new social capital” breaking away from the pre-war suppressing patronage relations by elders and state-officials, which led to marginalized conditions among young people (e.g. Peters 2007, Richards/Bah/Vincent 2004). However, I intend, in this paper, to show that patronage relations might still be the essential force in the new craft-based unions (exemplified by

ⁱ Today, 4 wheeled taxi-cars are still to be found, yet only for longer trips out of the city.

the *okada*-phenomenon)¹. This observation does not imply that I neglect the appearance of new features of everyday life in Sierra Leone – such as new ways of crafting agency and livelihood strategies among young people. On the contrary, it must be seen in the context of its limitations. I suggest that the current choice of *young people* to enroll in these new patron-client networks – such as the *bike riding* - must be seen as a strategic act carried out to improve their living conditions in the context of an ongoing state of marginalization.

This paper is about the creation of political order in Sierra Leone and its obstacles. In a condensed form my analytical understanding of the notion of “the creation of political order” is orientated on how *stable and peaceful forms of concerted activities among social actors evolve in Sierra Leone* (Verdery 1999: 23)². However, this does not say much about the sociopolitical realities in the country, and the actual meaning of the notion will be developed during this article. The question of political order is most commonly perceived by means of institutionalized and legal processes actualized in relation to a state body. Accordingly, informal and non-legal processes are normally understood as components challenging the political order (e.g. Abrams 1988, Verdery 1999). As regards the post-war context of Sierra Leone - which is characterized by decades of political instability and a state body which has never functioned according to a Weberian model³ - the issue of the creation of political order must be addressed in other ways⁴. It is commonly argued that livelihood strategies and sociopolitical agency of young people is closely linked to the creation of political order and stability in the country (e.g. Fanthorpe & Maconachie 2010, Bürge & Peters 2010). Based on this assumption, the new patronage networks are of particular interest as they seem to have an implication. Thus, I intend, in this article, to explore the relationship between the creation of political order and patronage-networks that have evolved from the civil war in Sierra Leone.

Based on my field work among a group of urban *bike riders* in Makeni in the fall of 2009⁵, I argue that the postwar patronage-networks hold an ambivalent role with respect to the creation of political order⁶.

“Crisis of youth” the overall narrative of the creation of political order

A post-war context like the one in Sierra Leone can take many different forms. In my earlier writing I have argued that the atrocities caused by the recent civil war still affect the consciousness of people, both time-wise and location-wise (Voldby [forthcoming]). Officially, the war came to an end a decade ago, but several of my informants expressed uncertainty and doubts about what the

future holds? Furthermore, Sierra Leone is surrounded by countries characterized by great political instability. Western Africa is one of the poorest areas in the entire world and Sierra Leone holds a bottom position on the *Human Development Index*⁷. In that respect, poverty and uncertainty seem to be defining the context of Sierra Leone. Most civilians are affected by this, but the urban youth is, by far, the group mostly influenced by this situation. In the literature on conflicts in West Africa, a number of studies can be found which underpin our knowledge of *youth* in economic and sociopolitical crisis in this region (e.g. Christiansen/Utas/Vigh 2006, Christensen & Utas 2008)ⁱⁱ.

In the situation of a prolonged state of decline, young people have due to unemployment, poverty and general scarcity been in an exposed position of *social death* (Vigh 2006). They have been unable to move forward to responsible adulthood (Christiansen/Utas/Vigh 2006) and have lacked economic and political mobility in a strongly hierarchical social system, where they have been ranked at the bottom of the pre-war patronage systems (Richards 2004 [1996]). These difficulties among *young people* have led to a general understanding of a frustrated and marginalized *youth* who was among the first to take up arms in times of conflicts, trying to navigate towards better conditions and a desperate search for empowerment. Accordingly; warfare has been described to constitute one of the few ways to gain mobility and to break free from the sociopolitical and economic “stuckness” (Christensen & Utas 2008, Fanthorpe & Maconachie 2010).

As indicated above, a vital cause of the civil war in Sierra Leone is linked to an underlying *crisis of youth* which is well summed up by one of my informants, when answering why he became a *rebel-fighter* he simply replied: *it was the only thing I could do!* As the war is a clear-cut example of a condition of political disorder, I find that establishment of political order is closely connected to and entwined with improving the conditions of the *youth in crisis* in Sierra Leone – including breaking the old rhythms of a strong hierarchical social system of patronage. There are many indications that the *crisis of youth* is expanding into the present post-war context, and political violence and remobilization is an ongoing “threat” to the creation of political order (ibid.). This consideration may be too undifferentiated in the bounds of the complexity of the notion such as “political order”. Nevertheless, following the example of others I suggest that *the crisis of youth* is a lens through which post-war challenges, such as the creation of political order, can be understood. E.g. the social scientists Richard Fanthorpe and Roy Maconachie write:

ⁱⁱ In Sierra Leone the notion of *youth* does not refer to a certain age of years, but to a sociopolitical indication of political contestation and social position (e.g. Christiansen/Utas/Vigh 2006, Christensen & Utas 2008.).

The ‘crisis of youth’ has clearly become the master narrative of postwar reconstruction in Sierra Leone, providing a compelling explanation of the causes of conflict and a ready means of identifying priorities for post-war peace building and development programming. (2010:56)

Thus, I see the *creation of stable and peaceful forms of concerted activities among social actors in Sierra Leone* (and the obstacles to this) to be intertwined with the process of young people struggling to craft spaces of agency and desperate search for empowerment in everyday life. I have found the notion of *social navigation* (Vigh 2003) and *agency* helpful in regard to understanding the everyday struggle to make life endurable among the young urbane ex-combatants in Makeni – my empirical object.

