A Terrain in Motion:
Youth and ‘Ex-combatants’ (Re-)Negotiate Social Relations through Navigation and Articulation in Post Conflict Liberia

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# Content

## Acknowledgements

2

## Content

3

## List of Figures

5

## Introduction

6

## Chapter One: Analytical Frame and Methodology

10

1.1 Analytical Frame

11

1.1.1 Social Navigation

11

1.1.2 From Conflict to Violence

13

1.1.3 On Identity

16

1.2 Methodology

20

## Chapter Two: Historical Continuity and Change

24

2.1 An Overview

24

2.2 A Scale-Sensitive Analysis

34

2.2.1 Negotiating the Nation State

35

2.2.2 Regional and Global Dynamics

39

2.2.3 Social and Cultural Dynamics of the Conflict

41

## Chapter Three: Youth and the Production of Identity in a Historical Perspective

47

3.1 On Youth

48

3.1.1 Youth as a Social Category

48

3.1.2 Youth in Liberia

49

3.2 Youth Engaged in the Conflict

50

3.2.1 General Assumptions Addressing the Position of Youth in Conflict

51

3.2.2 Combatants and Identity

53
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.2.3 Identity and the Logic of Practice</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Non-combatant Youth</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter Four: Renegotiation in a Terrain in Motion</strong></td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Post Conflict Transformations</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1.1 Transformations at the Local Level</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1.2 Transformations at the National Level</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 ‘Ex-combatants’</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.1 Categorisation ‘from above’</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.2 Multiple trajectories towards reintegration</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Youth</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.1 Youth as a Category?</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.2 Navigating towards the Right Horizon</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.3 Mobilizing Other Youth</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.4 Institutionalized and Structured Identities</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.5 NEPI, LOYA and social Practice</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter Five: Conclusion</strong></td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>References</strong></td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

Figure 1: Students and spectators at the High School graduation ceremony 68

Figure 2: A convoy of returnees arriving in Voinjama 76

Figure 3: ‘Ex-combatants’ gathered in their ‘shop’, aka the ‘ghetto’ 90

Figure 4: LOYA members launch the ‘Youth for Truth’ awareness campaign 100
Introduction

This thesis is based on empirical data that result from conducting three months of ethnographic fieldwork in Voinjama (Lofa County). From within this geographical and social terrain I try to grasp and identify how social relations in post conflict Liberia are constantly open to renegotiation. In doing so, I do not pretend to present a framed picture where nothing can be added or left out or that the scope of my research is all-encompassing. I merely present a contextualised analysis of the many conversations and encounters I had during my stay in Liberia. A basic assumption in this thesis is that the terrain within which the social dynamics I identified during my fieldwork occur is never fixed but always in motion. The general predicament of this thesis furthermore goes into the idea of determinism and naturalization which leaves no room for manoeuvre or change. Both throughout its history and in contemporary Liberia I demonstrate how identities and social relations are always the result of navigation and articulations. In chapter four I describe the empirical data from my fieldwork. My focus in this chapter is on the category of ‘ex-combatants’ and on youth. I look at how they experience social and political transformations and explore different trajectories to articulate an identity and navigate the social terrain. In order to fully understand these dynamics it is necessary to elaborate on both the analytical frame I propose to interpret the empirical data and historical and political dynamics that surround these contemporary processes of negotiation.

In a first chapter I therefore elaborate on analytical assumptions that help interpret my empirical data. The idea of social navigation represents the way in which I see the social field – or even better: the social terrain – in which I situate my empirical data. The terms social terrain and social navigation offer a possibility to designate the constant movement of and within the field. Further reflections on the notions of conflict and violence are necessary to identify and understand the ongoing dynamics in a post-conflict society. The inherent continuity and change over time are significant to understand contemporary dynamics. In conclusion, I reflect on the notion of identity. Since I argue that the politics of identity help constitute the constant motion of the social terrain and offer the social actors who move within that terrain the possibility to articulate certain identities, it is important to elaborate on how the politics of identity operate.

Chapter two starts with a selected, chronological overview of the historical events that lead to the situation as it is today. In a second section of this chapter I look at these historical
events from a different perspective and apply a scale-sensitive analysis to them. This recontextualisation of events allows me to look at Liberian history from the point of view of the nation state, to embed Liberia in a broader regional and global perspective and to take a closer look at the social and cultural dynamics that lead up to the conflict that started around 1980 and officially lasted up to 2003. This scale-sensitive analysis furthermore corresponds with the approach I propose in the first chapter. The focus here is on the position of the social actors and on how they perceive the change and continuity over time. This also implies the constant movement of the social terrain which leads to the negotiation of identities, categories and concepts.

In a third chapter I narrow my focus to one specific group, youth, and look at their position in Liberian society from a historical perspective. Since the notion of youth is complex and multiple I start this chapter with a brief elaboration on how this notion is treated within social science in general and especially within the context of African studies. The position of youth in Liberia is not uncontested. I shall therefore present some case studies that address different relations between youth and their social and political environment. From there I move on and take a look at the often discussed position of young people during the conflict. Although there is no discussion that young people constituted the majority of the fighting forces, there is little consensus in different analyses on why these people chose to fight. In a third section of that chapter I argue that there is not one single answer to this question. I do this by presenting how young people articulate certain identities to establish their position within the terrain. These identities are never singular nor monolithic but always a contextualised positioning. As a final point I use this chapter to briefly address the position of non-combatant youth. This group is often, underserved, left out of academic and other analysis. Today this group tends to enter the field of power, apparently determined to renegotiate the existing relations. This chapter serves as an introduction to chapter four where I shall compare the context of the conflict with the context as it develops after the official end of the conflict.

As mentioned before, chapter four is built around the empirical data I gathered during my fieldwork. In a first section I present the field in which I conducted my fieldwork. Here I elaborate on the idea of post conflict transition and transformation and how both dynamics influence each other. This interpretation is to be seen within the proposed analytical framework in which I approach categories as movements that are constantly renegotiated. These reflections on post conflict transition and transformation help me to interpret contemporary developments at the local and the national level. I describe these developments
first in Lofa County, and more specifically Voinjama, to introduce the field where I conducted my research. From there I move on and look at how these local developments are infused by recent developments at the national level. The starting point of this description is based on what is written in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed August 18, 2003.

The remainder of this last chapter can be divided into two major sections. Here I shall look at how social relations are (re-)negotiated in a post conflict context through navigation and the articulation of identity. In a first section I address the reintegration of ‘ex-combatants’. Note that when I refer to this category, I always use quotation marks. I chose to do so to point out the fact that, from the perspective of the social actors, this category is perceived to be implemented ‘from above’ and that those who fall under this label appropriate it according to the position they find themselves in. The identity marker ‘ex-combatant’ is therefore complex and multiple and not determined, as some might argue. I argue that the ‘ex-combatants’ have the possibility to choose one in a range of multiple trajectories towards reintegration rather than the one trajectory as presented by the UN programme. As a corrective to a static or determinist interpretation I look at how the articulation of identity allows ‘ex-combatants’ to tactically navigate the social terrain they find themselves in.

In a final section I shall examine the emergence of the category of youth within the social terrain. Although the argument I make corresponds with that of the ‘ex-combatants’, this movement is to be approached from a different perspective since it emerges, from the perspective of the actors, ‘from below’. I describe how two movements I encountered during my fieldwork (LOYA and NEPI) on the one hand mobilise young people from different backgrounds at a ‘grassroots’ level (in a process of upscaling) and on the other hand try to establish their position within the broader field of power (in a process of downscaling). Here too, I shall explore how the identity ‘youth’ is never stable or fixed but always flexible, complex and the result of a positioning in a shifting context.

In the last chapter I shall draw some general conclusions by linking my analysis (chapter 2 till 4) back to the analytical assumptions I set out in the first chapter. Here I focus on how the politics of identity influence the process of social navigation in order to renegotiate social relations in a field that is always in motion.

As a final point I should mention that I use pseudonyms throughout my thesis in order to respect the privacy of my contacts. You will also find that I never give a detailed transcription of interviews. There are various reasons why I chose not to do so. Firstly, my analysis is not a sociolinguistic one. I do not apply discourse analysis and therefore a detailed transcription is not always relevant. Secondly, as I explain in my methodology, most of my
empirical data is the result of participant observation. I therefore chose, especially in chapter four, to present a contextualised account of the events and encounters I came across. In my writing this results in short stories which I literally framed because they are written in a more narrative style and therefore to be approached from a different point of view. There is of course no strict line to be drawn between these pieces of narrative and the actual analysis. On the contrary, as you will notice, both are intertwined.
 Though I went through a whole range of literature on the history of Liberia and the contemporary post conflict situation, I did not have a clear picture of what to expect before I went there to conduct my fieldwork. Even several conversations with people – both scholars and people who work in Liberia – who just came back from the field could not prepare me for what I was about to encounter. It was only upon entering my field therefore that the focus of my research became clear. I did have a general idea about the topics I wanted to work on but there was no certainty that those ideas were relevant for the context where I conducted my fieldwork. All this leads to the fact that the empirical data I came across during my fieldwork form the base for the delineation of my analytical frame, which I present in the first section of this chapter.

The objective I aim at by setting out the analytical frame is not to give an exhaustive overview of theoretical assumptions but rather to introduce some notions and ideas that help interpret the empirical data from my fieldwork. In his analysis of the position of youth in the conflict in Sierra Leone Paul Richards argues that “[o]ver-theorization may break the connections between social science ideas and their community context” (Richards, 1996: xii). With this idea he tries to warn social scientists not to apply theoretical assumptions for the sake of the argument but to start from the social reality they want to describe. That is why I reflect on those issues that are necessary to understand how I interpret the dynamics I encountered.

First I discuss a recent model of interpretation, namely that of social navigation, as it is set out by Henrik Vigh (2006) in his analysis of young soldiers in Guinea-Bissau. I further elaborate on the notions of conflict, violence and identity to demonstrate how I interpret them in the light of my further analysis. These notions form the core issue throughout my further thesis.

In the second section of this chapter I briefly elaborate on the choices I made concerning the literature I use and also present the methodology I applied during my fieldwork. Here I focus on my personal experiences and my own position as a researcher in the field. I elaborate on the difficulties I encountered to establish my own position in relation to the different institutions and people I worked and interacted with during my stay. And how these relations changed over time. There is obviously no clear line to be drawn between the selection of literature and my empirical data. Both work complementary.
1.1 Analytical Frame

1.1.1 Social Navigation

Building on other theories, Vigh (2006) presents an analytical model to interpret the actions and practices undertaken by young Aguentas in Guinea-Bissau. The Aguentas represent those young men and women who fought at the side of the government during the civil war, which lasted from 1998 up to the year 2000. Since they officially lost the war these days they are marginalised and considered as ‘losers’ within broader society.

The idea of social navigation describes the choices made by social actors in a context of emerging socio-political change in pursuit of more individual possibilities and advantages. The focus here is on the construction and realisation of social being, on the process, in short, of social becoming (Vigh 2006: 11). By stressing that the concept of navigation implies movement, Vigh acknowledges that this movement is never completely free. A first domain in which he identifies that movement is the dialectical relationship between agency and social forces. In much the same way there is an inseparable connection between act and environment or praxis and knowledge. By acknowledging this connection he refuses to see the concept of navigation as yet another replacement for the concept of agency. A second domain where that movement is present is that of the social terrain in which the social praxis takes place. His suggestion to use the notion terrain – or environment – as a slight modification of the notion of field as presented by Bourdieu allows us to account for the fact that the environment is never stable or solid but, on the contrary, is always in motion and non-transparent.

The concept of horizons within this framework indicates the “spaces of possibilities and spheres of orientation that constantly arise in the interaction between agents in motion and the shifting social and political circumstances they seek to move within” (Vigh 2006: 30). This idea also leaves room to see the intertwining between the agent and the social field in which that actor moves. The concept has, according to Vigh, two dimensions: a spatial and a temporal one. This implies that horizons define our position both in time and place – in a social terrain – while on the other hand our position in relation to a certain configuration of social forces defines our horizons (Vigh 2006: 31).

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1 For example the New Barbarism thesis elaborated by Richards (1996a). He also works with the notions field and habitus by Bourdieu (1992), and de Certeau’s concepts of strategy and tactics which he uses to describe the practice of everyday life (1984).
The navigation towards the right horizon requires both strategies and tactics to be able to respond to the constant movement of the social forces constituting the social terrain. The fact that navigation asks for a number of qualities implies that this process is not an easy one but rather brings with it risks that, in the case of warfare, can literally be fatal. It is therefore not a sinecure to make choices and anticipate the direction of the motion within the social terrain. The terms strategy and tactics are borrowed from de Certeau (1984). Applied to the context of social navigation, especially in Guinea-Bissau, strategy “is the process of creating and consolidating space” (Vigh 2006: 133). This implies a bird’s eye view since “every “strategic” rationalization primarily seeks to distinguish its “own” place, that is, the place of its own power and will, from an “environment’” (de Certeau 1984: 36). This appropriation of place is accompanied by certain effects, one of which these being the recognition of a “specific type of knowledge, one sustained and determined by the power to provide oneself with one’s own place” (idem). “The space of a tactic”, on the other hand, “is the space of the other”. It is the space organised by the law of an outsider, it is the “art of the weak” (ibid: 37).

Put in terms of the theory of social navigation, the tactics are the space that is left to manoeuvre within, the space that is organised by others. Here too, it is obvious that the room for movement and mobility is not completely free. The relation, in terms of movement, between both strategy and tactics can be explained by their relation to rules. To describe this relation, Vigh turns to Bourdieu (1992), and states that “strategy is action directed at defining, actualising or consolidating rules; tactics are actions directed at making the best of them, using and bending them” (Vigh 2006: 135). The relation between strategy and tactics thus describes the dynamics between what happens ‘from above’ and ‘from below’. Moreover, it is an interesting starting point to look at the position of the ‘ex-combatants’ in Liberia today. In chapter four I look at how they – tactically – navigate within the terrain that is set out from above by national and international organisations (cf. chapter 4). It will become clear than that there is no clear cut distinction to be made between dynamics ‘from above’ and ‘from below’. This does not mean that there is no value in upholding this distinction. Rather than looking at these dynamics from a determinist perspective, this distinction is best to be regarded as relative and contextually embedded. I therefore suggest to approach them from a scale-sensitive perspective. This implies that the position of the social actors who deal with labels and categorisations on a daily base is crucial. They might perceive dynamics as being implemented ‘from above’ in a process of downscaling while, on the other hand, movements emerging ‘from below’ can be situated in a process of upscaling. Here too, movement is an important notion.
1.1.2 From Conflict to Violence

Though the context in which I conducted my fieldwork is one that can be described as post conflict, it is relevant to discuss reflections on the notion of conflict because of the unequivocal relation between both. This relatedness becomes even clearer when I approach this continuity from the notion of violence.

In 1994 Robert Kaplan warns the world by predicting how violent conflicts will occur in the twenty-first century. The basic principle of his ideas is based on observations in West-Africa and Eastern Europe. His thesis could be situated in the tradition of Huntington’s ‘The Clash of Civilisations?’ (1993). He argues that the eruption of conflicts will more often be based on cultural assumptions because “everywhere in the developing world at the turn of the twenty-first century [there are] new men and women, rushing into the cities, […] remaking civilizations and redefining their identities in terms of religion and tribal ethnicity which do not coincide with the borders of existing states” (Kaplan 1994: 66). He further states that

“We are entering a bifurcated world. Part of the globe is inhabited by Hegel's and Fukuyama's Last Man, healthy, well fed, and pampered by technology. The other, larger, part is inhabited by Hobbes’s First Man, condemned to a life that is “poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” Although both parts will be threatened by environmental stress, the Last Man will be able to master it; the First Man will not.” (Kaplan 1994: 60)

This idea, combined with an atmosphere of anxiety, crime, overpopulation, tribalism and disease in many countries and the hopeless prospects for the future will, according to Kaplan, lead to inevitable primitive and barbaric conflicts. From within social science there has been a lot of reaction against this approach that Richards referred to as a “New Barbarism” thesis (Richards 1996a: xiii). Richard’s book is, as he himself states, to be seen as a critique of that new barbarism thesis. The extreme violence which the world has been exposed to cannot be interpreted as an expression of the absolute or inevitable cultural burden because this leads to an essentialist, a-historical interpretation. It is important to realise that the actions as they occurred during the war were “devilishly well-calculated” (ibid: xvi). They contributed to the realization of the political agenda hidden behind the violence. There is a need to pay attention to developments at both the micro (agency) and the macro (structure) level and especially to see how they are intertwined. One way to do this is to approach current events by looking at them from a historical and broader regional or global level (cf. chapter 2).
In the introduction to his comprehensive work on Liberia Stephen Ellis (1999) also pays attention to the idea of new barbarism. He points out that a civil war can occur because of the breakdown of the political and social order but that this does not mean that during war there is no order at all or that events take place in a void, a chaos which nobody seems able to control. One should realise that during the time of conflict a new, or better a different order is generated. For the outsider, that order is not always easy to identify, let alone to understand. It is also essential to understand that the rules of practise in a way work as an imposed logic bounded by certain contextual limits that shape the harsh reality of the war. This implies that a contextualisation of the gathered data is needed. Elsewhere Richards, with Krijn Peters (1998), gives ‘voice’ to youth combatants in Sierra Leone. With this approach they want “to pay due attention to their [the combatant’s] agency in conflict” (Peters and Richard 1998: 183). This form of empowerment gives those fighters who are interviewed an opportunity to explain in their own words how they experience(d) participating in the war and their motivations to do so. This approach enables the reader to acknowledge the level of awareness these young fighters bring to the battlefield. By giving voice to the fighters the authors emphasize that, as social actors, they are to be considered as subjects rather than objects determined by structures.

