

# The Civil Wars of Liberia and Sierra Leone

Anthony Clayton

Volume 21, numéro 2, winter 2001

URI : [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs21\\_2re01](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs21_2re01)

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

---

## Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

## ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-5673 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

---

## Citer ce document

Clayton, A. (2001). The Civil Wars of Liberia and Sierra Leone. *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 21(2), 141–145.

## **The Civil Wars of Liberia and Sierra Leone**

Ellis, Stephen. *The Mask of Anarchy, The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of an African Civil War*. London: G. Murst, 1999.

Aboagye, Lieutenant Colonel Festus B. ECOMOG. *A Sub-Regional Experience in Conflict Resolution, Management and Peace Keeping in Liberia*. Accra: Sedco, 1999.

The world was taken by surprise by the protracted civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Neither country prior to the wars appeared to contain irreconcilable factions or ethnicities, both were small African states not having to face the problems of size and communication that have led to warfare elsewhere. Further, the divisive nature of these civil wars, their horrifying cruelty, the widespread use of child soldiers, the bizarre costume of some of the participants and numerous factions involved have made both conflicts hard for Europeans to understand. This essay highlights two works that, in this reviewer's opinion, offer in the case of Liberia a wider understanding of underlying causes contributed by Stephen Ellis, and in the cases of both countries a very perceptive study of the practical problems of peace support operations, based on his own experience, by Festus Aboagye.

As his title indicates, the interest of Ellis's work lies in his analysis of the religious dimension. This factor of religion and/or spirit cults is not new to African civil strife. Besides the overtly Christian versus Moslem conflicts of Sudan and elsewhere, the factor existed in Mau Mau, in Alice Lenshiua's Lumpa uprising in Zambia, in the fetishes attached to the armored cars and landrovers in Nigeria's Civil War (the Biafran Army chaplain's department even recruited fetish priests) and the Uganda Lords Resistance Army. As a factor it has not always received the attention it deserves, Western analysts focusing more on economic and purely ethnic causes of conflict. A fighting man, however, whether he is a Battle of Britain Spitfire pilot or an African guerrilla is often more responsive to the fears of superstition or his own private religious beliefs than academic issues.

Ellis's work falls into two parts. The first part, "A Chronicle," sets out the nature of Liberia's historical and social development, the end of the True Whig Party era and the Doe decade, the opening and the progress of the civil war and the factions involved, and the events to the 1997 election won by the most brutal of the warlords, Charles Taylor. His recipe for winning an election was the simple one of "If I don't win I'll start the war again," and his followers sang, "He killed my Pa, He killed my Ma, I'll vote for him." Other accounts have been written of these events, but Ellis's scholarly factual narrative also provides descriptions that cannot be bettered, noting the mix of motives, spiritual, personal greed, rap singing and drugs that inspired the "General Rambos," "General Murders" and "Captain Mission Impossible." One proclaimed openly "I am a rebel, I fought off the trouble, I took in the bubble (amphetamines), I said double trouble, I am a man whose not stable." The mix and the fighting became for many a way of life, after Liberia moving on to Sierra Leone. Ellis's narrative also analyzes the attitudes and motives of the various West African political leaders to the conflict and their policies

with regards to both political peace-making and the West African intervention force, ECOMOG (Economic Co-operation Organization of West African States Monitoring Group).

It is the second part of Ellis's work, "An Inquiry," that contains so much food for thought. Ellis reminds us that Liberian spiritual thinking, supernatural theories not needing realistic secular criticism, is very different from that of Western Europe. Power has its origins in an invisible world of spirits and local gods. Human beings may have three spirits - one that wanders in dreams, one the essence of the individual passed on to descendants and one a "breath of life." In sleep it was held that souls with magic powers can enter into a leopard. The human being so convinced then sees himself as a leopard occupied by a spirit, perhaps donning a leopard skin, and he may go on to attack a village. The spirit of a forest or any local god that might seek or be willing to do such work could be both good and evil. In the Poro and Sande cults of much of the Liberian social order the spirit of the forest can be used to inflict punishment. The Zoes, the priests of Poro, may be required to perform human sacrifices - even of their own family or children - for the common good and accepted as a necessity.