An analytical view on the everyday struggle of being

“social navigation”

The notion of agency is interlinked with that of “being” or “becoming”. The anthropologist Michael Jackson ponders on *the balance between being an actor and being acted upon* (Jackson 2005: x), and stresses that the core phenomenological notion of being is a state of constant becoming in time and place (Jackson 2005). His writing is an example of the recent polemic of the notion of being by several anthropologists (Lindquist 2006). This attempt to accumulate being is what social science takes as “agency” - broadly defined as an *instance of power with purpose and direction* (ibid.: 7). The concept of agency has been criticized in recent anthropology (e.g. Jackson 2005, Lindquist 2006). It has been pointed out that in some cases there is a vast difference between will, incitement and desire to act and the ability to do so in a particular context. The conflating aspect of agency is gathered in the approach of *critical phenomenology*, which holds an attention to the linkage between the phenomenal and the political. Robert Desjarlais is the originator of this approach which is driven from the strive to understand how *self-hood, person-hood and subjectivity [agency][...] are born of a gamut of cultural, political, biological, linguistic and environmental forces* (Desjarlais 1997:24). This analytical debate occurs in the ethnographical literature of West Africa with Jackson’s studies in Sierra Leone. In this study, he understands the *struggle for being cybernetically [...] as a course steered between a variable environment and the equally variable capacities of persons* (Jackson 2005: xi)ⁱⁱⁱ. And it also occurs as the Danish anthropologist Henrik Vigh

ⁱⁱⁱ Jackson is inspired by existential thoughts of Jean-Paul Sartre and . He writes: *[...] I seek to extend Sartre’s insight that our humanness is the outcome of a dynamic relationship between circumstances over which we have little control –*

developed the notion of *social navigation* in his ethnography about youth and soldiering in Guinea-Bissau (Vigh 2006). Following the writings of Bourdieu, he strives to overcome the conflicting relation of agency and structure with this concept. With the notion of *social navigation*, he sets out to understand the everyday movement of young people in a shifting and unstable sociopolitical landscape (Vigh 2003, Vigh 2006).

In regard to my empirical focus of investigation I have found the work of Vigh and Jackson inspiring and helpful. The notion of *social navigation* seems to be a constructive frame of understanding regarding my informants' ongoing attempt to positioning themselves in a world which *acts upon them*. My informant Allan clearly accentuated on this balance as he stated: *A man proposes and God disposes...*

With analytical attention to how my informants are navigators (strategically seeking to optimize their agency) and at the same time caught in a vast machine of sociopolitical and economic dynamics in the context of Sierra Leone, I intend to explore the relationship between the creation of political order and “new” patronage-networks below.

In the first part of the paper, I outline the political situation in Sierra Leone and introduce my empirical object in detail. In the second part, I suggest that the new ex-combatant networks make up a way for my informants to realize their desires to act, and these young men make use of this strategically. I also show how this seemingly complies with the creation of political order. However, in the third part I suggest that this needs to be considered in accordance with the broader social and political dynamics in accounting for subjective realities (Desjarlais 1997: 25). The new patronage networks are one of the only ways to bring together the conflated aspects of agency among youth in Sierra Leone today (the will to act and the ability to do so) and leaves very little space for maneuvering. Although, agency and mobility is offered it is limited to the form of patronage and it does not change the basic problem of dependence of patrons. Furthermore – and even more important - nothing is transformed concerning the ongoing crisis in the country and the region. All in all, I find that this generates potentials for political disorder.

such as phylogenetic pre-dispositions, our upbringing and our social history – and our capacity to live those circumstances in a variety of ways (Jackson 2005: xi)

How to organize yourself according to a non-working state

- *politics of patronage*

APC and SLPP are all the same..., this is how my chauffeur with a deep sigh ended a long conversation about the political life in Sierra Leone. The All People's Congress (APC) and Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) are the two largest political parties in Sierra Leone. Since 1961, when Sierra Leone gained independence from Great Britain, these two parties have been the dominating actors on the political scene. The problem referred to, in the quote above, is a very essential one concerning a high level of corruption and patronage which seems to characterize both parties (e.g. Keen 2005). From my chauffeur's point of view, it does not make any difference which party comes to power, and in deep frustration he has given up seeking influence through the institutionalized channels. This attitude of frustration is a widespread phenomenon in the population of Sierra Leone (e.g. Christensen & Utas 2008). Several research results underpin that in the population of Sierra Leone there seems to be a general tendency towards putting very little trust in politicians, election processes, ideological agendas from political parties as well as other institutionalized and governmental processes for political conduct. As an example, the Danish anthropologist Maya M. Christensen and the Swedish anthropologist Mats Utas identify this tendency among some young street musicians:

Many young Sierra Leoneans call this [politicians advocating for democracy] a game of poli-tricks and demo-crazy; popular musicians, the voice of the street, release a seemingly endless stream of protest songs on the subject. (Christensen & Utas: 2008:516)

The frustration expressed here has to be seen in the context of recent political history in Sierra Leone. In April 1971, Siaka Stevens became the first President of Sierra Leone (just one day after the constitution had been ratified by the Parliament). He constituted a milestone in politics in Sierra Leone. Among many other things, Stevens' regime was characterized by a high level of patronage. The British political economist David Keen expresses it as follows:

Siaka Stevens' political system was based on extending patronage to a relatively small but shifting group of "insiders", whilst intimidating any "outsider" who expressed their dissatisfaction too vigorously. (Keen 2005:16)

The recognized anthropologist in the context of West Africa, Paul Richards has contributed a number of examples adding to our knowledge on how figures of patronage in the government of Sierra Leone in the 70' and 80' evolved to be centered on personal enrichment and on exploitation of minerals. E.g. he documents how taxation for diamonds is manipulated and he mentions even more concrete examples⁸. In continuation of a large economic crisis in the 80s due to a decline in the mining sector, Siaka Stevens' protégé, Joseph Momoh took over the presidency in 1985. This did not in any way change the corruption among government officials or the privileges of patronage-positions among a small élite. On the contrary, the marginalization of the broad society continued likewise the general state of decline. In April 1992, the already collapsing one-party-regime was removed in a coup, pioneered by the *youth*, who were among the most marginalized due to their dependence on both patronage networks within the state and on the powers of traditional authorities. (Keen 2005, Richards 2004 [1996]). Richards stresses that people in general hoped that the coup might bring about changes and liberation from decades of political patronage. He writes:

[...] after years of APC mismanagement [...] The coup[in 1992] was widely welcomed by the majority of Sierra Leoneans, especially by the youth, as offering the country a new start (Richards 2004 [1996]: 9)

However, despite the hope for a change the coup and the following war did not change the conditions of political patronage nor the general state of decline. In contemporary Sierra Leone, politics is still about networks of patronage rather than a well-functioning political system. Consequently, people still navigate into patronage networks to gain political and economic agency, as they have little choice to do otherwise⁹.

New actors in the political game

- ex-combatants and their networks

The persistency of the dominant political structure of patronage throughout the war does not equate with the circumstance that influential politics components have remained the same¹⁰. Naturally, the picture is complex. On the one hand, several of the pre-war politicians are, today, still key persons in the political landscape (e.g. Utas & Christensen 2008), on the other hand, new actors have entered the scene (e.g. Richards/Bah/Vincent 2004). The latter will be given special attention in this paper. As mentioned above, the civil war constituted a partial change regarding “the look” of the patronage networks of influence in politics in Sierra Leone (prior to and after the war)¹¹. New

patron-client formations seem to have surfaced as a consequence of the war. Richards/Bah/Vincent 2004 writes:

[...] there are some new interest-driven (or “horizontally-organized”) forms of social capital being created in post-war Sierra Leone, mainly in the provincial headquarters (2004: iv)

These networks have taken the form of non-state interest-driven networks¹². Yet, a more interesting observation concerning the discussion of “the creation of political order” is that they seem to hold the capacity to include the youth and to create new features of livelihood strategy among them (and thereby also to put forward new pathways of gaining agency). One of the most promoted examples is Motorcycle-taxi driving as introduced above. *Bike riding* has emerged in most large cities in the country, and is said to hold new social capital and a livelihood strategy among youth in Sierra Leone (Bürge & Peters 2010, Peters 2007, Richards). *Bike riding* is also important for society at large. E.g. being present during a strike of *the riders* in Makeni, the anthropologist Michael Bürge came to realize how important this transportation activity is to the society and how many social actors are dependent on and influenced by it. He writes:

Yet, speeding up a great part of economic activities, transporting people and goods, and increasing the number of consuming people, they also contributed to the economy and society at large and therefore serve indirectly to the benefits of people who don't take bikes themselves [...]. The strike I witnessed and suffered from during my research 2007, showed how much people relied on the services of the Okadas. (Bürge [forthcoming]: 2).

Furthermore, *bike riding* is particularly noted for its contributions to interest-based associational life in the nation. In Makeni the interest-driven associations connected to *bike riding* are named; “the Makeni Bike Riders Association” (hereafter MBRA). In the following, I will discuss the example, based on my own field work observations.

Makeni Bike Riders Association

- a pathway to the creation of political order?

The MBRA is composed of an executive board and approximately 600 rank-and-file members. The executive board consists of approximately 25 men who all have a past as active *riders*^{iv}. Immediately after the war, apparently all the board-members were ex-combatants. Although, some of the members of the board have been replaced since the foundation of the MBRA, only a few replacements have taken place. According to the board members' own statements, the primary function of the MBRA-network is to enhance the conditions of *the riders* and to mediate between the different parts involved in *bike riding* (i.e. *the riders*, *the owners*, the police or other parts of the community). To obtain this service all *riders* are supposed to pay a daily fee^v.

During my field study, I witnessed how this mediating position of the MBRA board often developed into disagreements between owners of the motorcycles and *riders* or into fights among the *riders*."External" mediation came into effect when the board members served as spokesmen for the *okadas* in the community by, e.g. attending meetings at the local government office in Makeni or when inquiries from the police or other officials (or non-officials) were addressed to the board of the MBRA. In both cases, the existence of the MBRA seemed to have strengthened local structure and functionality of the transportation sector.

Exemplifying this, I will elaborate on my observations regarding the circumstances of a change of law in the Makeni traffic rules. During an early morning during my fieldwork, I was with informants from the board as they received a letter from the local government office addressing an enactment regarding the use of helmets when riding motorcycles. Many *riders* do not use a helmet when working and this common habit was about to become prohibited. The board members needed to communicate this to the *riders* before the next day when the legal amendment would come into effect. It might be expected that it would be both difficult and chaotic to pass this information on to the huge number of *riders* due to the lack of e-mails or other electronic communication means and, furthermore, that this legal amendment would bring about negative reactions from *the riders*. But within approximately two hours, all *riders* in Makeni were informed due to a special

^{iv} In addition to the 25 board members there are 16 *tax-collectors* (*tax-collector* is the term my informants made use of).

^v Having said that, I must add that it is far from every day that these membership fees are paid (e.g. during the rain-season the payments are not executed).

communication structure within the *okada* network. All the *okadas* have a default parking area in the city to which they return after driving a customer, and connected to each of these parking spaces there is an appointed speech person who is the liaison officer between the *riders* and the board. In Makeni there are 10 of these areas divided all over the city. On this particular day, the board members made use of this structure and drove to all of the different areas informing the spokesperson and reminding him to communicate this information to the riders in his area. Within a short period of time most *riders* were informed. Thus, this somewhat sophisticated organization structure in the MBRA functioned as a channel of communication from the local government office to the rank-and-file *riders*. However, it also works in the other opposite direction (bottom up). In case the *riders* needed to present an inquiry or were displeased with something, then these communication channels were activated. Or to put it differently, within the MBRA structure the *riders* had access to a mode of gaining agency independent of patronage networks encapsulated by elders. This possibility would have been considered unheard of before the war.