The preceding, rather diverse, reflections on the notion of conflict lead to the idea that conflict cannot be approached as “a thing in itself” (Richards 2005: 3). Richards therefore calls upon the assumption that conflict is the result of the actions undertaken by social agents. War in this way can be seen as one of many phases of social reality, a “social project among other social projects” (ibid: 5). Together with Richards we now move on by making the connection between the context of conflict and that of post-conflict.

Richards argues that, given the inescapable sociological implications of war, there is a continuum between war and peace:

“[T]he seeds of war are to be seen shooting up in peace; […] the shift towards intense armed conflict is a process with many twists and turns; […] turning back towards peace, even beyond a peace agreement, is a rocky path with many pitfalls.” (Richards 2005: 14)

It is clear that there is no distinct line to be drawn between both ‘phases’. The signing of a peace agreement merely puts an official end to the conflict and in most cases the physical confrontations that resulted from the conflict. The signing of a peace agreement does not, however, bring the many refugees back to their homes, rebuild their houses, provide them
with a sustainable income, bring back their loved ones or reintegrate those who actively engaged in the fighting back into society as productive citizens or erase the personal and collective memory that will shape social relations for generations to come. Mats Utas (2003) argues that the conflict in Liberia was infused by a generation of young people who reacted to the lack of opportunities in society. The war in this view is regarded as strategic upward mobility by “taking agency in their own hands trough taking up arms” (Utas 2003: 231). In the end he looks at the effects of this revolution of youth by analysing processes of reintegration of ‘ex-combatants’ and the ways in which they accomplished their objective of changing their marginal position in society. In different contexts he looks at whether ‘ex-combatants’ are reintegrated or rather experience this process as remarginalisation. The answer to this question is not as unequivocal as it is presented here. I will therefore return to this matter when I discuss the reintegration process of ‘ex-combatants’ as they experience it today (cf. Chapter 4).

In order to fully understand the fluent boundaries between the context of conflict and that of post conflict it is interesting to turn to the notion of violence because it is related, but not limited, to the violence as it is experienced in the context of war. I shall therefore elaborate on how to interpret the occurrence of violence. By focusing on violence we include all sorts of violence that can occur at any time. This focus also makes us think about the content of the notions war and peace. Is peace then the absence of public and violent confrontations, or is it the presence of constructive social dynamics? The consideration of the notion of violence supports the basic idea that war or conflict can be regarded as a social project among others since it lays the responsibility for its existence on with the social actors. I will return to this responsibility later when I discuss the issue of identity related to social actions.

Violence is a complex notion. Different scholars identified and analysed different kinds of violence. In the introduction to their edited volume on violence in war and peace, Nancy Sheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois (2004) note that “[t]here is no primary impulse out of which mass violence and genocide are born, it is ingrained in the common sense of everyday social life” (Sheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004: 21). They argue that for the analysis of violent acts it is helpful to keep in mind the “blurring of categories and distinction” (ibid: 19) when studying the context in which violence occurs. They speak of a continuum of violence through which they link the different contexts in which violence

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2 Utas’ analysis goes back to the events of 1998, the last eruption of violence and recent developments are not included.
occurs. On the one hand this continuum makes it possible to connect so called everyday violence with explicit violent acts conducted by the government. On the other hand they pay little attention to how these different forms of violence are internally related and how they compare to one another. The model of a continuum implies that violence can be identified at all levels of society and in all kind of places and spaces. The basic assumption from which to depart from is the idea that, at the heart of violence, one always finds the social actors responsible for his or her acts. Bourdieu (e.g. 1992) is one of the main theorists on the concept of symbolic violence. His ideas on this subject are based on observations he made when studying gender relations and the issue of language usage. He notes that symbolic violence is closely related to the politics of everyday life. The problem here is that, because of its commonplace and therefore ostensibly trivial nature it is hardly recognised as such. The legitimisation of violence is closely related with the prevailing power relations and modes of domination. As Topper (2001) notes when analysing Bourdieu’s contribution on symbolic violence:

“Bourdieu is interested in those opaque power relations which contribute and sustain various forms of domination not only within formal legal and political institutions […], but in relations and spheres of life commonly thought to lie outside of arenas of power and politics.” (Topper 2001: 42)

I argue that the forms of dominations that are present in legal and political institutions partly constitute the relations and spheres of everyday life. I shall highlight this point when I discuss the issue of the reintegration of ‘ex-combatants’ in Liberia in chapter four.

1.1.3 On Identity

Bourdieu’s reflections on power relations bring us to the notion of identity which I will further discuss here. Identity is, as I shall show, an important ‘tool’ in demarcating boundaries when it comes to negotiating relations of power distribution. Reflections on the notion of identity occurred in several academic disciplines from anthropology over sociology to philosophy. This resulted in a number of frameworks within which we can situate the available theoretical assumptions. In this section I highlight the relevant assumptions for the interpretation of my further analysis.
The starting point here is an interpretation of identity that goes beyond primordialism. Appadurai (1996) presents several reasons why a primordialist approach to identity is no longer sustainable. According to Appadurai, the primordialist argument says the following:

“all group sentiments that involve a strong sense of group identity, of we-ness, draw on those attachments that bind small, intimate collectivises, usually those based on kinship or its extensions. Ideas of collective identity based on shared claims to blood, soil, or language draw their affective force from the sentiments that bind small groups.” (Appadurai 1996: 140)

A first remark made by Appadurai is that primordialist arguments are to be situated in the modernist paradigm. It is within this paradigm that the Western world imposed the project of development on the non-Western world. In doing so it caused friction by creating new elites and new chasms between classes. This friction is said to “fuel mass frustration”. For a second set of reasons why the primordialist thesis is no longer manageable Appadurai turns to the literature that stresses the role of imagination in politics (e.g. Anderson 1983, Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983). This literature allows analysts to look at subaltern consciousness from a new perspective. It has become clear that this consciousness is “less a knee-jerk symptom of buried and semiconscious ideologies of identity and more a conscious worked-out strategy of irony and satire, which could critique the ruling order while experimenting with styles of identity politics” (Appadurai 1996: 145). It has become clear that the role of imagination here can no longer be dismissed as being ‘imaginary’ but has to be considered to have an influence on the practise of everyday life (see de Certeau 1984). The third and final main set of reasons provided by Appadurai to leave the primordialist thesis behind has to do with the fact that emotions are always culturally constructed and socially situated and therefore never universal. In this sense it is not of much use to postulate primordialist ideas as underlying “the surface of cultural forms, social orders and historical moments” (Appadurai 1996: 148) but instead approach these feelings and emotions from the assumption that they are inseparably connected to “the world of language and self-representation and that these in turn are remarkably responsive to macroconceptions of civility and dignity, as constructed by interests and ideologues that exercise power over whole social orders” (idem).

When the primordialist thesis no longer allows us to explain and understand the politics of identity, how then, are we to approach these phenomena? In what follows, I shall address this issue in greater detail and elaborate on how I, drawing mainly on the work of

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3 I interpret the notion of “mass frustration” both in the sense that the frustrations that erupted, did so on a massive scale and that the frustration arose from the mass, in contrast to the elite.
Stuart Hall, see these articulations of identity. Before turning to the politics of identity it is relevant first to look at how identity, as an analytical category, contributes to social analysis. Here too, a constructivist stance does not lead to a satisfying understanding. Brubaker and Cooper (2000) argue that, when identities are constructed, fluid and multiple, they are everywhere and, therefore, nowhere. It is important not to forget that categories applied for identification are both “categories of social and political practice and categories of social and political analysis” (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 4, emphasis in original). The link between both levels is not always clear. We should avoid naivety when analysing processes and mechanisms of politics of identity and therefore not reproduce or reinforce categories of practise as categories of analysis. In their analysis social scientists need to consider how a term is used rather than acknowledge that a term is used (ibid: 5). To be able to ‘work’ with the notion of identity, the authors suggest a deconstruction of the meanings that accumulated around the term and present a number of less congested terms instead (ibid: 14). I shall not discuss the alternatives they put forward in greater detail but instead turn to the way Stuart Hall presents his theory of articulation as a way to address the complexity of the notion of identity.

Rather than a ‘construction’ Hall (1990) thinks of identity in terms of ‘production’. This implies a process that is never completed, and that it requires both views from the in- and the outside. Identity therefore ultimately expresses itself through representations. An interpretation of representations cannot be limited to the representation an sich but it requires an insight in the context from which these representations are the result. Only then does it become clear that those representations are always positioned (Hall 1990: 392). When it comes to the issue of ‘cultural identity’ Hall identifies two ways to approach this notion. A first way is from a historical perspective through which people turn to a shared history and articulate a feeling of unity to claim oneness. This rediscovery of the past does not result in an “identity grounded in archaeology but in a re-telling of the past” (ibid: 393, emphasis in original). In the same way as Appadurai (1996) stressed the importance of imagination in politics of identity (cf. above), Hall acknowledges that an imaginative rediscovery of the past feeds the apparently essential identity which emerges from it. A second way of looking at cultural identity is from the position which stresses difference and discontinuities that constitute an identitarian uniqueness. In this sense, Hall talks about (cultural) identity where ‘becoming’ is just as important as ‘being’, which fits the image that identity is a never completed process. Even though identities have a history “they undergo constant transformations” (ibid: 394). Both ways of positioning entail what we could call ‘recursion’.
This is the idea that the boundaries of identity in transformation are in a way arbitrarily constructed and depend largely on the context in which they emerge. The aspect of history is very important here but through the process of transformation new elements both from the interior and the exterior shape the ‘new’ boundaries of the identity. They can be added while others can be left out. Or put in other words: “far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they [cultural identities] are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power (idem: 394, my emphasis). I put an emphasis on the word ‘play’ because I believe it allows us to look at the articulation of identity in terms of a negotiation rather than a struggle as proposed by some who uphold a constructivist or primordial interpretation of identity (e.g. Comaroff 1996: 165-166). As Hall notes the term ‘play’ implies a certain flexibility that allows us to interpret the complexity of a representation at different times and in a changing context whereas ‘struggle’, for me, implies a more determinist view of identity. The term play also leaves room for the idea that identities, and especially counter-identities are shaped within a field of power that is constantly in motion. Although both the dominant and the dominated have something to say, as Vigh (2006) notes, these movements are never completely free. According to Hall, the articulation of identity is not limited “to the small point of truth inside us, [but rather,] identities actually come from outside, they are the way in which we are recognised and then come to step into the place of recognitions which others give us. Without the others there is no self, there is no self-recognition” (Hall 1995: 8). It is important here to acknowledge that the boundaries of the room for manoeuvre are mainly put out by the dominant elite but on the other hand it is just as valuable to recognise the ability of subaltern groups to ‘speak’. In short, every positioning has a strategic and arbitrary component (Hall 1990: 307). All the previous reflections on the notion of identity bring us to what Hall has to say about the idea of articulation, his interpretation and the analysis of the politics of identity.

“An articulation is [...] the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain condition. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. You have to ask, under what circumstances can a connection be forged or made? So the so-called ‘unity’ of a discourse is rally the articulation of different, distinct elements which can be re-articulated in different ways because they have no necessary ‘belongingness’. The ‘unity’ which matters is a linkage between that articulated discourse and the social forces with which it can, under certain historical condition, but need not necessarily, be connected.” (Hall 1996: 141, emphasis in original)
In my further analysis I look at how the articulation of identity influenced dynamics in Liberia. First from a historical perspective and second I look at how navigation towards new horizons occur in the social terrain in contemporary post conflict Liberia.

1.2 Methodology

Since this thesis is based on qualitative data rather than quantitative data, I first want to elaborate briefly on the literature that I used to back up my own findings. This thesis is highly interdisciplinary and therefore the scope of my selection of literature is broad. Since I write about a social field that is constantly in motion, it is important to approach the different dynamics from various – relevant – points of view. In my analysis I therefore rely on historical, anthropological, sociological, political and philosophical accounts that interpret the events. At first these multiple interpretations might seem confusing but this complexity is necessary to be able to interpret the complex social reality it addresses.

In the introduction of this chapter I wrote that I had no idea of what my field was like before I physically entered it in July 2006. This means that the first few days – and even weeks – I had to walk around and talk to people in order to eventually end up with a small network of contacts. The image of Voinjama I present in chapter four is based on stories and opinions that result from sharing three months of experiences inside this network. It is important to note that this report is my interpretation of what I encountered rather than the interpretation which is not open for discussion. Hannerz (2004 [1969]) nuances his own findings on life in a ghetto community by turning to Kluckhohn (1942). He claims that “no two [scientists] will ever see life in a community in identical terms any more than one can step twice into the same river. They will be exposed to different events, and they will go about the problem of making an orderly interpretation of the slightly disorderly complexities of human life in different ways – unless they are willing to become fettered by certain rigidities of method which will blind them to much of the human experience” (Hannerz 2004: 15). Ethnography is therefore not something you learn from books but from personal experiences in the field. This section is a reflection on my own position as a young researcher.

My lack of experience definitely made me miss out on a lot of information. Events I did not attend or where I did not pay enough attention to because they did not seem important at the time they occurred. Conversations I did not record or write down because I believed it was irrelevant information. Or just questions I did not think about or forgot to ask. On the other hand, it is impossible to absorb all the information one encounters during three months.
Ethnography is always about making choices and taking sides. This is especially the case in a precarious context as that of Liberia where the conflict is still a vivid memory and where relations on all levels can lead to tensions and confrontations. My own position is no exception here. For the first month of my time in Voinjama I resided with the staff of an international NGO. The last two months I resided in the house of UN staff members. Since I was working on the reintegration of ‘ex-combatants’ I tried not to be associated too much with the UN, which was not always an easy task. I often had to defend myself when I spoke with my informants. On the other hand the UN employees helped me to get access to places and meetings I otherwise would never have been able to attend. Their outsiders’ perspective and their knowledge of the area also opened my eyes and made me notice things I would otherwise have missed out on.

In the beginning my informants were very reticent towards my presence and reserved when I asked some questions. They later explained to me that they were not used to an ‘outsider’ who comes to them and listen to their stories. It was therefore important for me to win their trust. I experienced that conducting ethnographic research is not about treating informants as objects where you can withdraw the information you need but rather about interaction and building relations. This is also one of the most difficult aspects of engaging in ethnographic fieldwork, especially when it is limited in time. Three months is a short period to establish strong relations in a difficult and new environment. At several moments, when the scope of my research got more structured, the importance of being part of a network of relations became clear. When I was taking notes and pictures at a public meeting where local and international representatives were present an immigration officer came to me and told me to stop taking pictures. When he wanted to see my passport, a group of young people I worked with before came into the picture and defended me by saying that I did not have show my passport and that, if I wanted to, I could take all the pictures I wanted. The most comforting message they gave me was that, since I was in Voinjama, I was a member of the youth then. A similar event occurred a few weeks later when I was present at the high school where ‘ex-combatants’ who I got to know quite well received their payment for their participation in one of the reintegration programs. Some of them were about to receive a lot of money because, instead of getting paid every month as promised, the money was distributed all in once due to financial problems at the organisation. At first I was observing what happened from a certain distance, taking pictures and talking to the ‘ex-combatants’. Later on

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4 Voinjama, 18/07/2006
some ‘ex-combatants’ came to me to complain that they did not get paid because there was a problem with their registration and the validity of their ID-card. At that time an international observer came to me and asked me about my reasons for being there. When I explained that I was invited by some of the ‘ex-combatants’ she asked me to sign a statement where I declared not to publish any of the pictures I had taken at the site. The organisation was on a tour throughout the country to pay the due money. Since the majority of the participants were ‘ex-combatants’ the organisation feared for violent reprisals. When she later on asked me to leave the premises one of the ‘ex-combatants’ responded that I was there to do my research and that it was necessary to be present at the site because then I could write about it in my report. We remained at the site till the end of event\(^5\).