Boys were traditionally initiated into the social order at bush ceremonies, where their former selves were said to have been eaten by the Bush Devil (scars on the body showed the Devil's teeth . . .). They returned disciplined but reborn, with new values and ideas. Those who did not comply were killed, their relatives being told that their boy had been eaten by the Bush Devil. Consumption of certain vital organs was believed to transfer their life essence to the consumer. The process, involving the sacrifice and death of one animal or human to further the reinvigoration of another, strengthened the consumer for warfare in a way perceived and accepted as proper by traditional society as a whole.

Although the Americo-Liberian dominated True Whig Party government formally banned these societies and practices in 1912, in fact they continued with the compliance and often infiltration and participation, as a means for social control by government officials and political leaders. The old spirit cult secret societies with their local priests and oracles came to be the arenas for contesting local control, all in a culture in which acquisition of local political power was identified with the eating rituals. A chief could implement government regulations by day, at night, as a leopard, he could murder opponents. It was perfectly feasible for True Whig Party politicians and leading Christian personalities to be involved in Poro, the coastal True Whig politicians seeing their involvement as a form of indirect rule.

Inevitably, degradation followed, personal interests and greed led to increasing abuse. Poro became privatized. Some True Whig political leaders collected body parts during election campaigns; young bloods in the hinterland lost respect for the local Zoes in the collection of these parts. In the war young men brought up in this culture that had taught the eating of human hearts and drinking of blood gave the consumer the spiritual essence of the victim inevitably followed their perception of custom. Cannibalism in the war, therefore, had nothing to do with hunger but everything to do with acquiring more power and intimidating opponents - "to eat the heart of a strong man at the front makes us strong

too” in the words of one fighter. To this degradation add Rambo culture, amphetamine drugs and rap music. The restraints of traditional Poro society against such abuses quickly became ignored or totally forgotten. It now becomes possible to understand the historical roots and the significance of bizarre costume, the dismembering of victims, the initiation rites for child warriors, and evidently quite frequent, the cannibalism that formed so horrifying a part of the conflict. Most of the warlord leaders of the different factions, in particular Charles Taylor of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), had had previous initiations into Poro and used an interaction of debased cult religion and politics to secure their aims. On one occasion when a rumor of the coming of three days of darkness swept Liberia and the Nigerian ECOMOG intervention force commander deployed all his units, Taylor had himself photographed for the local press turning on the lights for Christmas. As Ellis points out, not just a public relations move but as a proof of his power over cosmic forces.

Aboagye, a Camberley Staff College graduate, commanded a Ghana Army battalion in ECOMOG and writes with academic dispassion and commendable perception. He carries the story of the conflicts in both territories forward to 1999; his account of the creeping civil war in Sierra Leone being particularly useful. Most of the work, though, provides an almost blow by blow account of ECOMOG’s activities in Liberia. The account adds greatly to knowledge and understanding of the course of events, in particular the death of Samuel Doe, the pre-civil war ruler of Liberia, and Taylor’s NPFL October 1992 OPERATION OCTOPUS, where he notes that not the least important of the causes of this offensive was Taylor’s need to commit his men to battle before they rebelled against him. His descriptions of the organization (or lack of it), equipment, fighting style and personnel (men, women and children) of the various factions are based on his own first-hand experience.

ECOMOG was the largest peace support force ever mounted by a region and not sponsored by the United Nations. For specialist students one very valuable feature of Aboagye’s work are the Appendices which give the texts of the 23 ECOWAS (Economic Co-operation Organization of West African States) resolutions, decisions and agreements on the Liberian Civil War and the organization’s specific regulations for ECOMOG. For both the specialist and the general reader the illustrations add to our knowledge, the physical appearance of the leading personalities, ECOMOG in action and the war destruction all convey atmosphere; the pictures of atrocities, one captioned “fear, death and destruction” convey the horror.

Aboagye’s last chapter, “Final Legacies of the Conflict, Guideposts and Lessons for the Future,” contains a number of political and international recommendations under the headings of preventive political measures, peacekeeping approaches, political direction and integration and peace support and humanitarian activities. Some of these recommendations, and many others that appear in the earlier chapters are specifically military and it is these, in this reviewer’s opinion, that merit highlighting and study by any concerned with military peace support in today’s Africa.

ECOMOG forces arrived in Liberia with no clear mandate and no general acceptability, one major warlord faction being in total opposition. It was never, as a force, seen to be totally impartial. This ambiguity worsened in the years to follow with continual switching from peacekeeping to peace enforcement. The different national contingents of the force had differing doctrines, which on occasion led to loss of confidence in each other, loss of morale, and operational and tactical gaps in offensive and defensive operations. There was not always interoperability in equipment, and apart from Nigeria and Ghana, other contingents often arrived without support weapons, defensive stores, communications or even transport.