According to the board members themselves, more peaceful conditions have come into effect as a consequence of the MBRA arrangement - both in the sense of less accidents, etc. and in the sense of ‘taming’ and controlling the *riders*, who hold a reputation of being troublemakers¹³.

In theory, the MBRA takes the form as an “official” contractual arrangement (Peters & Bürge 2010:5). E.g. the membership fee paid by the *riders* was gathered in a joint account with the purpose of supporting economically the riders in case of emergencies of some kind. During my fieldwork, I experienced how this joint money fund was activated because of the death of a rider. He was killed in a traffic accident, and the MBRA paid the costly funeral expenses. Some *riders* expressed their mistrust to whether the members of the MBRA board spent the money wisely, but in general most *riders* considered being part of the MBRA as some kind of security system, both with respect to economic and social aspects. This observation was confirmed in several of my interviews.

A weaponless livelihood strategy

- MBRA and channels of agency

The MBRA is an example of a civil society arrangement contributing to the structuring of the transportation sector in Makeni. However, due to the focus of this study, it is of even greater interest to this paper that *bike riding* - as a livelihood strategy - has provided the urban youth with new ways

to social navigation and creating sociopolitical agency and mobility. A great amount of jobs was created in connection to *bike riding* and it still seems to be on the increase. Consequently, it provides urban youth with an economic possibility to craft a livelihood strategy (Peters 2007, Bürge [forthcoming]). To illustrate this, some of my informants informed me how possessing the position as a *okadaman* helped them to earn money to pay for education.

It has been noticed positively in ethnographical field studies in Sierra Leone that *okada-men* have managed to organize themselves in a vibrant youth network and in interest-based organizations in several provincial cities (e.g. Richards/Bah/Vincent 2004, Peters 2007). The MBRA as well as other interest-driven ex-combatant networks in post-war Sierra Leone have been described as features contributing to the physical and economic empowerment of young men. With respect to the creation of political order, which is entwined with improving the conditions of the youth, I find that the ex-combatant network (exemplified through the *okada* –phenomenon) contributes with positive perspectives on the creation of short-term political order as it limits the *social death* of the youth in crisis.

These positive perspectives on the new post-war interest-driven associations (pioneered by ex-combatant networks) are often accompanied with descriptions of their horizontal composition (Peters 2007). E.g. the *okada*-phenomenon, especially the MBRA, has been described as an “interest-based association with horizontal organizational structure” and a bureaucratic and non-hegemonic form carrying new social capital which promises alternatives to the pre-war repressive structures of patronage (e.g. Richards/Bah/Vincent 2004, Bürge & Peters 2010). There is little doubt that the vibrant body of the informal social practices in the *okada* network is a new feature in the everyday life of a group of urban men in Makeni, and has provided new ways to navigate socially. However, in order to be loyal to the statements of my informants, I must question the idea of horizontal structures and the idea of MBRA as a new form of social capital. According to their statements and my observations, the well-known pre-war structures of patron-client relation still constitute the fundamental structure within the *okada* –network (however, having said that the patronage structures might take a different form than those linked to, e.g. Stevens and the pre-war arrangement). We have probably been slightly blinded by the refreshing breeze of a “new look” of a patronage network. I am convinced that we could benefit from calling attention to what the German anthropologist Anna Menzel calls the *double-edginess quality of bike riding* (Menzel [forthcoming])¹⁴. During my fieldwork among *okadas* in Makeni, I couldn’t help to observe how

the reproduction of pre-war structure of repressive patronage was evolving. Most obviously, it manifests itself in the *owner/renter* arrangement, as the *riders* clearly become heavily dependent on the wealthy owners of the *hondas*. However, the MBRA also shows evidence of patronage relations. As this has not been given much attention in recent research, I will go into greater detail and have a closer look at this observation.

Structures of patronage in the MBRA

Spending time with both the *riders* and board members, I observed how the board members, in general, took a superior role of power in relation to the *riders*. Among other examples, this became evident at the payment of the membership fees. Being a member of the MBRA implies a payment of 1000 Leones every day (as mentioned above). A few board members are appointed to be tax collectors and once in a while they go to different area of the city and collect the fee from the *riders*. It has to be understood that the 1000 Leones are a vast amount of money for the *riders* and that they often try to avoid paying. The payment is often carried out in a friendly manner, but sometimes the board members are strict towards the *riders* and in some cases it leads to violence. Once I witnessed how a board member constructed a handmade trap blocking the road for any riders who did not pay the fee. This way of behavior and the attitude behind makes Peters and Bürge conclude that the MBRA tends to *act as an internal police force* (Bürge & Peters 2010: 6)¹⁵. During my fieldwork, I observed several examples of this *police-like*-behavior. As another example, let me mention a young *rider* who once approached some of the MBRA board members. He stated that he did not have the money to pay the membership fee this specific day. The board members reacted by instantly punishing him by detaining the motorcycle he had been promised to rent. The young man panicked and left - an hour later he returned with the 1000 Leones. Similar examples are to be found in the work of Menzel. She has studied an association similar to the MBRA in Bo-town in the southern Sierra Leone - Bike Riders' Development Association (hereafter BRDA). She emphasizes that hierarchical structures lead to accumulated frustration among the *riders* in Bo. E.g. she points out how one of the *riders* states that the board members *are like another rebel war* (Menzel [forthcoming]: 20). My informants also expressed frustration and irritations concerning the MBRA board members' attitude and behavior – most clearly expressed during *tax collection*.