I did not leave for Liberia with a standard questionnaire. Neither did I conduct a lot of formal, standardised interviews. Most of my information comes from conversations and informal interviews. Participant observation constitutes the core of my activities in Voinjama. By working and living together with my informants I got confronted with their problems, what frustrated them, what they enjoy, what they want to achieve, how they feel about the situation in Voinjama today, etcetera. I could recognise myself in how Henrik Vigh (2006) describes his experiences with the Aguentas in Guinea-Bissau:

> “I spent most of my time in Bissau sitting on walls, worn and broken chairs, or just djunguto, squatting, hanging out with my informants as they spent time with their peer group, and moving between them. The primary ‘place’ of my fieldwork was, in other words, more closely related to the meeting-places of different collegasons, and the relation between my informants and different collegasons, tan to a specific neighbourhood or other traditional urban-geographical demarcations.” (Vigh 2006: 18, emphasis in original)

When I was walking through town on a day the rain was pouring down a groups of ‘ex-combatants’ invited me into their home for shelter. Later on they offered me a meal. When we all sat down and ate they started talking about their experiences during the war and the difficulties they encounter in the community today. I experienced similar situations with my closest contacts on several occasions. When the weather was fine we used to sit outside the house with the owner of the house, his wife and little child and some friends. I used to help with the cooking or the washing of the clothes. It is really embarrassing at those moments when a member of the town administration, whom I spoke to a few days earlier, passes by and shouts so that the whole street can hear: “what are you doing in that corner, don’t you know

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\(^5\) Voinjama, 07/09/2006
these people are dangerous”. It does demonstrate the difficulties that ‘taking sides’ brings along.

6 Voinjama, 20/08/2006
Chapter Two: Historical Continuity and Change

In this chapter I shall sketch a history of Liberia. The purpose here is not to describe an exhaustive history but rather to introduce the field in which I situate my research from a historical perspective. Therefore I focus on those aspects of history that are relevant for the analysis of the data I gathered during my fieldwork and I also demonstrate the relevance of the analytical frame I presented in the previous chapter by applying it to historical developments (cf. chapter 1). This historical perspective is a necessary setting in order to understand the contemporary dynamics since these do not take place in a timeless void but are influenced by past events that help create the contemporary context. Pels (1997) urges a holistic approach to anthropological analysis. I believe this approach to be applicable to social science in general. In a first section of this chapter I give an overview of the historical developments that led to the situation as it is today. My aim here is not to look for specific causes that might have incited and further fuelled the conflict from the eighties onwards but rather to point to the complexity of Liberia’s past and look at how history stands “in a supplemental relationship” with social dynamics today (Pels 1997: 167). In a second section I want to conduct a “scale-sensitive analysis” (Arnaut 2005: 218) of the historical events I present in section one to open up the interpretation of these events. To do so I look at how others approached and analysed the history of Liberia. I shall discuss three main issues at great length. Firstly, how the idea of the nation state is applied to Liberia. Secondly, I picture Liberia in a broader geographical and political entity and look at dynamics in West Africa that influenced Liberia’s history. Thirdly, I shall look at the ways in which the conflict is interpreted from different points of view. The examples I describe in the second section will overlap with those I discuss in the historical overview given the fact that there is no strict distinction between the events and their interpretation.

2.1 An Overview

The history of Liberia is shaped on two fronts. If we want to give an accurate description of the events we need to consider what happened on both sides of the ocean. The most influential actors who helped outlining contemporary Liberia are to be situated in the USA. On the other hand there are those groups who inhabited the territory before the arrival of the settlers. These
groups developed a network of intergroup relations in economic, political and social fields which I shall discuss in brief.

Before the arrival of the settlers the groups who inhabited the coastal areas relied on extensive trade relations with both the African interior and the outside world. In those areas, slaves were the most important trading good, mainly bought by Europeans. Although this was an important trading good, it was not the only product that provided an income for the people occupying this area. Other important economic sectors were mining and agriculture. The trade products were chiefly gold, ivory and rice. As Holsoe points out “the overseas trade carried on in this area was of some importance. The earliest records reveal an almost continuous sequence of documents concerning trade in this area”. He further notes that, because of these trade relations, several small-scale and decentralised political organisations emerged in the coastal area, with the exception of the Condo confederation which was one of the larger structures. (Holsoe 1971: 331-333).

In the Liberian Hinterland, in this case the north west of the country, intergroup relations were both economically and socially characterised by “swidden agriculture, matrilateral cross-cousin marriage, secret societies and […] warfare” (Højbjerg 1999: 535). In the same article Højbjerg notes that many scholars found that the ambiguous environment that characterises this region results from the dynamic and unstable political – often multi-ethnic – organisation. This description of the distribution of power points to the contextual embedding of the historical events and the possibility of strategic manipulation of these events (ibid: 536).

Meanwhile, towards the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, the US government started passing laws enacting the abolition of slavery, and freed slaves appeared all over the country. Their freedom, however, did not come with many legal rights. They were considered outcasts. The fact that the authorities at that time could not get them of their hands and that “supposedly humanitarian considerations similar to those of colonialism being a civilising mission to Africa is said to have led to the formation in 1816 of the ACS [American Colonisation Society]” (Osaghae 1996: 27). Despite the name of the organisation, Liberia cannot be seen as an official colony of the United States but rather as “the philanthropic project of a private, white, benevolent organization” (Moran 2006: 2). In 1819, the US Congress made it possible for president Monroe to repatriate freed slaves to Africa (Osaghae 1996: 27). This act encouraged the ACS to pursue its idea of the creation of the Liberian state. In 1822 the first Black American colonists arrived in Cape Mesurado.
The encounter between the American colonists and the – from then on – indigenous people introduced an era of hostilities and negotiations. Holsoe (1971) gives a detailed description of the events that took place between 1822 and 1947 in western Liberia. From these events, we can conclude that the American colonists came across heavy resistance from the local inhabitants. “The colonists appealed for a peace settlement but the chiefs refused to mediate, since their real desire was to see the colony removed completely from their territory” (Holsoe 1971: 339). The arrival of the colonist gave rise to a number of intra- and intergroup dynamics through which alliances were made and others broken in the best interest of the own group or to maintain sovereignty. The military missions sent out by the colonists aimed primarily at ending the slave trade that was still going on in the area. By 1835 there came a shift “to a policy of controlling peoples surrounding the colony whose behaviour was antagonistic to that of the colonial government. The use of force for this purpose would become a standardized policy in the relations between the colonists and the indigenous peoples for the rest of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth” (ibid: 346). By the 1840s the relations between the colonists and the indigenous peoples became more peaceful, the prestige and authority of the colony became more influential and the colonial authorities mingled with local politics. Nevertheless, relations between both sides remained fragile. Finally, on July 26 1847, the colony declared its independence and occupied a stretch of the coastal area between St. Paul and Lofa rivers (ibid: 356). This situation would remain essentially unchanged until president Arthur Barclay decided to control the hinterland as well as the coastal area.

The literature on the early history of Liberia is dominated by the distinction between the settlers and the indigenous people. Analysts who address the latter use multiple labels without real coherence. The indigenous groups are often referred to as ethnic, tribal, local, native or autochthon to point out they inhabited the territory that would become the Republic of Liberia. In light of my approach to identity through which identity is to be seen as a production or a positioning in relation to others rather than a natural phenomenon, it is important to take a closer look at how the distinction between the settlers and the indigenous groups emerged. I will therefore shortly elaborate on the process of creating ethnic identity in Liberia. For a more detailed interpretation on this question of identity, I also refer to the next section (cf. nation state).

With his case study on the Kru in southeastern Liberia Breitborde (1991) argues that “ethnogenesis is best understood as the result of processes which occurred along a geographically complex social frontier which included both urban and rural components”
The distinction between urban and rural components is, as he notes, best to be seen as a social distinction rather than a purely geographical one. He describes how the flow between the capital, i.e. the political centre, and the hinterland, i.e. the political periphery, resulted in the emergence of Kru ethnicity. He focuses on the complexity of these flows by looking at how they intertwine. For over centuries social units often referred to as clans, inhabit the coastal areas of Liberia where European traders came ashore to establish trade relations. During that time many males from that area worked on European trading ships. The concept Kru might be related to the label ‘crew’ that was used to describe the people who worked on those ships. The term Kru is never found as a reference term for one of the clans (ibid: 188). An “external locus for Kru ethnogenesis” (ibid: 189) which focuses on the interaction between the clans and the Europeans or Americo-Liberians in West-African port cities does not lead to a satisfying understanding of this process. Breitborde therefore suggest to look at the integration from people both in the countryside and in the city. He gives the example of the Kru Corporation, an organisation created in 1916 by the national government for Monrovia Kru – those Kru who lived in the capital – to extend their power over the coastal areas and the hinterland (ibid: 191). This organisation introduced a first official definition of who the Kru people are ‘from above’. The representation in the structure of the organisation did not always reflect the social reality of the hinterland. The organisations distinguished between six sections and in this structure some sections held more power than others did. By the nineteen eighties however, there came a change in the status of rural groups as a result of which they could gain political and economic status. This meant that people in the hinterland now had more influence to respond to the question of who the Kru were. The official definition was more open to the constant renegotiation of the Kru identity.

In order to strengthen their grip on the population the settler community created the True Wigh Party (TWP) in 1869. This means the start of 102 years of oligarchic policy whereby the indigenous population was ruled by a hegemonic governing elite and regarded as an object rather than as citizens with political rights. During this regime, the president dominated the patrimonial machine (Ellis 1999: 47). In 1904 president Arthur Barclay introduced the political system of indirect rule which included the hinterland territories. The country was divided into three provinces which were further divided into districts. The paramount chiefs elected by town and clan chiefs served under the district commissioner who can be seen as a representative of the president (Osaghae 1996: 33-34). This movement away from the coast also has to be seen in the light of the emergent European colonisation following the scramble for Africa in 1885. Both the British and French government put
pressure on the Liberian government to impose the system of indirect rule to control the Liberian hinterland. We could say that, during the TWP era, a dual mode of governance existed. On the one hand there were the coastal peoples influenced by the Americo-Liberians, rightful citizens of Liberia entitled to a number of rights and on the other hand there were the African-Liberians, the indigenous groups who inhabited most of the hinterland. They were excluded from the national level of decision-making and depended on the goodwill of the president for the election of the paramount chiefs. Again, it would be naïve to state that the latter groups were silent suppressed citizens. On the contrary, the TWP regime had to deal with outbreaks of resistance throughout their period in power.

A slight shift in policy towards more widespread political participation was introduced by the Unification Policy of the Tubman regime (1944-1970).

“Tubman launched a unification policy which aimed at the assimilation and unification of [the] various populations. In pursuit of this policy, which became the hallmark of his administration, important changes which aimed at greater incorporation of African-Liberians, especially those of the hinterland, were effected”. (Osaghae 1996: 44)

The most influential measure for the indigenous groups was probably the expansion of their political rights by means of the right to vote – although this right was only available for those who were able to pay the hut tax. This shift worked in two directions. On the one hand the inhabitants of the hinterland obtained more political autonomy while on the other hand the president opened a new register of potential electorate with the insurance that they could not obtain enough power to threaten the established regime. Hlophe (1973) describes how this inclusion of ethnic groups in the policy making led to the strategic use of ethnic identity in search of more political and economic power. In this search for power, ethnic affiliation also became an issue of class. In the other direction government officials tried to infiltrate the Poro society as a safety measure because of this structure’s extensive influence on local political dynamics. The author concludes that the “continual manipulation of [ethnic identity] has facilitated their final acceptance into the national political structures. Their aspirations and socio-political goals have been effectively channelled within this national boundary” (Hlophe 1973: 256).

The unification policy was continued by Tubman’s successor, president Tolbert (1971-1980). This was partly the result of the abiding resistance of the suppressed and discriminated ethnic groups. Tolbert shifted from the Unification Policy to a policy of Total Involvement. The expected change failed to occur and different indigenous groups saw their chance to
change the established regime. On April 14, 1974 the frustrations of the indigenous groups led to the ‘rice riots’. This event was the result of the announced increase of rice prices. Since rice is the staple food of most Liberians, many of them would suffer the consequences. The Political Awakening Movement (PAM) orchestrated these riots. This movement was constituted of an amalgam of different organisations, each with their own agenda. The two most influential parties involved in the formation of the PAM where the Movement for Justice in Africa (MOJA) and the Progressive Alliance of Liberia (PAL). The first organisation’s agenda “was to organize a grassroots political movement that would conscientize the Liberian electorate about the ills of the nation, particularly, settler’s subjugation of indigenous people. Their target groups were marketeers, labour organizations and student movements” while the goal of the PAL “was to create a multi-party democratic environment in Liberia, strictly within the framework of the law” (Dolo 1996: 41-50). As mentioned before both organisations found each other in the PAM which could be labelled primarily, though not exclusively, as a student movement. In the meantime on the other side of the ocean, the leader of the Liberian student movement in the United States, Charles Taylor, decided to return to Monrovia to be able to follow up on the occurring events.

When we return to the rice riots of 1979 we cannot attribute this outbreak of political discontent merely to the increase of the rice prices. These demonstrations have to be seen in the light of the continuous discrimination and oppression during the last hundred years. Nonetheless, we cannot base our analysis on the assumption that the riots were the first outbreak of violence since the arrival of the colonist settlers during the 1820s. Rather it is a (first) climax that results from the countering of the TWP regime, an open challenge of its rule and the result of complex and dynamic changes within Liberian society. The riots set a precedent for the coup d’etat by sergeant Samuel K. Doe on April 12, 1980. The PAM was hungry for power but did not have the means and the power to overthrow the TWP regime.

Samuel Doe identified himself as a member of the Krahn ethnic group, one of the sixteen generally recognised ethnic groups in Liberia. This group constitutes a little less than five percent of the total population. During the TWP regime, this group did not manage to gain power and was restricted to the margins of society. Doe’s parents lived in the heart of the Liberian hinterland and were uneducated. Doe himself finished primary education before entering the Liberian Army where he started as a private and obtained the rank of Master Sergeant in October 1979. As the highest in rank Doe was the leading figure of the coup. Thomas Quiwonkpa, mobilised by the student movements MOJA and PAL and a good friend of Doe, led a group of seventeen soldiers into the presidential mansion where they killed the
president in his sleep. Ten days later thirteen members of the Tolbert government were tried and executed on the beach of Monrovia. Doe, with his party the People’s Redemption Council (PRC), took over power at that time. Because of the lack of experience in the public offices, the newly established government included several (progressive) members of the former regime. Together with all those groups who had, until then, been excluded from the decision-making process they started lobbying for high-rank positions. Here too, the mobilisation and manipulation of ethnic identity turned out to be an important issue in the search for power (cf. below).

In the meantime it was Samuel Doe who announced a return to civilian rule and a diminishing of the military power. He also presented a new constitution for the country. Doe’s partner during the coup, Thomas Quiwonkpa, felt threatened by this idea and fled into exile. Earlier on Charles Taylor also decided that this was the right thing to do. He went back to the United States where he was arrested in May 1984 because of Doe’s accusations of embezzling $900,000 from his former employee. Choosing exile seemed the right thing to do for both of them, especially for Quiwonkpa who originated from Nimba County where Doe, in the light of ethnicized politics, started a campaign against the Gio and Mano. After fifteen months Taylor escaped from prison. In 1986 he reached Ghana where he was recaptured and imprisoned for another three months because of the rising suspicion regarding his escape from the US and accusations of spying for the CIA. From Accra he moved on to Burkina Faso where he met some of Quiwonkpa’s allies and where he helped overthrow the Burkinabe regime. In doing so he established his position in a wider West-African network (Ellis 1999: 69). Back in Liberia the Doe regime did not bring the expected change. Corruption and discrimination went on as before and in 1983 Doe orchestrated a horrific campaign in Nimba County where a Krahn-Gio ethnic rivalry was emerging and which was further reinforced.