The command structure, at the outset, was in Aboagye's own words, "incongruous," units being answerable only to the Force Commander and their own governments, a structure that led to national animosities. The creation of an intermediate, operational command structure of brigade levels remedied this, but political expedience often hampered military requirements. The Nigerian General "I don't give a Damn" Dogonyaro wished to mount a pre-emptive attack to forestall Taylor's 1992 OCTOPUS offensive, but was not allowed to do so. The imbalance of the force, so preponderantly Nigerian, also created problems. While accepting the need for a "lead nation" as was Britain in the Kosovo operation, Aboagye comments that the Nigerian hold on the command and staff structure, with other contributing nations inadequately represented and the force so obviously on occasion working to a Nigerian agenda, created friction. The force's naval and air components, too, were inadequate to impose the agreed arms import blockade, with the result that the NPFL received a large consignment of weaponry in September 1992.

Only the Ghana units had practical experience of peacekeeping. This, with the overall inadequate numbers of men for the size of the country, led to tactical errors. Deployments inland were extended too far, widely dispersed detachments became vulnerable to rebels, on occasions being ambushed, or encircled and obliged to obey the orders of the local rebel commander. In Sierra Leone the force was unable to contain infiltration. There was a permanent lack of combat intelligence - and even adequate maps.

Aboagye remarks on the need, when success is near, to provide face-saving opportunities, so compelling a faction to negotiate from a weakened position. However, he also points to lessons at a moment of success - manpower and resources must be sufficient to supervise ceasefires and demilitarization and vigorous searches are necessary to ensure weapons are all handed in. There must also be clear thinking of what should be done with weapons so surrendered; claims by a winning faction that these be given to them for a "national army" should be set aside. At this point also "Withdrawal Anticipation Syndrome" could set in, with units hoarding stores rather than sending them to conflict areas. Sufficient personnel should be available for the escort of humanitarian relief convoys.

The author has some common sense to offer on supply and logistic aspects. Vehicles should be chosen for their suitability for the terrain and roads of the country - light

vehicles could sometimes move where heavier ones could not. Care of water supplies should be included in training. Although expensive to train, well trained engineers form a vitally important component of any force, for road and bridge repair, provision of sanitary, weatherproof and securely protected accommodation, bomb disposal, communications. Often ECOMOG found available accommodation full of refugees, elsewhere units should have been provided with funds for hiring to avoid any ruthless requisitioning. Adequate supplies of food for units is, of course, obvious, in Liberia the Ghana government also despatched wood fuel for cooking so that its troops would not requisition or simply expropriate local resources.

Aboagye regretted the absence of any effective public relations staff projecting ECOMOG's successes; at village level he notes the value of units organizing local sports, singing and community development projects.

In the case of Sierra Leone Aboagye notes, the rebel tactic of mass terror of civilian populations by mutilation and killing could only be met by good intelligence, compact deployment to hold vital ground with mobility for access and sortie and capable of dealing with ambushes, systems of prohibited areas to isolate the civil population from the rebels and a high state of troop discipline and alertness - all difficult to provide.

While he admits ECOMOG committed excesses on occasions, Aboagye sees the main causes of these as being "military operation fatigue," leading Nigerian officers into, on occasion, quite large-scale commercial sideline activities - mining and logging in particular. A further consequence of this fatigue, the product of long tours without home leave, was the use or abuse of local women. Four thousand babies per year were estimated to have been born during ECOMOG's seven year stay in Liberia; numbers of women lived in the unit camps and were known as the "ECOMOG Rifles."

Overall, while accepting that only a good, well trained soldier will be an effective peacekeeper, he challenges the Western view that the prime need is for training, arguing that both training and the evolution of African peacekeeping doctrine can be left to Africans. He sees the greatest need being that of increased international cooperation together with external help in funding and logistics. One is reminded of the despairing cry of a Nigerian commander in Sierra Leone faced with insurgent attacks which he had not the resources to track down, "What I need is helicopters."

No serious student of the events in Liberia and Sierra Leone should neglect these two works with their special perceptions of the catastrophes that have fallen upon these two territories. Aboagye's book may be difficult to obtain, but librarians of military libraries should make a particular effort to do so.

Anthony Clayton

DeMontfort University