I do not intend to claim that the board members show bad intentions towards the *riders* - as this was generally not the case - but rather to stress that neither the *riders* nor the board members left me with the impression that the MBRA did *not* work according to patronage relationship and a strict

hierarchical structure. The fact that there is a widespread solidarity within the MBRA and that it is an interest-based association does not necessarily imply that it works according to horizontal organization structures, as indicated by the anthropologists Krijn Peters (2007) and Richards/Vincent/Bah (2004). Yet another concrete event from my fieldwork can serve as an example underpinning the existence of the above indicated structure. My boyfriend and I sometimes went on daytrips riding a motorcycle. We organized this by renting a bike from a *rider* for a whole day. Sometimes we could feel that the *rider* was in doubt whether or not he should rent the bike to us^{vi}. On one specific occasion, the *rider* decided to call one of the MBRA board members for advice. The board member came and negotiated with him, we agreed on a price and terms of condition, which was then agreed by the *rider*. In my opinion, this minor experience calls attention to the resemblances between the board members and a classic notion of a *big-man*. Although, there are almost 600 *riders*, it was my impression that most of them had a personal relationship to a board member (having access to his phone number and name, etc.) and made use of this relation when necessary. I also witnessed how the *tax collectors* excused some *riders* from paying while others were forced to pay due to differences in personal preferences. This also implied that the board members “took care of” some the *riders* if they were in trouble as regards more personal matter. Several times during my field studies, I experienced how this so-called bureaucratic system of MBRA rested on personal relations rather than formalized rules and structures. As described above, the board members often exercised authority and showed a condescending as well as a protective attitude towards the *riders*, which makes the picture of a *big-man* even more compulsive. In addition, I might add that the members of the board were considerably wealthier than the average *rider* despite the fact that they often used several hours of the day to play board-games (in comparison, the *riders* generally worked constantly during the daytime).

“From weapons to wheels”^{vii} ... and back again?

From an outside perspective, the MBRA is designed as a bureaucratic and interest-driven organization among equal parts. However, according to my field-data including my informant’s statements, I have to conclude that the MBRA is, under the surface, deeply influenced by patronage relations. The MBRA both displays hierarchical structures, domination and bottleneck leadership, economic imbalance, vertical power-structures and protections of few¹⁶. To illustrate this, I will

^{vi} Despite the fact that we offered a fair price knowing the details about the *rider*’s economic situation.

^{vii} The phrase: “from weapons to wheels”, is used by Peters (2007) as he points out how *bike riding* is a successful form of ex-combatant self-reintegration and a demobilization process.

refer to my informant Alfa, a member of the board. One day he outlined the organizational chart of the MBRA in a vertical line with the board members at the top and the *riders* at the bottom, while trying to explain to me how the MBRA works. In his opinion, there were no doubts about the hierarchical nature of the MBRA.

The MBRA may very well have been set up like a form of new social capital and an alternative to patronage relation. However, based on new research as well as my own observations on the topic, this picture seems to fade as an exclusively exhaustive description of these phenomena (Bürge [forthcoming], Menzel [forthcoming]). In addition to this, Fanthorpe & Maconachie suggest the idea of a horizontal organization within the BRDA in Bo-town, is difficult to maintain (2010: 261-262).

I emphasize these new discoveries because the improved conditions of the young *riders* must be observed in the context of their limitations. The sociopolitical latitude of the *riders* and the new livelihood strategy of bike riding are new features of everyday life among groups of young men in Makeni. However, it seems that it is restricted to an ongoing dependency of an *owner* and the authority of the MBRA-board. Consequently, the *riders*' enrolment in the MBRA and in the *owner/renter* arrangements cannot be seen as an act which barely generates positive effects in regard to the *rides*. Based on interviews with several *riders*, I suggest that most of them were aware of the unfavorable aspects of being in the patronage relations. Nevertheless, they saw this as the best way of being positioned in the given context. The *riders* are social navigators who estimate their benefit in the present situation, which accurately means being a part of the MBRA. However, this estimation may change over time. E.g. this tendency shows in the statement of my informant Bob: *I don't know what God keeps for me in the corner. I'm like a butterfly flying around looking for something better...*

Above, I have indicated that the *riders*' dependency on the board members (the new patrons) and the unequal distribution of resources and power within the MBRA network have - started to - accumulate frustration among the *riders*. All together, these observations form a disturbing but noticeable basis of comparison with the situation of the marginalized youth before the war. The partial improvement, which the *riders* have experienced through *bike riding*, have not exempted these young men from being "stuck" in a hierarchical social system. Thus, a potentially political disorder seems to be smoldering. In general, several researchers have made similar observations indicating that the youth in Sierra Leone is stuck in a prolonged low-ranging position based on

patronage relations. For example, Utas and Christensen (2008) explore how ex-combatants are remobilized into violent ‘security squads’ of political parties in today’s Sierra Leone. They argue that armed remobilizing of ex-combatants as well as mobilizing of young men is an ongoing threat to the creation of political order in Sierra Leone.

The above findings imply that I cannot support the view expressed by Peters (2007) and Richards/Bah/Vincent (2004) underlining the positive long-term potential of the new interest-based networks (such as the MBRA). Richards/Bah/Vincent write: *Stronger development of collective action along “horizontal” (specialized, interest-driven) lines is an evident feature of post-war recovery in Sierra Leone, and alert civil society activists have already noted the change.* (2004: 41)¹⁷. Having presented these diverging positions, Menzel brings out an important reflection. She considers whether or not a discussion of different sorts of patronage-client relations in Sierra Leone needs to be further analyzed (Menzel [forthcoming]: 24)¹⁸. In this context, we must leave this to future research and instead draw attention to the relation between political order and new patronage networks.

Summing up, my research indicates that the city of Makeni is caught in a negative spiral of marginalized youth and hierarchical patronage relations which constitute the primary mode of sociopolitical structure and temporary order. This situation may obstruct the *recovery* in Makeni in a long-term perspective. Peters suggests that *bike riding* has been instrumental in demobilizing and reintegrating ex-combatants in Sierra Leone – i.e. moving from weapons to wheels (Peters 2007). Yet I ask; when will these young navigators move from wheels to weapons (in search for agency and empowerment)? Recent research to indicate that a similar “limbo-situation” seems to take place in other parts of the country (e.g. Rincon 2010, Fanthorpe & Maconachie 2010, Christensen & Utas 2008) as well as in West Africa in general (e.g. Vigh 2009, Utas 2003).