In 1985 national elections appointed Samuel Doe as the rightful president of Liberia. One of the most important implications of these elections was the approval of the regime by the US government. This in contrast to the weak popular support with a majority of only 50,9 per cent. In Nimba County, where Jackson Doe (no relation with the president) was the most important candidate and where the raid of two years earlier lingered on, there was a breeding ground for resistance. This antipathy against Doe and his regime was strengthened by Thomas Quiwonkpa’s return from exile. In November of the election year Quiwonkpa led a group of dissident soldiers into Monrovia in an attempt to overthrow the Doe regime. Doe’s troops managed to counter this attack and proudly paraded with Quiwonkpa’s body through the streets of Monrovia (Ellis 1999: 60). This event encouraged Doe’s determination to fight
dissidents throughout Nimba County. To accomplish this he also made alliances with the Mandingo groups which are attributed an ambivalent status in the Liberian society to which I will return later.

In 1987 Burkina Faso and Côte d’Ivoire found each other in a mutual resentment against the Liberian president. Both regimes backed up Taylor’s plan to overthrow Doe. More support came from another corner. Libya’s Colonel Gadaffi had military camps all over the country and trained revolutionaries at his World Revolutionary Headquarters. One of them was Charles Taylor and his followers from the Liberian diaspora. The idea of an actual revolution got more structured, concrete, and institutionalised with the foundation of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) which united Liberians in exile. This idea was further strengthened by an alliance with Foday Sankoh of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) of Sierra Leone who was also trained in Libya.

On December 24, 1989 Taylor and his troops launched an attack on the Liberian government by entering through Nimba County where they had numerous supporters coming from neighbouring Côte d’Ivoire. Consisting of a core of little under two hundred professional fighters and backed up by a mass of followers they set out for Monrovia. It took the troops about a week to reach Monrovia and there the real violence broke out. About a year later, in September 1990, Prince Johnson, one of the NPFL military leaders, captured Samuel Doe in Monrovia. They tortured and humiliated him before executing him in the football stadium. The whole ‘ceremony’ was videotaped and, according to what I have heard, is still available in Monrovia today. Despite the relative success of the operation against Doe there were internal tensions which eventually lead to the split of the NPFL. In July 1990 Johnson launched the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL) and pushed Jackson Doe forward as a presidential candidate. Although both parties were fighting over presidency it was Dr. Amos Sawyer who managed to get inaugurated during a ceremony in Guinea and become the head of the Interim Government of National Unity. By then the Ecomog forces were inside Liberia to take control over the situation in order to provide stability in the wider West-African region. About 10,000 troops with a mandate to cease-fire, which implies that they were not allowed to shoot, had to control the fighting fractions. Behind the scenes of this intervention the Ecomog Force Commander Dogonyaro guided the transition process until he was called back in February 1991 (Ellis 1999: 88). So what happened with Charles Taylor at that time?
“In July 1990 Taylor had seemed on the verge of success. His forces were in Monrovia, and the United States was doing nothing to stop his advance. Jackson F. Doe and anyone else who could possibly pre-empt his elevation to the presidency were disappearing from view. Just seven weeks later his hopes were to be dashed by the emergence of Prince Johnson and an independent candidate, the arrival of Ecomog, and the murder of Samuel Doe. Taylor was left in control of Liberia but excluded from the capital city.” (Ellis 1999: 87)

This is how, what analysts describe as, the distinction between Greater and Lesser Liberia came into existence.

Taylor continued planning a final attack on Monrovia and used all his contacts to gather the necessary amount of wealth and support. He did so in a very effective and comprehensive manner. Money came from neighbouring countries and from the exploitation of diamonds in the area. Despite the growing success of the NPFL, not everyone felt secure in Greater Liberia. Many Mandingo and Krahn fled to Guinea and Sierra Leone where they organised themselves to counter Taylor’s troops. Two new fractions came into being: the Liberian United Defence Force (LURD) in Sierra Leone, mainly consisting of Liberians in exile and supported by the Sierra Leonean government and the United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia (ULIMO), launched in Guinea-Conakry. Back in Liberia Taylor had already declared himself the official leader of Greater Liberia but expressed the desire to control the whole country. Before attacking Monrovia he got himself involved in the conflict in Sierra Leone to take revenge on president Momoh by actively supporting RUF rebel leader Foday Sankoh and relied on support from the contacts he made during his stay in both Côte d’Ivoire and Burkina Faso. When the pressure became too high Taylor launched a second attack on Monrovia (after the one in 1990) on October 15 1992. This attack would be remembered as Operation Octopus. Because of the violence surrounding him from all sides (Ecomog, and ULIMO) Taylor became the first one to propose peace negotiations. On July 25 1993 a ceasefire was reached in Cotonou, Benin between the most important fighting fractions but the accord did not last (Ellis 1999: 101). As the war went on, it got more complex: more fractions emerged who felt the need to take part in the fighting, each with different motivations but with the same objectives and goals and the more lives were lost. The country was divided under warlords battling for wealth and power.

On April 6 a third battle over Monrovia commenced. The three main fighting fractions at the time, Taylor’s NPFL, Johnson’s Ulimo-J, and Kromah’s Ulimo-K, met each other in the

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7 One example is the split in the Ulimo into Ulimo-K and Ulimo-J named after the military leaders Kromah and Johnson, because of internal differences
capital. This final encounter resulted in over 2,000 people losing their life and a national election on July 19 1997, which put Charles Taylor in the presidential Mansion.

The election of president Charles Taylor did not bring peace to the country at all. Between 1997 and 1999 it was relative peaceful but from 1999 until 2003, when a new peace agreement was signed, a new spiral of violence erupted.

Around 1999 Charles Taylor’s troops, the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) were opposed by two main rebel groups: Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) headed by Sekou Damate Konneh and Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) under the command of Thomas Nimeley. The political agenda of these groups was not very clear. The only point upon which they agreed was the removal of Charles Taylor. Both fractions were formed by Liberians in exile, most of them took part in the war before and found the required resources to organise themselves. For LURD rebels, the Guinean refugee camps formed an interesting point for recruiting new soldiers. MODEL rebels did the same in Côte d’Ivoire. Once organised the LURD moved from Guinea and recaptured Voinjama, which was to be one of their headquarters, and Lofa County. MODEL entered the country from the Ivorian border and occupied the southeast of Liberia.

In June 2003 LURD rebels reached the capital where they would engage in what Liberians call the ‘first, second and third world war’. At this stage the Liberian conflict received international media attention. Especially because of the fact that the US government and other international agencies refused to send help and the situation for inhabitants became critical. With the first attack on June 5 the LURD reached the outskirts of the city and little than a month later, on July 17, with their third attack they managed to get hold of the port which was an important strategic point. Eleven days later MODEL reached Buchanan, Liberia’s second city, and its port. (Itano 2003: 3). During this turbulent month many people lost their lives. Those who managed to escape sought refuge in the Samuel Doe stadium or at the American embassy. There was a strong signal when, on July 22 2003, Liberians started piling up dead bodies in front of the American embassy while US marines stood there watching behind their bullet-proof glass. The condition for the US to intervene was that president Taylor should step down. Taylor himself declared that he would only step down once the American troops set foot in Liberia. The precarious situation in Liberia combined with the accusations by the United Nations Special Court in Sierra Leone made Charles Taylor leave the country for Nigeria on August 11 where he was granted asylum.
Now that Taylor had gone the United Nations Secretary-General declared he wanted to send-in UN troops to secure the situation\textsuperscript{8}. Following this declaration, the Security Council adopted resolution 1497, which authorised the intervention. By August 18 the three parties, LURD, MODEL, and Government troops, signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in Accra, Ghana. Here all three parties were represented in the Transitional Government conducted by Gyude Bryant, a former businessman who did not actively take part in the fighting.

Since then the UN mission in Liberia (UNMIL) has taken over much of the military and administrative functions while the national government is trying to regain its legitimacy. This is not an easy task since the Bryant government had to step down partly because of corruption claims. In 2005 Liberians could choose a new president from seventeen candidates of which some occupied important positions in earlier regimes. After the first round two candidates were held back: George Weah, a former football star, and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, a former employee of the World Bank and initial supporter of Charles Taylor. In a second round Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf became the first female African president. She stands before the challenge and the opportunity of putting Liberia back on the right track, supported by massive international support.

2.2 A Scale-Sensitive Analysis

In this section I set the historical events according to different scales. My argument here is that “space and scale are discursively constructed” (Arnaut 2005: 218) rather than natural concepts that determine social reality. This interpretation leaves room for imagination and constant renegotiation when attempting to define boundaries and identities. I shall therefore reflect on three notions: the nation state in Liberia, Liberia in a broader regional perspective and the Liberian conflict. When discussing the issue of the Liberian nation state I look at how the history of Liberia corresponds – or better does not correspond – with this notion. I shall start my analysis with the arrival of the Americo-Liberian Settlers in the beginning of the nineteenth century and see how their interaction with the indigenous groups shaped Liberian nationalism. In the second issue I address the history of Liberia in a larger geographical and geo-political perspective and look at what happened at a national level and how this compares to events at a regional (West Africa) and global level. Here I have special attention for the

\textsuperscript{8} UN document: S/2003/769, July 29, 2003
events in neighbouring Sierra Leone. Finally, I take a closer look at the conflict itself. In the previous section my main purpose was to present an overview of the political events. However, in order to fully grasp what happened I believe it to be necessary to see the conflict in a broader social and cultural framework. In this analysis I move beyond geographical and political boundaries and look at social and cultural spaces that influenced the events. The aim here is not to present the causes of the civil war. Instead I want to indicate the complexity of the dynamics of which the present-day situation is the result. I shall therefore reflect on how others approached the conflict.

2.2.1 Negotiating the Nation State

Before turning to Liberia, I shall present the theoretical framework in which I situate my analysis. I therefore turn to Appadurai (1996) who describes the idea of the nation state in a modern world:

“Where soil and place were once the key to linkage of territorial affiliation with state monopoly of the means of violence, key identities and identifications now only partially revolve around the realities and images of place. […] [C]itizens imagine themselves to belong to a national society.” (Appadurai 1996: 161, italics in original)

He further notes that “not all nation-state policies are hegemonic, nor are all subaltern forms of agency impotent to resist these pressures and seductions” (ibid: 163). This description includes a complex variety of notions and ideas. The main idea here is that the concept of a nation state is not a natural fact but rather a social construct. Drawing on the historical overview presented in section one and the consideration made by Appadurai, it is difficult to look at Liberia as a nation state from a more traditional point of view. This assumption goes for most post-colonial African states. Although Liberia never experienced an official colonisation, the origins of the state show certain similarities with colonialism. The philanthropic mission by the American Colonisation Society made it possible for freed slaves to be sent back to Africa. This idea led to a strict distinction between the Americo-Liberians and the indigenous groups that I briefly discussed in the previous section. A major distinction that returns in most analyses is a geo-political one namely the one between the capital and the hinterland. However, the social, political and cultural implications of a rigid distinction between both areas suggest an impermeable centre-periphery relationship. This image does not entirely reflect the social reality. As mentioned in the previous section a change in
administration in an effort to stretch power over the hinterland occurred by introducing a system of indirect rule consisting of paramount chiefdoms. In his analysis of Loma political culture, Højbjerg (1999) notes that this model not only led to the consolidation of existing power relations but increased the autonomy of existing power structures. My point on the emergence of nationalism in Liberia strongly corresponds with the idea presented by Chauveau and Dozon (1987). In their analysis of emergent ethnicity in Côte d’Ivoire they argue that the emergence of nationalism is unequivocally connected with the establishment of a colonial state. They distinguish between two periods in which a crystallisation of socio-cultural identities was achieved. Firstly there is what they refer to as ‘the inventive forecast’ (la prédiction créatrice) through which the state operates as an ethnographer (l’État-ethnographique) and plays a key role in identifying the Ivorian society. A second phase entails the reiteration and amplification of the work done by the ethnographer state by the Ivorian civil society. In the first phase, the work done by the ethnographer state resulted in an inventory as a result of which the different ‘races’ were attributed certain characteristics which were subsequently moulded into a hierarchy. This was supposed to be a functional hierarchy that ranked the different (ethnic) groups according to their aptitude to accept the colonial burden and their ability to fit in the mode of production the colonial system was about to install. The way they approached ethnic identity worked as a self-fulfilling prophecy through which they enunciated a ‘traditional’ representation while, at the same time, they were changing the environmental life conditions (Chauveau and Dozon 1987: 242). In this first phase categorisation is imposed ‘from above’. In the second phase identified by Chauveau and Dozon, that of the productive misunderstanding (‘le malentendu productive’), the Ivorian civil society adopts these categories but appropriates them and infuses them with new meanings. The same goes for the manipulation of ethnic identity in Liberia as discussed by Hlophe (1973) (cf. above). The point they want to make here is that the introduced transformations combined with the reaction from the civil society goes beyond primordial assumptions. The dynamics that occurred are not the result of a distant dialogue between two autonomous realities but rather of an intertwining of the dominant and the dominated. Ethnic identities are, according to Chauveau and Dozon, the result of a recomposition and crystallisation of the introduced ethnic genealogy in which every group has its place. In the jeu à trois between the state, the ethnic groups and the development of a plantation economy, the ‘in-group’ identified itself in relation to the ‘out-group’ as well as in relation to the destination which was stipulated for them (Chauveau and Dozon 1987: 243). In short we can say that, as Karel Arnaut puts it, “an essential aspect of their ‘identity’ is the fact that they are,
each in their way, auxiliaries: helpers and propagators of colonialism” (Arnaut 2004: 206-207).

In the case of Liberia there never was an overwhelming feeling of nationalism throughout the country. From the early beginning, with the arrival of the settlers, relations were limited to peace negotiations and arguments over territory. After the inclusion of the hinterland and the introduction of the indirect rule regime by president Barclay all this changed to some extend. The TWP regime seemed to be more interested in preserving its position and consolidating existing power relations than to engage in a nationalistic campaign. Even despite later efforts to unify the people of Liberia (e.g. the Unification Policy by president Tubman and Tolbert’s policy of Total Involvement) the ruling elite also never seemed able to impose relevant common features to achieve a nationalist feeling. The continuous resistance by ethnic groups shows how agency delimits the room to manoeuvre within the imposed structure and counter the hegemonic regime. Different groups within Liberian society tend to identify themselves along other lines than the nationalistic one. This apparent freedom is still somehow limited. Since they are situated within the national structure and not outside the ‘system’, their strategic use of identity is situated within this frame.

Some analysts describe the civil war as solely or at least mainly ethnic an one but I believe this is an unjust reduction of what really happened. Take for instance the last eruption of violence (1999-2003). There the fighting fractions crossed ethnic boundaries and other motives to engage in the fighting were eminent. Ellis argues that the Liberian civil war “or at least the part that lasted from 1989 to 1997, was about money, power and revenge, like most wars” (Ellis 2003: 458). I would also add greed and grievance to this list.

James Guseh (1997) argues that unity is achieved by centripetal forces which bind the country. This contrary to centrifugal forces which tend to divide the country. The most influential of the centripetal forces is a strong state through a strong government system. He argues that, for Liberia, these forces never occurred as strong as the centrifugal ones (Guseh 1997: 38-42). Since the election of president Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf a massive nationalistic campaign orchestrated by the national government has arisen which is largely supported by the international community. The problem here is that the national authorities in general do not enjoy the support of the majority of the people because of their experiences in the past. One example of this distrust is the resignation of the interim government after accusations of corruption and discrimination. Even today, during my fieldwork in the summer of 2006, I heard some critical voices that did not spare the government criticism. One woman was
complaining about the fact that in the published budget both education and health care would receive fewer funds. She even compared the current regime with the Taylor administration and concluded that Taylor might be considered a dictator but at least the teachers were paid and throughout the year, food was supplied all over the country.\(^9\)

The question whether Liberia can be regarded as a traditional weak state is a difficult one. A first problem is the definition of the concept ‘weak’. Many labels are used to suggest the same problems: weak states, failed states, hollow states, criminal states etcetera. For this analysis I turn to Bourdieu’s analysis of the bureaucratic field. He argues that:

“The construction of the state monopoly over physical and symbolic violence is inseparable from the construction of the field of struggles for the monopoly over the advantages attached to this monopoly. The relative unification and universalization associated with the emergence of the state has for counterpart the monopolization by the few of the universal resources that it produces and procures.” (Bourdieu 1994: 16-17)

State legitimacy depends entirely on the goodwill and approval from the inhabitants. If we apply this idea to Liberia, we see that not one government enjoyed this approval from the inhabitants. The distinction between the coastal area and the hinterland is significant for this idea. Since the creation of the Liberian state there has often been a double regime that did not achieve the inclusion of all Liberians.