If this limbo scenario holds true, it gives rise to questions on how long-term political order may develop? Commonly, it is argued that Sierra Leone needs a change of political mentality or culture. For example, John L. Hirsch, senior advisor of the President of International Peace Institute (IPI), states that: [...] *peace and stability will require a transformation of Sierra Leon’s political culture* (Hirsch 2001:105). However, the findings of Vigh (2009) and others (e.g. Bayart 1993) bear evidence that we should not become hypnotized by the idea of a political culture in a context like Sierra Leone - rather we should strive to understand *under what situations patrimonialism [patronage relations] becomes a dominant political structuration?* (Vigh 2009: 156). In this, the

last part of the article, I intend to focus on why the country of Sierra Leone seems to be “stuck” in a returning perilous combination of economic decline, marginalization and a dysfunctional political structure of patronage. In doing so, we must once more call attention to the *balance between being an actor and being acted upon* (Jackson 2005: x).

The everyday making of patronage relations

Poverty:

Introducing the term of “politics of the belly” the French author Jean-François Bayart points out that patronage networks are born in situations of poverty, physical survival and social frustration when other political systems do not have the capacity to provide for people. In a situation with high unemployment rates, lack of resources, poverty and other kinds of physical and social scarcities, people tend to find platforms allowing them to “survive” physically as well as mentally. Bayart argues that both “big-men” and “small-men” are driven by the same motivations of political agency i.e. to provide for themselves and those within their network (Bayart 1993: 249). The desperation and frustration brought about by hunger as well as not being in a position to provide for the closest relatives *forces ‘little men’ to make radical choices* (ibid.: 240). The normal characteristics of patronage such as greed, corruption and rivalry must be understood as a logical outcome of people’s constant struggle for finding a platform to ‘survive’ to benefit. (Bayart 1993, Vigh 2009). Summing up, the political structure of patronage emerges in circumstances of poverty, hunger and impoverishment. The characteristics addressed above seem to fit very well the description of today’s Sierra Leone. The persistent political patronage seems to be a symptom of continued economic crisis. Let me exemplify.

An afternoon in the fall of 2009 I was sitting in a small taxi-bus between Lunsar and Makeni with my informant Mik. Among the 10 passengers, a mother was carrying her child in her arms. At first, I did not notice anything special, but at some point I became aware that most of the other passengers paid attention to the child. I had never seen a dying child before, but as I saw this little girl foaming at her mouth, unfocused eyes and fever cramps, all doubt vanished - this child was dying! All the passengers started talking and Mik told me that the mother had been travelling from Freetown (a 2-3 hours’ journey), heading to Makeni to get the child to a hospital or to be treated by a witch doctor. Shocked by this incident, I asked why the mother had not attended a hospital in Freetown? Mik told me that the mother had no money and no relatives in Freetown. Accordingly,

she felt forced to travel the long way to Makeni, hoping that her family in Makeni might want to give her money. During the one-hour drive, the girl's condition became only worse.

This episode bears evidence that this woman's lack of network as well as economic "backup" caused widespread recognition and fear by people in the car. Constantly giving a quick glance in the direction of the child, Mik told me that this episode gives a typical picture of life conditions in Sierra Leone. It also shows that there is no support outside your network and that basically you are, in an economic sense, completely dependent on this network. Accordingly, the widespread poverty and hopelessness naturally generates a desire for enrolling into patronage network that might provide a security net.

Similarly, the motivating factor for *the riders* in Makeni to enroll in the MBRA patronage network can be found in a basic drive to "survive". Enrolling yourself in patronage relations, expressed in the MBRA-arrangement is, at the same time, a way of enrolling yourself in a political environment of economic structures, based on everyday interpretations of "how to survive" in the context of Makeni, Sierra Leone.

Social certainty:

In addition to the important contribution of Bayart, the anthropologist Alpa Shahs adds a dimension to the question of why patronage emerges. Based on a field study among potential members of the armed squads of the Maoist insurgency in India, Shahs argues that people's devotion to close relations and networks increases in the case of violence and uncertainty. She argues that an epistemological search for certainty in social relations may be central in understanding why young men in India joined the Maoist revolutionary movement (Shah 2009). Thus, it seems that living in uncertainty enhances one's devotion to close and familiar networks and arrangements and make them seem to be attractive components of life. In other words, in times of war and uncertainty people get together in smaller social entities such as patronage networks to find social security (Christense & Utas 2008). This also appeared to be the case in regard to my informants among the *riders*. When asking my informants why they became *riders* immediately after the war, I generally got two replies: Firstly, they referred to the economic aspect of the membership, and secondly, they found it natural to remain in the network to which they were already familiar. One of my informants expressed it like this: *it happened right here [pointing], with him and him*. I also found evidence for that in my own observation of their social conventions. For instance, several of my *rider*

informants described their colleagues as “brothers”, “their family” or using similar terms. The importance of familiar security in Sierra Leone is commented by others. E.g. Christensen & Utas (2008) showed that ex-combatants in the streets of Freetown were totally dependent on a brotherly network with respect to protection from police harassment and imprisonment (2008:524).

Summing up, new patronage relation does not seem to be established exclusively among the powerful or the patrons (board members)- seeking to utilize the clients (*riders*)- rather it appears to be a reflection of everyday logic, social navigation and sociopolitical action of the plurality of actors’ exposed to crisis (Bayart 1993:238, Escobar 2006). People turn to alternative channels of agency in a context where the state body fails to operate in accordance with a well-functioning Weberian model and does not provide basic social security (Linguist 2006, Richards, Escobar 2004, Escobar 2006). Consequently, patronage actualizes as an alternative political channel in situations characterized by despair or absence of security forcing people to turn to ‘shelters’ being in a position to protect and support them.