The extreme fragmentation of the fighting fractions is another indicator of the weak state thesis. Those fractions were often led by a strong individual and, because of its great diversity, never managed to engage a majority of the population. Here I shall focus on Charles Taylor who is considered to be one of the most influential warlords, in his attempt to disrupt the country and the region. As we have seen before, he started his campaign headed for Monrovia as leader of the NPFL in 1989 and won the 1997 elections which put him in the presidential mansion. Even though his insurgency officially started when he (re-)entered Liberia on December 24 1989, his success relied on previous connections and networks. Although the professional core of the NPFL constituted only a small part of the movement, Taylor managed to mobilise people from different backgrounds. As Richards put it, “Taylor was the movement’s charismatic spokesman, but not a soldier” (Richards 1996a: 3). One example is the recruitment of young people who had been excluded from power in the past. By giving them a weapon and the right “to inflict violence” (Reno 1997: 499) and to loot

\(^9\)Mawa, 15/08/2006
where possible, he gave them an opportunity and the means to move upward on the social ladder. In other words, he managed to empower the powerless (or the less powerful) in his attempt to achieve his own personal goals. He did so by controlling different segments of society through his extensive networks, mainly throughout West-Africa but also reaching wider than that. He did not only focus on the control over territory but in addition to gaining control over Greater Liberia he also shifted market forces. He took advantage of the scarcity and disruption after 1991 to gain personal control over national and international trade networks by exploiting the anxieties of foreign investors (Reno 1997: 499). The economic aspect is an important one when analyzing the conflict. William Reno notes that:

“NPFL sponsored commerce threatened local Mandingo traders with ties to the old Doe Regime. This shift in cross-border trade [with Côte d’Ivoire and Sierra Leone] also disrupted arrangements between individual Sierra Leonean officials who dabbled in the illicit diamond industry in Sierra Leone with Mandingo partners.” (Reno 1997: 500)

Mandingo are often marginalised within Liberian society because they are said to originate from Guinea and therefore they are not considered as real Liberians. This idea disregards the fact that they arrived in the region in the eighteenth century and established intense relations through marriage alliances. A more serious concern of many Liberians was probably their control over international trade relations and, the majority of them being Muslims, their religious beliefs (Konneh 1996: 142-143). Because of their precarious position within society and being a target group during the conflict one could conclude that the motive to engage in the fighting was a purely an ethnical one. Reno (1997) points out that there is more to it than that. The control over resources was vital in gaining power and establishing one’s position.

2.2.2 Regional and Global Dynamics

After taking a closer look at national dynamics, I would like to broaden the geographic framework and look at the regional and global context surrounding and influencing the events in Liberia.

From a historical point of view, those connections seem obvious. Although Liberia was never officially a colony of the United States, its ties were very influential. From the beginning the US have always been opposed to colonialism and therefore supported several
revolutionary regimes in Africa to overthrow the European colonial government during the twentieth century in the name of freedom and sovereignty. Liberia appears to be an exception to this ideology. Some Liberians considered themselves the fifty-first state and relied on the goodwill of the US authorities. The constitution drawn up at the foundation of the republic of Liberia by the TWP regime shows several similarities with that of the US. The US connection is also obvious when we look at the ‘lone star’, the national flag that looks a lot like the American one. The coat of arms of Liberia, containing the motto “the love of liberty that brought us here”, refers to the Americo-Liberian settlers. Those are the formal marks of the bond between Liberia and the US, but there are more significant expressions to be found in the political and economic attitudes of both countries toward each other. During the Cold War, for example, the US found a great ally in Liberia. With the overthrow of the TWP regime and the inauguration of Samuel Doe as president in 1980, the US government, with Ronald Reagan as its president, increased its aid. Not primarily out of support for this regime but rather out of fear that communism would reign in Liberia. This shows that besides the strategic value of Liberia the US tended to keep a certain distance. This became painfully clear when the violence returned around 1999. Many Liberians cried for help from the US and symbolically placed dead bodies before the American embassy while US troopers stood there and watched. The world expected an intervention by the US government especially since the UK and France did this quite high-handedly respectively in Sierra Leone and Côte d’Ivoire. But here lies the difference between official colonialism and the historical ties between the US and Liberia. The US government did not seem to fall for the moral obligation some analyst attributed to them – at least not until the resignation of Taylor as president. They even supported the UN sanction on the export of diamonds in the UN Security Council.

The conflict in Liberia was not only constituted by global policies but the direction it took largely depended on regional, West-African developments. Despite earlier attempts to secure control over existing borders they became strategic areas during the war. Reno (1997) argues that the transcendence of territorial boundaries has to do with the involvement of “new political units” or “strongmen” who are able to gather economic and political support, most often by means of violence, because of a weakened state authority or the lack of a strong civil society. One important argument to engage in the ongoing conflict is clearly an economic one. Ellis (1999) points out that the ECOMOG intervention, lead by a majority of Nigerians, had as primary objective the acquisition of security over the ports (Buchanan and

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10 President Tubman was one of the first to launch the idea of founding the Organisation of African Unity (Ellis 1999: 151).
Monrovia’s Freeport) and the control over incoming and outgoing shipments. Personal alliances with neighbouring countries were vital for achieving the goals: a supply of weapons, an operating base near the border, sites of recruitment, financial support, etcetera.

From the historical overview, it is clear that historical ties and alliances that go back to before the conflict emerged proved just as important as the ones made during the conflict. The conflict in Sierra Leone and the organisation of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) would not have happened in the same way without the influence of Charles Taylor. The same goes for the preparations of the attack of the NPFL that entered Liberia from Côte d’Ivoire with the support from the Ivorian president. These relations influenced the events ‘from above’. When looking at dynamics ‘from below’ it is clear that borders are permeable and therefore contextually defined and organised. Richards (1996b) describes the boundary wilderness that divides Liberia and Sierra Leone. Until 1990 the border was often crossed by smugglers in search of a good price for diamonds and other goods. In light of the conflict the author notes that “the uncontrolled character of this international border, and the history, social organization and resource base of the communities in and around its central boundary wilderness, help to explain how and why the RUF was able to secure an initial foothold and why […] this dissident movement was so difficult to dislodge” (Richards 1996b: 209). This means that relations on both sides of the border influenced, and therefore contributed to, the complexity of the regional context.

2.2.3 Social and Cultural Interpretations of the Conflict

Finally, after shedding my light on the national and international (geo-) politic-historical dynamics, I want to take a closer look at the social and cultural aspects of the civil war. To do this I shall also reflect on the use of violence since the conflict was often said to be exceptionally atrocious. For my analysis I draw on literature that discusses these issues from different perspectives. I look at how others interpret these dynamics and where they see a focal point from which the conflict emerged. My focus here is on two fronts. The first is the religious component that influenced the conflict. The second are the social relations as they existed before the war which drove marginalised groups to active participation in the conflict.

Let me start by pointing out that since the introduction of Christianity and Islam creolization occurred. In this analysis I cannot work with a strict distinction between the different religious persuasions. Many of the ‘indigenous believers’ also adopted certain aspects of those ‘new’ religions and converted to Christianity or Islam. We can speak of a
mutual assimilation of religious practices (Ellis 2000: 80). One example from my fieldwork confirms this idea. When I attended the inter-religious council – a peace building initiative that brings the different religious beliefs together – in Zorzor members of the organisation asked the attendants to divide themselves into groups based on religious beliefs (the different categories presented were Christianity, Islam, Traditional Beliefs and youth). This immediately raised questions of what to do when one belonged to different categories\textsuperscript{11}. The presumption that ethnic identity and religion correlate stems from a determinist approach to the politics of identity. One Mandingo man had to defend himself when he got angry reactions from other Mandingo, of whom the majority are Muslim, because he and his family had converted to Christianity\textsuperscript{12}.

Apart from the influence of Christianity and Islam, some attribute the most pertinent and extensive sphere of influence to the secret societies. The most widespread of all secret societies, especially in North-West Liberia, is the Poro society and its female counterpart, the Sande society. Both institutions are initiation societies for young adults who are about to make the transition from youth to adulthood. All this happens under the supervision of the elders in society and the priests known as Zoes. This initiation rite takes place in the bush where outsiders are not allowed. The strongest image is that of the Bush Devil, which is said to eat the initiates. Therefore Poro business is said to be ‘eating business’. The period of initiation, which could take several years, was seriously shortened because of the civil war (Ellis 1999: 224-225). One of my informants in Voinjama was initiated into the Sande society and her initiation took only three weeks because she was going to school at the time. By contrast that the initiation of her mother took about a whole year\textsuperscript{13}.

Both Poro and Sande are labelled secret societies, but since almost everybody in the town knows who went through the initiation and who did not this label is rather surprising. When I asked my informant why she went through the initiation she told me her mother advised her to do so because then she would be respected by the community\textsuperscript{14}. This is another sign of the openness and the importance of the process. For the sake of convention I shall handle this term throughout my analysis. It is interesting to note that the secret societies have always been both political and religious in nature. This was certainly the case when the system of indirect rule was introduced in Liberia. At that time, opportunities arose for individuals, rather than for groups, to get involved in local and national politics because of the

\textsuperscript{11} Zorzor: 08/08/2006
\textsuperscript{12} For a more detailed account of this event I refer to my analysis in chapter 4.
\textsuperscript{13} Fatuma, 25/09/2006
\textsuperscript{14} Fatuma, 25/09/2006
fact that their sphere of influence was seriously broadened. This political influence became
crystal clear when Samuel Doe joined the Poro society after he renounced his claim to power
in 1980. Even Charles Taylor was a Poro initiate. During my fieldwork one local journalist
told me in an informal interview – which was therefore not less serious – that it is practically
impossible to become president of Liberia without being initiated in a secret society15.

Engaging in the conflict in Liberia was mainly about the accumulation of power on all
different levels, from the youngest soldiers to the biggest warlords. In the process of
accumulating power the secret societies and their knowledge played a very important role. Or
as Stephen Ellis describes it:

“There is a certainly abundant evidence that religious beliefs in the broadest sense
have affected the way in which fighters have behaved. [...] Some smeared their faces
with the white clay they called leh, a practice associated with people in contact with
the spirit world, such as in Poro rituals. [...] Transvestism is often taken as a
demonstration of the strength of a warrior, containing an element of wildness, an
ability to transcend established genres. [...] Some sources claim that such cross-
dressing is traditionally used as a sign of the dangerously liminal status during the
passage from boyhood to manhood, in which case its use by adolescents setting out on
the essentially adult business of making war is not surprising.” (Ellis 1999: 259-260)

War in this sense can be seen as an alternative initiation in adulthood for young fighters.
There are however some remarks to make about this interpretation. This analysis draws on
historical precedents that determine actions in the present context. I argue that this ‘return’ to
the past cannot be seen as absolute because it leaves out the role of imagination that leads to
this recontextualisation. The context in which these events occur is vital in the light of further
interpretation. As I mentioned before (cf. chapter 1), the social reality is a product of
articulations uttered in representations and discourse. The link fighters see with the practice of
secret societies can therefore be seen as a reinvention of tradition since “inventing traditions
[...] is essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to
the past, if only by imposing repetition” (Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983: 4). Højbjerg (2005)
goes into the relation between political violence and ritual performance among the Loma
people in northwestern Liberia. He warns analysts not to draw premature conclusions that
lead to a causal link between traditional religion and the violence that occurs during the

15 Charles, 02/08/2006
A general question that comes up when discussing social practises related to political and symbolic violence concerns legitimacy. This legitimacy is an important claim in acquiring power over the use of violence during the conflict. Here as well, the secret societies had a certain influence. The Poro initiation contained certain aspects that are not in conformity with the Christian principles. One example is the consumption of human flesh during the ceremony. To understand how the conflict developed and why certain practices happened the way they did we may not lift those events out of their historical context but need to look at their roots (Ellis 2003). If we do that we come to the conclusion that the extreme violence was certainly influenced by religious beliefs but more because “it served the fighter’s purpose”, to intimidate others than because these practises are imbedded in the local culture.

The second issue I want to highlight here is the impact the conflict had on previously existing social relations. My aim here is to present certain social dynamics briefly. Firstly I shall present some general ideas on the negotiation of social relations and, secondly, I shall apply these thoughts to the Liberian context. This section serves as a bridge to the next chapter where I look at the position of Liberian youth throughout history and with special attention for its role in the conflict. Most issues I address in this chapter return from the historical overview I presented at the beginning of this chapter.

Foucault opened the way to study social dynamics in the field of power by introducing the notion of governmentality which encloses both a top-down and a bottom-up analysis. He notes that power is not to be equated with the access to or the effectuation of violence. Violence is only one way of defining power. Power is to be identified as a series of actions performed on the actions and reactions of others. Foucault talks about the link between power and the access to knowledge that allows one to dominate the other. Following Foucault, many scholars apply his observations to knowledge and power, for instance to the notion of development (Escobar 1988, Ferguson 1990). These analysts argue that discourse is a powerful tool to shape social reality and therefore power relations are often based on fictitious categories. Edelman (2002) acknowledges that discourse does categorize people, although those categories do not always reflect reality. Edelman argues that, contrary to the Foucaultian tradition, the categories generated by discourse by those in power do not count unconditionally. He attributes the subaltern the capacity “to appropriate labels (and more complex discourses) and infuse them with new and often positive meanings” (Edelman 2002: 410). If we bear Edelman’s remark in mind and think of the question postulated by Spivak (1995), namely whether or not the subaltern can speak, one possible answer can be provided. Several authors have made clear that the subaltern are not completely powerless but dispose
the ability to accumulate economic, cultural and social capital they can invest according to their interests (Bourdieu 1992). One could say that ‘speak’ is the only thing the subaltern are not able or allowed to do. Many scholars have shown that through the accumulation of capital there are many other ways in which they “challenge, escape or subvert” (Arnaut 2004, 325) the ruling ideology. Warfare can be considered one of the ultimate means to change existing social relations. In order to be able to renegotiate relations or redefine identities in a post-conflict context one assumes that, due to the conflict, the previously existing relations no longer exist or at least they no longer manifest to both the in- and outsider. It is highly relevant to approach and analyse the dynamics from the point of view of the subjects engaging in actions. Sall (2004) also notes the importance of the interpretation of identities in this process.

In her ethnography of democracy and violence in Liberia, Moran (2006) devotes several chapters to the interpretation of the struggles over place and identity in Liberia. Her book goes against the idea that both place and identity are natural categories but rather constantly shifting and complex. When discussing the process of nation building in Liberia she argues that the distinction between nationalism and ethnicity is too often reduced to that between modern and traditional as if they are never reconcilable. In Liberia the denominator ‘civilization’ served as a tool to distinguish between the traditional Liberians who privileged ties of ethnic affiliation and civilized Liberians whose primary allegiance was to the nation-state (Moran 2006: 75). The author sees Liberian nationalism as a projection of the state which leads her to say that, with a term introduced by Anderson (1983), Liberian nationalism is official: it is marked by ‘civilization’ as defined by the American settlers (Moran 2006: 78). However, the use of ‘civilization’ as a marker to draw the line between the settlers and the indigenous people is neither rigid nor everlasting. There came a shift in identity when the term ‘civilized’ came to be used locally. “Each of Liberia’s indigenous ethnic groups developed its own sector of civilized natives whose connections to noncivilized kin and friends […] take a variety of forms” (ibid: 80). Religion here was an important aspect of that ‘civilized’ identity. At several occasions and encounters they now openly challenged the settlers’ claim of superiority. The claim that one could be both civilized and native countered the dominant position of Monrovia. This shift in identity was only possible because of the...
vague overlap between the terms native and civilized (ibid: 97). Moran concludes by stating that:

“The civilized/native divide is neither stable nor unitary. Indeed, for most rural communities, the human “face of the state” is not a member of the Monrovia elite with an American pedigree, but a “civilized native” with local ties and kinship obligations. Such people […] can be benevolent patrons who dispense funds at development rallies and give gifts of latrines to their home communities, or they can be malevolent heartmen, literally tearing the life from children in their drive for power.” (Moran 2006: 157)

With the coup by Samuel Doe in 1980, the settlers’ dominance is brought to an end. At first Doe tried to take on the image of being civilized. By 1986, when opposition and political pressure rose, he found that upholding this image could eventually turn against him. Therefore Doe moved away from the idea of ‘civilization’ and fell back on ethnicity as the main category to define status. This strategic essentializing of ethnic identities led to a shift which would further determine the struggle over power in Liberia since opposition movements would organize themselves along ethnic lines.