Looking at patronage relations as a symptom rather than a cause does not only improve our understanding of why patronage structures persistently seem to be a dominant political form expression in Sierra Leone. However, it also implies a challenging perspectives on the depth of *the crisis of the youth*...or - the crises of Sierra Leone? ..of West Africa? .. or Africa?

Concluding remarks - *back to the future*...^{viii}

The concept of political order is most commonly discussed in normative perception of institutionalized and legal processes actualized in relation to a state body. However, looking at political order from a non-normative perspective the patronage networks are just as qualified candidates for creating order as other political systems, such as a state body¹⁹. The present discussion of *okada-men* and *bike riding* in Makeni illustrates how these patronage networks retain an ambivalent role with respect to the creation of political order. They seem to create short-term political order due to the fact that they addressed and included the neglected youth just after the war – thus, also providing an alternative to warfare for the young navigators as the only way of obtaining livelihood. However, this creation of political order is not based on a radical political reform of patronage relations or the emergence of a counter-balance to the pull of patronage relation, as argued by part of the literature. On the contrary, the patronage structures seem just as

^{viii} The phrase; ”back to the future”, is inspired by the writing of Fanthorpe & Maconachie (2010).

distinct as in the pre-war networks of *bike riding*- in which only the few get a *share of the national cake* (Richard 2004 [1996]: 35). This holds the potential of reproducing the marginalizing conditions where the *youth* in a historical perspective have embraced warfare in a search for agency and livelihood, thus also for the creation of political disorder in a long-term perspective

On a broader scale, the processed example of *bike riding* indicates that the new patronage network fosters a stage of paradoxical limbo as regards to the creation of political order in Sierra Leone. On the one hand, young men navigate into these new interest-based structures of patronage trying to gain agency. On the other hand, frustration seems to accumulate over time due to suppression and uneven distribution of resources, leading to the possibility that it will put these structures of patronage under pressure in a long-term perspective.

What seems to be the overall problem in Sierra Leone is a persistent economic crisis which makes the development of any stable political system difficult. In a conversation between my informant Mohammed (M) and myself (K), he explained how he viewed the political situation in Sierra Leone:

M: *Do you believe in democracy or socialism?*

K: *Are they necessarily conflicting?*

[...]

M: *In a country like Sierra Leone where the government cannot offer healthcare, infrastructure and education in a satisfying way, then we should not have democracy. A precondition of democracy is that the government can provide for the basic needs of the people.*

If not, then democracy cannot work – that is how simple it is!

The government does not work, because there are no ways it can live up to the people's expectations. – they [state-officials] cannot keep their promises...

K: *What is your alternative?*

M: *I say that we empower the old chiefdoms... powerful-men need to be closer to the people.*

Mohammed's point is clear; a functional state body is dependent on its capability to comply with the basic needs of the people. In my position, this also goes for any other political system or social movement within a civil society. In other words, the energy to care for others only arises when the belly is full (Bayart 1993). Thus, the creation of a persistent stable political system or long-term political order depends on addressing and of the capacity to comply with the basic issues of poverty rather than making a state-body work according to a Weberian model - or civil society movements according to a bureaucratic model (Escobar 2006, Escobar 2004).

It may be too early to conclude to what extent the emergence of post-war patronage networks, which include urban youth, may have an effect on the political structure of Sierra Leone. Yet, for the time being the persistent economic and political crisis urges patronage relation to be the basic building-block in the political system of the country – thus, also maintaining the potential of leading the nation “back to the future” - that is to say a return to political disorder.

¹ In this article, I understand the concept of patronage according to the writing of the social anthropologist T. Hylland Eriksen (1993: 193-197) and the anthropologist Paul Richards (2004 [1996]). According to them, “relations of patronage” is a political arrangement that actualizes in times of hardship and distress and is about reciprocally contractual relations in unofficially manners. The patron typically offers protection and economic support in times of crisis and, in return, he can expect support and loyalty from the client (Eriksen 1993: 193-194, Richards 1996: 34-60). I am aware that the notion of patronage is related terms like patrimonialism and big-men (ibid., Bailey 1969: 35-58, Eriksen 1993:175-200), and in regard to Sierra Leone they are in some cases used indiscriminately (e.g. Richards (2004 [1996], Keen 2005). Having said that, due to the character of my empirical object I will consistently make use of the notion of “patronage” throughout this article (Fanthorpe & Maconachie 2010, Brüge & Peters 2010).

² *Political order* is a term that in itself does not say much about the sociopolitical realities of a particular area. In this article, I will describe how it gains meaning in relation to the Sierra Leonean context and, accordingly, must be defined. Having said that, I will present my analytical orientation of the notion before going in to a detailed description of how the creation of political order unfolds in Sierra Leone. The word “politics” comes from the ancient Greek word *polis* which refers to “city” or “town”. Two words can be deduced from *polis*; *polites* “citizen” and *politeia* “citizenship”. Thus, despite referring to a concrete citizen, it refers to an abstract understanding of citizenship – a citizen with obligations and rights, and can, therefore, be regarded as a constitution - meaning the actual structure and system of ‘polis’. Knowing this, politics can, according to G. Balandier (1970 [1967]), be defined analytically as an “aim” (*telos*) *directed at the nature of the “polis”* (ibid.:2). More specifically, politics has to do with power-relations and distributions of resources in a context (e.g. Eriksen 1993:176), Richards 2004[1996]:35-70, Verdery 1999). The anthropologist Joan Vincent states: that *in the most abstract terms, the political anthropologist's goal is to understand, interpret, and transmit the ideologies and circumstances of political structure, political organization, and political action* (Vincent 2004:2) While the anthropologist Katherine Verdery sums up the analytical meaning of politics in a useful, yet broad, manner. Her geographical point of departure is East Europe, which is thus not related to work.