The key here is that social categories and identities are never natural but that the articulation of identity constitute power relations and that these relations are never stable or fixed but rather always complex and open for (re-)negotiation.
Chapter Three: Youth and the Production of Identity in a Historical Perspective

In the second chapter I sketched an ‘identity-less’ history of Liberia to introduce the historical context in which the social and political transformations occurred that lead to the violent conflict in the eighties up till 2003. In this chapter I shall go back in time and look at the production of identity throughout the history of Liberia. In doing so I shall pay special attention to one particular group – youth – that is relevant for the remaining part of my analysis based on the data I collected during my fieldwork. The category of youth, which I present here, is approached from different perspectives. Firstly I shall present some general ideas regarding the category of youth within social science. After this I shall take a closer look at their position in Liberian society. In a second part I intend to present those ideas which are relevant for their position in a context of violent conflict. First from a more general, theoretical perspective and subsequently applying those insights specifically in the context of the Liberian civil war. In this last section, I shall begin with discussing the reasons why young people engage in fighting. After that I shall look at the production of identity of combatant youth and point to the flexibility and importance of the context within which these identities are articulated. Finally, I shall look at how these identities are articulated in everyday practices. In a third section I intend to look at the position of non-combatant youth. I only address this issue briefly because this category too often falls outside the scope of academic research concerning young people in a context of conflict.

Over the last years a lot of research on both the position of youth and that of combatants in (violent) conflicts has been conducted. This is especially true in the African context. I shall therefore not limit this overview to the geographical boundaries of Liberia but also include comparable material that may point out significant similarities and differences in other regions in Africa. Most of the material I use will be on the conflict in Sierra Leone, which, as I showed in the second chapter, shows similar developments and even has a direct connection with that in Liberia. When using comparative material, it is necessary to consider the specific context in which the described developments occurred. I shall therefore elaborate on this where necessary.

Apart from academic literature I find it valuable to include what I would call popular publications on the topics I address. Although this type of literature mainly focuses on the identity of combatants, youth gain more attention from the outsider perspective. It appears
that a lot of people, from policy makers over news agencies to writers of fiction, are concerned with the issue of the recruitment of young people in war. I find it relevant to include those opinions in my analysis because it enriches the picture I shall sketch in this overview. In particular because Stuart Hall (1990) argues that the question of identity is always a question of representations. These representations add to the perception and establishment of the possible connection that can be achieved in a certain field of social forces.

3.1 On Youth

3.1.1 Youth as a Social Category

Before discussing the position of youth within the Liberian society, it is important to elaborate on the definition of youth. Within the field of African studies, this is an old discussion that has not necessarily led to a consensus on the position of youth. I shall, for this chapter, not recapitulate all of the arguments that have been presented over time but rather discuss only those contributions which are relevant for my analysis.

Youth and the related term generation are about more than just age. We have come a long way since the time when youth was considered to be merely one stage within a bigger teleological frame where ‘to be old’ forms the endpoint. Youth in this sense is merely ascribed to be a preparatory stage before entering adulthood where real life is said to start. The social interpretation of the concept of youth goes much further. This implies that, if one wants to talk about youth, there has to be room left for the role of social imagination and the negotiation of identity. The category youth never emerges in a social and political void. It is therefore important to pay attention to the ongoing hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces that constitute the broader social field (Durham 2000: 113). In other words: attention has to be paid to the social and political space within which young people (re)presents themselves as homogeneous. In the light of the theoretical frame I set out in chapter one it is relevant to approach youth as an identity category. Arnaut (2004) claims that youth, from this perspective, can be “seen as the temporal and local outcome in hegemonic struggles of subjectification and power distribution” (Arnaut 2004: 324). In the analysis of youth as a social category it is therefore important to “attempt to foreground the ways in which youth negotiate the structures, ideologies or discourses that attempt to shape or position them” (ibid: 326).
The history of the emergence of youth as a social category in Liberia is not extensively covered in academic research. In what follows, I will present the publications that are relevant in the light of my remaining analysis (cf. chapter 4). If, as some argue (e.g. Utas 2003), the conflict in Liberia can be seen, at least from the perspective of the youth, as a revolution through which those at the margins of society manage to move up and enter the centre through acquiring power mainly by means of violence, it is interesting to look at how and in what ways those groups lived at the margins. What opportunities were denied to them and what were they prepared to fight for.

3.1.2 Youth in Liberia

Here I shall reflect on the position of youth in Liberian society. For my analysis, I draw on the work of William Murphy (1980) who looks at the relations between youth and elders in the context of the secret society in the Kpelle society in north-western Liberia. Murphy notes that secret societies are well-organised institutions with a strong hierarchical structure. The main difference between those on top of the hierarchical ladder and those at the bottom is the access to knowledge. In this structure knowledge is owned and therefore implies power. The relevant knowledge is situated on two main fronts. The first is the one we can translate as ‘medicinal’ knowledge that “generally refers to substances, utterances, actions, and even organisations which are believed to possess unusual powers” (Murphy 1980: 197). A second kind of knowledge that is owned is historical knowledge. The relevant history needed here is not a very general knowledge of historical facts but rather a “specific recent history of individual families who settled in a particular area. Family and local community history is crucial knowledge because it bears on important questions of immediate concern: property rights and political position” (idem). From the perspective of the young people going through the initiation it is important to learn to respect the boundaries of knowledge in fear of retribution or punishment. This implies that, apart from their power over knowledge, the elders in the Kpelle society also hold power over violence and fear to impose a certain loyalty. On top of the power over knowledge, the elders also control aspects of labour and service through the practical training in the ‘bush school’ sessions. The extensive influence of the elders in both the secret and the secular world allows us to conclude that young people in general are excluded from access to power and are put at the margins while elders strengthen their leading position in society. Murphy’s view is quite negative from the perspective of the youth. His analysis is set ‘from above’ and pays little attention to how young people cope.
with the way they are coerced into their subaltern position. The interpretation presented leaves little room to acknowledge any flexibility regarding their position. The author claims that the practical education that is part of both Poro and Sande initiation and information are merely notes in the margin. The main objective is to increase the fear and the respect towards elders in society. He concludes therefore that:

“[t]he resulting image of Kpelle elders is not one of benevolent, wise old men who pass on hallowed cultural traditions to the young. Rather, it is one of calculating elders who withhold more than they teach and use claims on withheld knowledge to keep the young under their thumbs.” (Murphy 1980: 204)

Moran (2006) also pays attention to the position of youth by looking at the age/military systems that structure social life in south-eastern Liberia where Poro and Sande societies are not present. Rather than looking at these systems as constituting a strict gerontocracy she argues they operate as “a system of checks and balances which ensures the participation and voice of people in various social locations” (Moran 2006: 144). The different age grades allow participation of men and women of all ages within the frame of the town political organization. The authority of elders over young people is therefore neither absolute nor uncontested. Young men held power over the use of military force while elders controlled the spiritual power. This implies that both were able to enforce their interests in their own terms since both forms of power were seen as legitimate. “The age-structured hierarchies of the southeast look, from this perspective, more like a bureaucracy designed to ensure collective rights of unequal groups than a patrimonial or patronage system dominated by gerontocratic elders” (Moran 2006: 150).

In her age- and gender-sensitive analysis she does, in contrast to Murphy’s interpretation, acknowledge that the relations between elders and young people always intertwine in a social terrain that is never solid, stable or transparent.

3.2 On Youth in Conflict

As I stated in chapter two, following Richards (1996a), conflict can be seen as a social project among other social projects. This holds several consequences towards social and political relations. The aim of this thesis is to discuss the position of ‘ex-combatants’ and youth in post-conflict Liberia within a broader field of social forces (cf. chapter 4). The distinction between both categories, however, is not always clear since the category of ‘ex-combatants’
was introduced ‘from above’ while the category of ‘youth’ emerged ‘from below’ after the official end of the conflict. During the conflict, many of the combatants belonged to the category of youth. As will become clear in the following chapter (cf. chapter 4) both categories articulate their identity as significantly different during my fieldwork, in a post-conflict situation. This section shows how both categories cannot be separated by a clear line. This is no surprise since I approach identity categories not as rigorous and rigid but rather as a production and a positioning which is always open to negotiation. Before turning to the category of young combatants engaging in the fighting in Liberia I shall briefly discuss the position of youth in conflict in general. This is relevant because many scholars, especially within the field of African Studies, see a significant relation between the category of youth and the emergence of violent conflict that influences the occurring events in a different context.

3.2.1 General Assumptions Addressing the Position of Youth in Conflict

The conflict in Liberia was largely infused by the inclusion of previously discriminated and marginalised groups. Therefore, I shall focus on one of these groups, namely Liberian youth, who adopted what some call “the Kalashnikov-Lifestyle” (Reno 1997: 496) to achieve an upward social mobility. To back up my material I shall also include comparative material from interpretations that deal with the conflict in Sierra Leone.

In his analysis of the conflict in Sierra Leone Paul Richards (1996a) notes that this quest for social legitimacy is certainly part of the reason why young people engaged in the fighting. He argues that we cannot attribute youth a certain nonagency or subaltern position as opposed to the ‘big men’ orchestrating the rebel insurrections. It appears that young people were much more than ‘loose molecules’, they were well informed and fully aware of new developments thanks to the different media that reached them.

“We should think twice before too hastily concluding that rebels feed Rambo films to their young conscripts as an incitement to mindless violence. It seems more likely that such films are intended to support a political analysis about the wider society’s neglect of the creative potential of the young.” (Richards 1996a: 114)

Mats Utas (2003) comes to a similar conclusion in his analysis of the conflict in Liberia from 1989 till 1997 with special attention for the reintegration of former fighters. He notes that:
“[...] young people also saw it [the war] as a youth revolution, a possibility to get rid of an elitist urban leadership make up of autocrats who showed little concern for both the young people of Liberia […], and the local gerontocratic leadership […]. In this way, war was fought by marginalised youth who saw hostilities as possibly the only opportunity for them to experience mobility from the margins, into the centre of politics and economy.” (Utas 2003: 15)

Both interpretations can be seen in the context of the existing patrimonial relations of dependency and clientalism. As we have seen before, the absence of a strong state structure, which is supposed to engender the patrimony of the elite, enabled different ‘big men’ to accumulate different kinds of power in different domains within society. Those big men did not only exist on a national level, you could (and still can) find them in all different segments of society. Here I shall focus on the relations between military big men and their relations with the young soldiers. Murphy (2003) distinguishes three clientelist models of child soldier behaviour. Of which the first one is the “coerced youth” model that looks at the soldiers as victims. The second one is labelled the “revolutionary youth” model that corresponds with the ideas presented by Mats Utas above. A third model is the “delinquent youth” model in which child soldiers are regarded as “opportunists exploiting the economic spoils of social turmoil”. Murphy argues that these three models are not covering all aspects of child soldiers’ social reality. In a fourth model, the “youth clientalism” model, we are able to consider “how child soldiers manage their dependency and agency within an institutional structure of repressive patrimonialism in which their subordination to adults is based on a cruel mixture of brutality, personal benevolence, and reciprocity” (Murphy 2003: 64-65).

It is a well-known fact that many young soldiers were forced to join the fighting fractions. For others it was the only option since all of their family members had been killed and they had no one to support them. The responsibility of the big men, however, reached further than the recruitment of new fighters and the presumed dependency that is often said to be characteristic of the relation. It was not uncommon to hear stories from young soldiers that commanders served as a substitute father but in return for the received protection young soldiers, literally, had to give it their best shot during combat. Despite the patrimonial relations it is necessary to consider the agency of the fighters.

There is a need to approach youth as both “makers and breakers in society” (Utas 2003: 125). This implies that, as makers, they help construct the ruling norms and assumptions. On the other hand, as breakers, they are capable of changing, appropriating or destroying those norms and assumptions. If we include the analysis as presented by William Murphy (2003) into this framework we can see that besides being “makers and breakers”,
they are also “broken” (Utas 2003: 125) by outside factors. Ellis (1999) claims that young Liberians are above all on a quest for what they lacked the most: ‘power’. The quotation marks here refer to the fact that power cannot be interpreted in the conventional political sense, but rather has to be seen as the kind of power that has its origins in “the invisible world”. According to Ellis, young people in Liberia go without the possibility to prosper (Ellis 1999: 286). Young men and boys, for example, had only limited access to material wealth to get prepared to get married, start a family and settle down. This was frustrating because those things are the essential boundaries that constitute the difference between young people and elders. From this perspective, one could interpret the movement from the Liberian hinterland (the bush) to Monrovia (urban) as a shift from the margins to the centre both in territorial and in social terms. Life in the capital was envisaged to include a certain level of luxury and wealth that was absent in the countryside. In many analyses Monrovia, being the capital of Liberia, also represents the centre of political life while the Liberian hinterland is the political periphery. While life in the bush was said to be harsh, life in the city was a lot more comfortable. One ‘ex-combatant’ in Voinjama explained me why, for example, Charles Taylor’s troops in the capital incorporated child soldiers which were much younger than the child soldiers that fought in the bush. According to him, the LURD for which he fought never recruited children younger than fourteen years of age because life was hard in the bush without shelter and food. Life in the city however was much better because you could always find something to eat and a safe place to sleep. That is why the child soldiers in Monrovia were much younger. From this perspective many young people might have believed that life in the capital held the opportunities they lacked back home.

3.2.2 Combatants and Identity

The position of combatants engaging in violent conflict has both for insiders and outside observers often been a point of discussion. One reason why this could be the case is that, as we shall see, the category of combatants is never an uncontested and homogenous one. Another reason why the way this group is perceived is not one-sided has to do with the perspective from which this group is approached. A victim of the atrocities committed by the fighting fractions will, for example, experience the occurring event different from the reporter who encounters the war from a non-aligned perspective. The aim here is to give voice to those

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17 Kollie, 12/09/2006
different opinions that together bring forth a picture of the diversity and complexity of ‘combatant identity’ rather than an all-encompassing ‘one fit all’ model.

In 2001 author Ahmadou Kourouma published a novel bearing the title: ‘Allah is not obliged’ (Allah n’est pas obligé). In this work he describes life from the perspective of a boy called Birahima who travels from Côte d’Ivoire to Liberia and Sierra Leone in search of his aunt after the death of both his parents. On his way he comes in contact with different characters who give an idea of the variety of identities within the category of combatants. We also notice a changing and constantly adapting attitude of the main character as he gains experience throughout the story. In this section I shall illustrate this variety by means of this work of fiction which will serve as a guide to indicate certain issues. For the elaboration of my interpretations I turn to academic literature and the stories I came across during my fieldwork. My main focus here is on the role of young combatants and I shall therefore not go into detail on the role of elders in battle in this section.

A first characteristic which the reader notices from the first passage of the book is the specific language used by the main character. Birahima introduces himself in six points. He for example points out that he left school after fifth grade. Not because he had to but because he believed a degree did not offer the promising opportunities that it was supposed to. This might suggest that the majority of young people engaging in the fighting were school dropouts or were not educated at all. There is however abundant evidence that education was a valuable asset during combat (see Richards 1996a, Hoffman 2003). Education here is to be interpreted not in a narrow sense that focuses on going to school but rather in a broad sense in which traditional educational systems are included. During the fighting, warlords also made promises to their fighters concerning education in the sense that they could receive scholarships to attend schools when the conflict was over (e.g. Utas 2003). Education also turned out to be an asset which helped to achieve a fast reintegration after the conflict.

Kourouma’s main character, Birahima, also introduces the interesting contradiction regarding the fact that he is only a child and that the reader should therefore forgive his attitude while, on the other hand, he thinks of himself as stubborn, brutal, rude, and strong. Those are reasons why the reader should take him seriously and recognise his actions. We find the same attitude in the testimony of a child soldier who participated in the war in Sierra Leone but now lives in the United States. After he managed to escape from the fighting fraction he ended up in a shelter where he tells one of the staff members his story:
“When I finished telling Esther the story, she had tears in her eyes, and she couldn't decide whether to rub my head, a traditional gesture indicating that things would be well, or hug me. In the end she did neither but said: "None of what happened was your fault. You were just a little boy, and anytime you want to tell me anything, I am here to listen." She stared at me, trying to catch my eye so she could assure me of what she had just said. I became angry and regretted that I had told someone, a civilian, about my experience. I hated the "It is not your fault" line that all the staff members said every time anyone spoke about the war.”18 (my emphasis)

The concept of combatants as pure victims of the situation, as ‘Esther’s’ in the testimony presented above, is upheld by many organizations in the west or those involved with the rehabilitation of those young people in the field. Many scholars counter these ideas by arguing that the majority of the fighters are to be taken seriously in what they do and think. Although the idea that children are to be considered as rational social agents is not new in social science19, it seems that this is difficult to accept for some, especially in a context of violent conflict. Paul Richards is one of the most important defenders of the idea that the involvement of youth in the conflict in Sierra Leone has to be recognized as strategic and well contrived. In his article with Krijn Peters (1998) he literally gives voice to the combatants and concludes that “they have an at times quite surprisingly mature understanding of their predicament” (Peters and Richards 1998: 184).

In the academic literature as well as in the approach from the international community towards young combatants there is often a strict distinction made between child soldiers and other young people. This distinction is introduced mainly ‘from above’ by international policy makers because they believe this is a particularly vulnerable group that needs special attention in post conflict reconstruction (cf. chapter 4). The image of child soldiers is further reduced to that of a victim drawn into the conflict by others – elders. The special attention that is given to these children is often based on psychologistic or human rights frameworks which are infused with western perceptions of childhood (Shepler 2005a: 76). In the case of Sierra Leone, Shepler, suggests to start from a Sierra Leonean perception of childhood to interpret the practice of child soldiering. She then sees certain historical continuities that lead to a better understanding of this phenomenon. She argues for instance that child labor can be linked to the recruitment of children by the fighting factions. The majority of child soldiers’ first assignments consisted of carrying out jobs that were part of their primary every day practices.

19 See, for example, Argenti (2001).
like fetching water or cooking. This was not only the case with the rebel forces but also a common practice with the government troops (Shepler 2005a: 86-89). An even more relevant historical continuity the author identifies is that of those children who were soldiers before the term child soldier existed20. Different moments in the history of Sierra Leone correspond with different types of ‘soldiers’. From pre-colonial ‘war boys’ who were skilled warriors operating as mercenaries who terrorized the areas they controlled (Siddle 1968, cited in Shepler 2006: 8) over the ‘youngmen’ during the period of colonization when violence by young people emerged from a wider political discontent and the ‘APS thugs’ and the ‘NPRC’ in respectively the early and late independence when children are used as political instruments to enforce oppression. The author concludes by stating that “there is a well-defined identity, shifting in name and shifting in political alliance, but always present” (Shepler 2006: 19). In her analysis there is a strong emphasis on the historical continuity. I believe it to be equally important to note the historical discontinuities and shifting interpretation of young ‘soldiers’ here. These shifts point out the capability to cope with the changing historical context and renegotiate their position through articulation.

Closely related to the issue of child soldiers is the issue whether most young soldiers were forced to join the fighting forces or whether they chose to pick up arms. In Kourouma’s story Birahima’s position is quite clear. After the death of his parents he leaves his village in Côte d’Ivoire in search of his aunt in Liberia. In the beginning of his trip he is all alone and he identifies himself as a ‘street urchin’. On his way he meets some other loners who are wandering around, each in search of something else. When a friend tells him about the fact that, once incorporated as a soldier, street urchins receive everything they want he cannot wait to join any fraction.

“Those small-soldiers had everything. They had Kalashnikovs. […] Besides those Kalashnikovs the child soldiers had plenty of things. They had money, even American dollars. They had shoes, stripes on their sleeves, radio’s, hats, and even cars they sometimes call fourwheeldrives. […] I wanted to go to Liberia. Fast, fast. I wanted to be a child soldier, a small-soldier.” (Kourouma 2001: 42, my translation)

During my fieldwork I also encountered some ‘ex-combatants’ who voluntarily chose to actively engage in the fighting during the war. One example is an eighteen year old boy who fought for ULIMO during the war. Today he is a registered ‘ex-combatant’ (cf. chapter 4) who attends the formal education program and a skills training program in soap making.

20 According to Shepler (2006) the term child soldier became a problem for the international community since the late nineteen eighties.
Although he does not believe it will happen, he admitted that if the war would come to Liberia again, he would certainly pick up arms\textsuperscript{21}. The fact that many of them chose to fight supports the idea that they are to be considered as more than just victims. As Utas (2003) describes it, youth participation in the Liberian conflict had something of a revolution. They fought against a lack of opportunities. They tried to escape the power of big men. Ironically, by joining the forces – any fighting fraction that is – they again became subject to other big man. One example Utas identifies is the young men’s relative impossibility to engage in sustainable relations with women. By gaining status and respect as a strong fighter, they gain the privilege to have a – and often more than one – girlfriend. In general he argues that “[y]outh participation in the Liberian Civil War must be seen as means of strategic upward mobility, aiming at obtaining respect and status by turning society’s power structure upside down” (Utas 2003: 231). The problem here is that this resistance only proved successful in the short run. Once the conflict was over, “marginal souls are once again deported to the margins” (idem). The general question Utas asks is whether the ‘ex-combatants’ achieve reintegration once the conflict is over or whether they have to deal with remarginalisation in society. Utas’ analysis focuses on the period 1997-1999. As my analysis in the next chapter shows I believe the context has changed considerably. Therefore I shall adapt this question so that it corresponds to the changes that have occurred since then. The same idea that youth participating in conflict can be seen as a reaction against the lack of opportunities in society had been introduces a few years earlier by Paul Richards in the context of the conflict in Sierra Leone. His stance came as a critique of the ‘new-barbarism’ thesis which claims that young people act as ‘loose molecules’ (e.g. Kaplan 1994: 46). In short we can say that those young people are able to absorb and understand what happens around them in a way that allows them to take sides, to take a stance and to act according to their perceptions and experiences.

The evolution of Birahima, Kourouma’s main character, throughout the story also demonstrates this idea. The fact that he is not very loyal to the groups he is fighting alongside and always keeps finding his aunt by any means necessary a primary objective shows that he acts as a knowing agent. This image is strengthened by the fact that every time he encounters a new group or fraction he is able to give a history of that group and describe what they stand for. At a certain point in the story he decides he wants to join the ULIMO because they occupy the area where his aunt supposedly resides. He knew that if he and his friends wanted

\textsuperscript{21} Mamadi, 17/07/2006
to join the ULIMO they had to make sure they had the right name because “only Krahn and Guérés were allowed to join the ULIMO” (Kourouma 2001: 85, my translation). This shows the situational emergence of the identity of combatants. In Voinjama I also spoke to an ‘ex-combatant’ who explained to me how he was forced to join Charles Taylor’s NPFL after they killed his parents. From their on he often switched camps and ended up fighting for Ulimo-G and the LURD forces. After showing me the scars in his neck and his belly (which resulted from a fight in 2005) he stated that he had no choice other than to “fight or die”\(^\text{22}\). This example shows how they play with the boundaries of their identity and articulate certain aspects of that identity to establish a certain connection required by the context. Although the information is not always correct, they manage to adapt their position to the context as it presents itself. In times of conflict when official institutions lose their efficiency and control, new rules emerge that need to be adopted.

Another issue I would like to address here is something that struck Birahima in the story of Kourouma. He observes that “the strangest thing is that even girls can be child soldiers […]. There are not that many. But they are the cruellest” (Kourouma 2000: 51, my translation). The idea here is that most – especially outside – observers have an image of a boy or a man when they think of fighters. Richards notes that, in Sierra Leone, women were regularly recruited both by the RUF and the NPFL and that they managed to occupy relatively powerful positions (Richards 1996a: 89). Their recruitment was by no means an exception and the positions they occupied were very diverse. Some were recruited as sex slaves for a commander while others had to stay close to him and received ensured protection in return. Many girls were recruited to serve as cook for the fighting troops. They were not always powerless objects serving in the given structure. Some of the women who gained considerable status and respect, either through fighting or because of their relations to big men, used their power for their own well-being. As Schepler (2005a) notes: “young women often had to do a lot of work around the camp but managed to delegate the work to the legions of young boys who were ready to do the work for them” (Schepler 2005a: 238). Tolerance towards the behaviour of women engaging in the war was generated because of the different contexts in which they tried to find a place. Having to leave their house and family or choosing to do so, created a sphere of acceptance. The key issue many young women had to deal with during the war was to figure out how to react to the changing circumstances. Utas (2003) sees an interesting dialectic relation between victimization and agency at work in the actions and

\(^{22}\) James, 24/07/2006
reactions of women engaging in war. His analysis shows how women negotiate their position in society according to the surrounding context. It is clear however that their position to engage in this process of negotiation is never totally free. This becomes painfully clear in a first group identified by Utas, namely the group in which women turn out to be complete victims overpowered by their male counterparts, which results too often in physical and above all sexual abuse. The choice to be part of a group that was actively involved in fighting, without necessarily fighting themselves, was not an easy choice for some young women. Here the idea of negotiation is more appropriate than for the former group. However, the position they are put in is not always a ‘fair’ one. The big men who could offer them protection had to be chosen quite carefully since harassment was always lurking around the corner. As a girl you better chose a high ranked soldier because it could be said that the motto ‘the higher the rank, the higher the level of security’ counted as a rule.

Almost at the opposite end of the position of the victim, we find what Utas describes as women “in fatigues”. Some women, as mentioned before, voluntarily and convinced of what they wanted to achieve, chose to fight. Both the NPFL and the INPFL are said to have had special female units (Utas 2003: 209). From the testimonies included in Utas’ analysis it becomes clear that female combatants were just as fearful as their male counterparts. In conclusion we can say that the line between victim and perpetrator is not an uncontested one. It is shown that both characteristics can be attributed to the same person, depending on the context in which one finds oneself. Despite the assumption that the battlefield was no place for women their presence was very diverse and contributed considerably to the occurred developments.

3.2.3 Identity and the Logic of Practice

Identity is expressed through everyday practices. A lot has been said and written about the practices applied by combatants in Liberia and West-Africa in general. Many analysts were shocked learning about the horrifying level of violence and the atrocities committed throughout the war. Another example that struck outsiders as awkward was that many male fighters dressed up as women before going to battle. Rather than just ascribing these practices to the fact that many of these young fighters acted as irrational beings, I find it important to sketch the contextual frame surrounding these events. My aim here is not to present an apologetic analysis nor do I claim to be able to understand everything that happened. I intend
rather to approach these practices with an open mind and present a different possible interpretation.

To write off the atrocious practices and extreme violence that occurred during the conflict as incited by cultural determinism is a moral conviction that does not lead to a reasonable explanation. Instead, violence can be perceived as a means of gaining power and control. In his analysis of the violence that occurred in the Liberian conflict, Mats Utas (2003) turns to everyday violence in Liberian society to frame the practices as they occurred during the war. He argues that an aspect of mimicry of that everyday violence occurred during the war. I mentioned before that Liberian society can generally be considered as a gerontocratic one where elders are in control. Their control also includes the control over the use of violence. In an everyday context, Utas identifies several settings where this violence can occur. A first form is violence related to the initiation in secret societies that correlates with the analysis of the work by Murphy (1980) presented above. A second form of violence is the violence used as a means of sanctioning children. This can include flogging or food withdrawal, which could serve as an illustration of the relation between eating and power\textsuperscript{23}. A third setting where Utas notifies us of the presence of violence is in the educational system. And a last place where violence can be situated is in the context of fosterage where children spend their time in a different town than their own if they are to go to school.

Although in all previous situations, young people are victims of the situation, Utas highlights another side to this story as well. This side is what he calls ‘the rascal mode’. This group is also referred to as \textit{Grona boys}\textsuperscript{24} and is often attributed a strong and active ego. The violence directed towards them serves as a counter-hegemonic source because of the less outspoken hegemony in this traditional society, especially compared to that of secret societies. Utas claims that:

\begin{quote}
“if the ideal trajectory is to persist within a violent system, to accept the beatings, floggings and other techniques of ritualised violence, the pseudo-social trajectory to grow up and to reach adult acceptance, would be to go \textit{groan}. The Liberian war was a period of massive \textit{groan-fication}; i.e. youth branching off from a mainstream social trajectory, instead following the one which was pseudo-social.” (Utas 2003: 138, emphasis in original)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{23} See, for example: Last, Murray 2000 ‘Children and the experience of violence: contrasting cultures of punishment in Northern Nigeria’. \textit{Africa}, 70(3), 359-393

\textsuperscript{24} according to Utas (2003) the term \textit{grona} refers to someone who’s behaviour has outgrown his or her age and, more general to prostitutes (p. 137)
The violence that occurred in the context of the conflict can be seen as a form of communication. It therefore follows some conventions and rules. However, conflict is a time to experiment with, and renegotiate, those conventions. This implies, as Utas notes (idem: 151), that not all form of violence can be explained by framing them within the functionality of local cosmologies.

The conclusion we can draw here is that the violence as it occurred during the conflict on the one hand results from everyday violence as experienced by young people in different pre-war contexts while on the other hand resulting from the context surrounding the conflict in which young people found the freedom to experiment with violence as a form of communication.

In the previous chapter I already discussed the influence of religion on the occurrence of symbolic violence. I shall therefore not discuss this issue any further here. I shall only recapitulate the general idea I want to present here drawing on the work Mariane Ferme (2001). In her comprehensive analysis of history, violence and the everyday in Sierra Leone she draws attention to the importance of understanding history “not only as a site of causal explanations but also as a source of particular forms – symbolic, linguistic, practical – that social actors deploy to rework the social fabric in response to contingent events. These new social and cultural forms are the effect of a dialogical mediation between the present historical situation and a past repertoire of ideas with which social actors critically engage” (Ferme 2001: 227, my emphasis).

3.3 Non Combatant Youth

Up till now I looked into the reasons why young people in West Africa in general and Liberia in particular picked up weapons and actively participated in the conflict. In academic research the question in the other direction is often not considered. Almost never is attention paid to the questions why some chose not to fight. Danny Hoffman suggests “that the demonization so common in media treatments of contemporary African youth combatants – a portrayal of young African men in particular as somehow inherently, pathologically violent – has also led international agencies to focus too much of their energy and resources on these actors within the socio-political landscape of the postcolony” (Hoffman 2004: 226). The representation of young people in (West) Africa in international media coverage as being combatant men is so overwhelmingly dominant that it leaves out all those who did not choose to fight. This is not only the case in academic research but even more so in the post conflict transition programs.
issued by the international community. Non combatants, as opposed to ‘ex-combatants’, are defined by their lack of weapons. They are the “truly forgotten men” (Moran 2007: 5). The reasons why some young people chose not to fight are various and complex. The continuation of education is merely one possibility. I recall several conversations with returnees who explained to me that they did not like the life in the refugee camps but there was no other possibility at that time. The one thing most of them mention as a positive side of the story is the fact that they were able to continue their education. Some young people now speak very good French because of the education they received in the Guinean refugee camps. One young boy for example explained me that, before the war, his father did not allow him to go to school because he had to work on the farm every day. When the war came he crossed the border to Guinea in search of safety and security. Looking back at this experience today he told me that he was happy when the war came, not because he enjoyed a good fight, but rather because he could not even write his own name before he went to Guinea. That day he proudly wrote his name down in the sand waiting for the truck that would take him back ‘home’ from the transit centre in Voinjama25.

In the following chapter I shall highlight how non-combatants can turn out to be strong symbols in a post conflict society by looking at how they renegotiate social relations within the field of power by strategic use of identity.

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Chapter Four: Renegotiation in a Terrain in Motion

The general idea I work with in this thesis is that social relations and identities are always negotiated, positioned and contextualised. Conflict has proven to be an interesting form through which this renegotiation can be explicitly expressed. During the transition from a context of open conflict and violence to a relatively peaceful situation, a rapid shift in power can take place. In her analysis of post conflict transition in Côte d’Ivoire, Ebrima Sall (2004) notes that:

“Post-conflict transition (understood here as the simultaneous reconciliation and reconstruction after conflict) involves a certain amount of renegotiation of the relations between groups, generations, gender and regions that may lead to the redefinitions of identities, and the definition of new bases for citizenship and belonging, ether to local communities or to nations.” (Sall 2004: 599, my emphasis)

Rather than looking at this movement in one direction, I believe that both dynamics influence each other. Social relations are renegotiated through the redefinition of identities while that same redefinition of identities has an influence on the renegotiation of social relations. Furthermore I argue that this shift is strongly influenced by the articulation of identity as a response to post conflict dynamics. This is also the case in Liberia. In this chapter I shall continue to focus on the position of young combatants – who have become ‘ex-combatants’ – and the more general category of youth – understood here as an identity category. As we have seen in the previous chapter both categories are actually intertwined but as I shall show in my analysis, there are different reasons to uphold the distinction. The most obvious reason being the fact that during my fieldwork, both categories are used by my informants each embodying a different positioning.