Nevertheless, I find her analytical definition of politics useful in regard to my work. She writes: '*I see politics as a form of concerted activities among social actors, often involving stakes in particular goals*' (Verdery 1999:23). In this definition, political action is not restricted to politicians or state affairs, ideology neither to a particular structure. However, it is strictly dependent on how politics is carried out in a context (Verdery 1999). Thus, inspired by these different analytical contributions my analytical understanding of political order is orientated on how *stable and peaceful forms of concerted activities among social actors* evolve in Sierra Leone. The actual meaning of political order in Sierra Leone will be developed during this article.

³ A Weberian model understood as: *a rational minded, bureaucratically driven states, outfitted with a permanent and assured income maintain them, buttressed by accredited knowledge and scientific persuasion, and backed by a monopoly of weapon force* (Stoler 2004: 4).

⁴ In this way, I inscribe my research in the vast amount of anthropological research which has set out to nuance the idea that politics is about "states" and associated establishes institutions (e.g. Evans-Pritchard 1950 [1040], Comaroff & Comaroff 1999).

⁵ I was in the field for approximately three months. My empirical object (Hastrup 2006 [1999]) is defined as a social phenomenon evolving around motorcycle-taxi driving in Makeni. Despite of the fact that my field research had a broader focus than motorcycle-taxi driving in Makeni, this aspect of my field research will serve as my primary frame of reference in this paper. My study includes seven key informants who all were former combatants primarily in the rebel group of Revolutionary United Front (RUF). In addition to them I had more than 30 informants. I made use of various forms of participant observation as my primary mythological tool. Due to certain methodological circumstances (expounded elsewhere: Voldby [forthcoming]) it is not possible to estimate the exact number of informal interviews conducted. Furthermore, I conducted a questionnaire survey among 200 *riders*.

⁶ Inspired by recent anthropological work on political entities as effectively and socially embodied (e.g. Abrams 1988, Aretxaga 2003, Yurchak 2005, Desjarlais 1997) I suggest that in order to understand the creation of 'political order', the phenomenology of 'figures of patronage' must be addressed.

⁷ web 1 (UNDP)

⁸ For example Paul Richards points out that under Siaka Stevens's term in office in Sierra Leone the State House (the President's office) had a number of mobile generators that could be installed as temporary electricity supplies in towns or on college campuses where local politicians were unable to obtain the money and parts to fix a broken supply. Students, angry at interrupted study, would then be told by the President –*see, if you had come to me first, without rioting, I could have fixed this thing for you earlier (as your 'father')*. This is an illustrative example of a typical power play in politics of patronage (Richards 2004 [1996]: 35).

⁹ The contemporary literature on politics in West Africa seems, implicitly or explicitly, to emphasize crucial importance of patronage networks in understanding the political life around states in the region (e.g. Utas 2003, Vigh 2009). Specifically as regards Sierra Leone there are many examples of state-political patronage expressed through hierarchical networks (e.g. Christensen & Utas 2008).

¹⁰ Vigh argues a similar point in relation to Guinea-Bissau, he writes: *However, the political turbulence that this struggle for social security creates [the ongoing minor wars in the country] in Bissau seems only to lead to changes in the positions of power rather than the structurations of power* (Vigh 2009: 157).

¹¹ I am aware that a rigid division of before, during and after the war is an analytical nature. In some cases, it is relevant to emphasize a critical distance to the use of this liner approach (e.g. Utas 2003: 36-37). However, in attempt to promote the present point I find it useful to make use of the notion of 'pre', 'during' and 'after' (the war).

¹² In the ethnographical literature in general, state institutions and the connected patronage affairs are highlighted as important and dominating in the political practice in the country *prior* to the war, whereas *during* and *after* the war, the question of individual resistance and movement in non-state components is said to form the basis for political activities (e.g. Keen 2005, Peters 2007, Richards (2004 [1996])). I.e. we see a shift of focus in political analyses from state-patronage to non-state-patronage (ibid.). For instance, this tendency is present in the much quoted and important study: "Fighting for the Rainforest", by Paul Richards (2004 [1996]).

¹³ This common understanding of the *riders* as troublemakers is related to that there is a large density of ex-combatants in the *okada*-environment. In general, ex-combatants carry the reputation of being violent, unpredictable and rough. For further elaboration, see e.g. Bürge [forthcoming] or Bürge & Peters 2010.

¹⁴ She points out that both on an individual and collective level, there are shady sides of *bike riding*. Reminding us that social capital not only holds positive sides. She argues that the social structures, which mobilize *bike riders*, can be used for both profitable activities (as described above) and for destructive activities such as political violence (Menzel [forthcoming]).

¹⁵ Naturally, this picture is ambiguous and hierarchical conditions are only a part of the overall picture. Other places I have argued that trust and solidarity among the two parts was the guiding principles for their interaction (Voldby[forthcoming]).

¹⁶ For elaboration on the characteristic of patronage relations, see: Eriksen 1993:175-200

¹⁷ Or as Peters writes: *The key factor seems to be that combat provided fighters with a dense nexus of new connections, and ideas about social solidarity, that serve as a counter-balance to the pull of patrimonialism* (2007:16).

¹⁸ E.g. Following Durkheim's term of "organic solidarity both "Peters (2007) and Richards/Bah/Vincent 2004 argue that interest-driven organizations are more resistant to political capture – a point which serves more attention in other discussions.

¹⁹ The American anthropologist Arturo Escobar argues that social movement in Third World Countries *have to be understood in terms of their own rationalities and the organization they themselves produce* (Escobar 2006: 348) and as a reflection of an economic and political crisis in a context (ibid.: 344-349).

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