In the previous chapter I went back in time to describe the production of identity in relation to the field of power both before and during the conflict. In this chapter I shall take into account the way in which these identities evolved and still are evolving considering the changing social and political context. I will therefore first outline the recent changes in the field. Here I shall first look how socio-political transformation emerges in Lofa County and Voinjama which constitutes the field where I conducted my research. From there I place those transformations in their broader national context. In a second section of this chapter I shall turn specifically to the category of ‘ex-combatants’ and look at how they experience the complex transition from conflict to post conflict. I argue here that next to the official
trajectory towards reintegration, outlined ‘from above’ by the international community, they explore different trajectories towards reintegration. Finally I turn to the category of youth and their position in post war society.

For the data of this chapter I turn primary to information I gathered during three months of fieldwork in Voinjama, the capital of Lofa County in the Northwest of Liberia (cf. below). There I followed several reintegration projects up-close and listened to and watched the way in which the participants experienced how they were treated and observed by insiders as well as outsiders. Although three months is not that a long period to conduct thorough fieldwork, I managed to get close to a group of ‘ex-combatants’ who seemed to rely on each other and operated as a kind of family, supporting one another. This group was particularly interesting because they were both relatively (in)famous inside the community. I shall discuss this group in more detail as I continue my analysis. For now I just want to point out that they constitute my main source of information.

For my analysis of the position of youth, I followed a local youth organisation, called Lofa Youth Association (LOYA). This relatively new group consists of a core of about five young men trying to get organised in order to acquire an important position in the social terrain. This group is active in several fields of social life to expand and increase their influence. Their position towards certain issues in post conflict society, such as the reintegration of ‘ex-combatants’, comes as a threat to some and as a relief to others. Their position is therefore dubious depending on the point of view. The logic according to which they manage to articulate their identity is therefore highly relevant and interesting. A second youth group is a local NGO called National Ex-combatant Peacebuilding Initiative (NEPI). Despite of what the name of the organisation implies, there ideas on post conflict transition correspond to a large extend with those of LOYA members.

4.1. Post Conflict Transformations

Before describing the emerging processes of transformation in post conflict Liberia it is necessary to briefly elaborate on the concept of ‘transformation’. The choice to use the concept of post conflict transformation rather than post conflict transition is not arbitrary. Based on the work of Christopher Parker (2004), Timothy Raeymaekers (2007) describes the political and social dynamics in post war DR Congo as a transformation without transition “in which existing political constellations – networks, complexes – have largely taken the lead over the newly introduced political framework of internationally induced “transition””
(Raeymaekers 2007: 155). Although his analysis focuses mainly on developments at the level of the state, it contains some ideas that are relevant for this section and the remainder of this chapter. Despite the fact that his analysis focuses on a different level, I see a similarity between upholding the distinction between transition and transformation at the political level and that between strategy and tactics at the social level as described by de Certeau (1984) to interpret the practice of everyday life (cf. Chapter 1)\textsuperscript{26}. This implies that, rather than upholding a strict dichotomy between both concepts, I believe it is necessary to look at how they intertwine and influence each other. From an analytical point of view I argue that categorizations are best to be interpreted in terms of \textit{movements} rather than merely as imposed ‘from above’ or emerging ‘from below’. The actor’s perspective here is crucial. Transitions can therefore be seen as interventions which actors perceive as movements coming ‘from above’ in order to set out the rules. In terms of a scale-sensitive analysis, these interventions are experienced as a process of downscaling. Transformations on the other hand result from what social agents and units make of those rules. From their perspective therefore best to be seen in terms of a process of upscaling. Based on the work of Raeymaekers (2007) and the reflections I presented above I argue that both dynamics work into, and therefore influence, each other which lead me to say that transformation emerges \textit{through} transition rather than \textit{without} transition. The dynamics presented in the following paragraphs need to be seen in the light of this interpretation.

4.1.1 Transformations at the Local Level

Lofa County is one of the fifteen administrative sub-divisions of the republic. It is situated in the northwest of the country and is bounded, on the north and the east side by Guinea and, on the west side by Sierra Leone. This strategic territory has proven to be a valuable area during the conflict. In 1999 LURD forces entered Liberia from Guinea through Lofa County. Also, many refugee camps just across the border turned out to be helpful recruiting places to strengthen the manpower. Administratively Lofa is divided in six districts. Those are Voinjama, Zorzor, Foya, Salayea, Vahun and, Kolahun. There is much to say about the establishment of administrative boundaries and how they affect the social reality in the field. I addressed this issue extensively in the previous chapters. For this section I only want to repeat

\textsuperscript{26} The terms strategy and tactics are used by Vigh (2006) to elaborate on the concept of social navigation (cf. p. 11-12).
that frontiers are never as clear as they are presented. Diversity and dynamism are the norm rather than the exception when it comes to analysing processes of social change.

According to UN statistics\(^{27}\), six out of the sixteen recognised ethnic groups are said to be represented in Lofa, the Loma being the largest. Apart from this group, the Kpelle, Kissi, Gbandi, Mende and Mandingo are present in the area. Statistics like these are always dubious. They disregard the social complexity that is present in the field. I described the emergence and negotiation of ethnic identity in chapter two but here too I would like to stress the remark I made concerning the problem of boundaries. What I like to point out here is that the context in Lofa County is a multiethnic one. Among other things, ethnic tensions strongly determine the agenda of local politics. The relation between the Loma and the Mandingo are often described as being very troublesome. These troubles are often ascribed to ethnic differences. In reality the tensions that arise are as much about the access to power, land and resources where ethnic identities are articulated to manipulate existing relations. The Mandingo, who are for the majority Muslim traders, are said to originate from Guinea and therefore not rightful Liberian citizens. Now that the conflict is officially over and people are returning from the refugee camps there are some villages where either Mandingo or Loma are not allowed to resettle or rebuild their houses. This is one of the reasons why you can find two villages with the same name. Another related problem is that of access to land. It must be said that the discussion is in most cases about more than just ethnic strife but for some it is interpreted and reduces to just that.

The UN is present with both a military and an administrative branch in Lofa County since 2004. The Pakistani Battalion Headquarters are located in Voinjama and there are companies in Zorzor and Foya. The regional headquarters of the civilian staff are also located in Voinjama. Despite their location they manage to reach every corner of the County and acknowledge their position.

One of the biggest and most important challenges identified by the international community in the County is to take care of issues concerning security, and to deal with the numerous ‘ex-combatants’ present in the area. They are often said to be the cause of continuing violence. The objective here is to reintegrate them back into society as ‘righteous citizens’. Another concern is to cope with the many returning refugees and the repatriation of IDPs. Another point on the agenda is the rehabilitation of the destroyed infrastructure. Priorities here are schools, hospitals, and agriculture areas. Since Lofa is considered to be the

\(^{27}\) Lofa County Profile, April 2006 prepared by the Civil Affairs Section, Lifa county, United Nations Mission in Liberia
‘bread basket’ for Liberia, it is important to restart economic activities, especially agricultural production. The reconstruction of agricultural production is closely related to the rehabilitation of the infrastructure. A significant example here are the public roads, during the rain season it often becomes impossible to travel from Voinjama to Monrovia because of the terrible road conditions.

As I mentioned before, Voinjama is the capital of Lofa County. It is the home base of the UN military and administrative offices. Their presence in the area is therefore very influential. They are practically involved or represented in all ongoing activities. Voinjama is also the area where I conducted my fieldwork for a period of three months. I will go into more detail about my own experience and my methodology elsewhere (cf. chapter 1) but my description of the area here will mostly be based on personal impressions, encounters and, experiences. Voinjama can be classified as a semi-urban area. Although there is very little statistical information available, we can identify a number of interesting dynamics. The town houses the district commissioner, the city major and, important regional religious leaders and clan leaders. Because of the presence of different administrative levels, the administrative hierarchy is most complex. The town is divided into different quarters. Although some argue forcibly that everyone is allowed to settle where they like, others state that the quarters are organised along ethnic lines. Whatever explanation people articulate, the division in quarters is neither arbitrary nor useless. When I spoke with a member of the Catholic Church and asked him how he reached the members of his parish he clearly stated that he had to turn to the quarter chiefs to get the information he wanted.

The main economic activity in the city, as in the rest of the county, is agriculture. Most of the farming land is located outside the town centre. Therefore, people are leaving the area every day to go work on the farm and return at night. On Friday, marked day, people come from different villages, sometimes far away, to try and sell their goods. Others try to make some money by starting their own business. Most of which are located in Mandingo quarter. Mandingo are still proud of the fact that they descend from a tradition of traders. Since the border with Sierra Leone and Guinea is not too far, a lot of cross-border trade is situated in the area. Although nobody knows the actual number of inhabitants of the town, it is relevant to identify different categories of people. One important category that shapes the social reality is that of ‘ex-combatants’. They form the object of the DDRR program ran by the UN and implemented by many local, national and international NGOs. This group and their actions are often subject to discussion in the town. By some they are blamed for the situation as it is today, for the destructions that happened during the war. Despite their efforts to reintegrate
into society, they are also blamed for some of the problems that occur today. They are said to disturb social peace by just hanging around on the streets, by smoking marihuana, or drinking alcohol all day. Since the war they are said to have lost respect for traditional rulers or in general lack respect for those in control, and this on different levels from the town authorities to the teachers in school. When we disregard the label ‘ex-combatants’ we can identify a large group of young people. This group urges to bring some change to the existing social order. Although I will return to this issue later, it is interesting to note that this group is getting organised to empower their followers and this causes some tension between different generations. Because of the war most of the young people in the area dropped out of school. Since the rehabilitation of these institutions more children resume their school activities. 2006 was the first year since the beginning of the war (1987) that there was an official graduation ceremony for students who finished twelfth grade. During the official ceremony on August 7, 2006 sixty-one students received their diploma.

Figure 1: Students and spectators at the High School graduation ceremony

Nine of them were female and one of those nine gave birth to her first child the same day. Most of the students I spoke to that day had no, or only a vague, idea of what they would do
next. Some wanted to continue their education but did not find the means to do so. None of the students were 18 years of age and most of them lost one or both of their parents during the war. People in Voinjama saw the graduation ceremony as a great accomplishment in the return to peace. The event took place at the Public School Auditorium and the place was packed. People even had to stand outside and watch through the windows. There was a general atmosphere of happiness and optimism surrounding the ceremony. I experienced the same feeling during the evening before Independence Day, Independence Day itself and ‘cleaning day’ a week before Independence Day. On cleaning day the authorities decided to literally clean the town and clear the roads to prepare for the big day. Although some people had to break down their shops they did it without almost any complaints and everybody was recruited to participate in this event, especially the ‘ex-combatants’ who, guided by the former Master-General, preferred to take on the hard labour. People told me they realised the importance of this day. That, by working together they were able to achieve something positive for the whole community. The evening preceding Independence Day the streets of Voinjama were as good as empty because everybody was preparing themselves for the events the next day. Despite their limited financial means they did not hesitate to spend some money to prepare a big meal and women fabricated a special outfit for the occasion and plaited their hair. Nevertheless these positive messages there are still a number of problems overshadowing everyday life.

In Voinjama, the violent past is still lurking around the corner and influences the everyday practices. Post conflict transition, reconstruction and peace building initiatives dictate the social and economic agenda. The presence of national and international NGO’s provides many Liberians with jobs ranging from security guards to jobs as office clerks. Those with relevant qualifications are called on for the reconstruction of private and public infrastructure and the environment. Many of them are also involved with the reintegration programs for ‘ex-combatants’ where they teach classes in carpentry, mechanics or masonry. Besides the UNMIL radio station which is available in most of the country, there is a local community based radio station which operates from Voinjama. Despite several financial and equipment problems they broadcast four hours in the morning and another three in the afternoon. The station is manned by volunteers who are concerned with what goes on and try to raise awareness on what moves inside the community. In their programs they ask critical questions on local politics, religion or security. They broadcast the news in six languages in order to reach as many listeners as possible. The radio here is a strong alternative to the written press that hardly circulates outside the capital.
Religious practices also determine the order of everyday activities. Christians and Muslims live next to each other and both churches and mosques are present all over the area. The articulation of religious identities still creates a certain tension between different groups but those rarely turn violent. There is, according to the different leaders, frequent contact between representatives of the different religious beliefs to discuss how they can cooperate and improve inter-religious contacts.

Everyday people return to Voinjama from Guinea or Sierra Leone. Some organise their own return trip, others make use of the transport that is organised by national and international organisations. If the latter is the case, the returnees first pass through the transit centre just outside Voinjama where a medical check is available and where the administrative aspects of the return are handled. UNHCR also provides some food and non-food items which help with the often difficult reconstruction people are faced with when they return home. From the transit centre the returnees move on to the town centre where they are dropped. From there on they have to find their own means of transportation. Some of the returnees remain in Voinjama while others go back to see what is left from the place they left behind when the war made them leave.

4.1.2 Transformations at the National Level

The transformations that occur at the local level are unequivocally influenced by what is set out at the national level. Since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in Accra on August 18, 2003 a number of events occurred in Liberia that significantly changed the situation. Although the CPA meant the official end of the civil war, this does not mean that it has erased its consequences from the memory and the sight. The damage done by over fifteen years of fighting and struggle still dominates the agenda of both national and international actors. The CPA can therefore be seen as a first necessary step towards “better relations among [Liberians] by ensuring a stable political environment in which our people can live in freedom under the law and in true and lasting peace, free from any threat against their security”\(^28\).

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed by the three main fighting factions, the Government of Liberia (GOL), the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) and the political parties

\(^{28}\) Comprehensive Peace Agreement, Accra, Ghane, 18th August 2003
under the supervision of the ECOWAS members. The ceasefire agreement ended the fighting with immediate effect and allowed a by most Liberians long awaited multinational intervention constituted of members of ECOWAS. The ceasefire agreement went hand in hand with the disengagement and demobilisation of the fighting fractions and a nationwide disarmament program.

The breakdown of the fighting fractions was not the only concern addressed in the CPA. All parties agreed to look ahead and face some of the challenges in the near future. One of the main issues addressed is the reconstruction of the national political structures and the general political climate together with reinstalling the national order. They planned to do this by restructuring the Liberian Armed Forces and the Liberian National Police, the organisation of national elections no later than 2005, the implementation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to deal with the violent past and finally to find an arrangement to deal with the return of the many Internally Displaces People (IDPs) and the numerous refugees who fled from the fighting. In what follows I will look at these issues in more detail.

After the resignation of the National Transition Government of Liberia (NTGL) headed by Gyude Bryant in part due to severe corruption and overall bad governance, the National Election Commission organised national elections in October 2005 to appoint a new government. Liberians had to make their choice from twenty-two official candidates. The most influential medium through which the campaigns reached the population was the radio, especially outside Monrovia where newspapers are hardly distributed. The registration of the voters encountered some problems. Some refugees for instance registered in their home County but were not repatriated in time to vote on the day of the elections. However the general turnout of the elections was surprisingly high. The percentage of registered voter that actually voted was slightly higher in the urban areas than in the Liberian hinterland. This might have to do with the rainy season which makes that the roads are in terrible conditions so that many people did not reach the voting area (Harris 2006). After the first round, on October 11, 2005 none of the candidates received a majority of the votes. The decision on who would become the next president had to be decided in a second round on November 8. Only two candidates were withdrawn from the first round. The candidate who obtained the most votes in the first round was, and for some this came as a surprise, George Weah. He is a well known superstar but in a rather different field than that of national politics. Weah gathered international fame as an international football star who played for several European top teams. Today Liberians still remember him as that player. This turned out to be a useful aspect on which he based some of his campaign slogans. One example is the slogan ‘9+14=23’. The
numbers nine and fourteen here refer to the shirt numbers in AC Milan and the Liberian national football team while twenty three refers to becoming the twenty-third president of Liberia. Because of his past Weah managed to gain a lot of support from young people (Harris 2006: 384). For some his candidacy for the presidential elections came as a relief. His voters sent a significant message saying that today Liberia stands before the opportunity to start anew. Especially because most other candidates had either participated in previous regimes or fought against them. His opponent for the vote-off was Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, also known as ‘the iron lady’. She can look back on a great career within national and international politics. During the eighties she was a great opponent of the Doe regime and was an initial supporter of the movement headed by Charles Taylor. Once Taylor was in power she changed her position towards his politics and in 1997 she participated in the presidential elections and finished second after Taylor. Her score was however significantly lower than that obtained by Taylor. She also fulfilled an important international position as Africa director at the United Nations Development Programme. For the vote-off she openly received the support from most highly educated Liberians and the Americo-Liberians whose candidates did not survive the first round. The outcome of the second round, whit a turnout of only 61%, decided that Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf would be the next president of the republic of Liberia. She won the elections with a total of 59,4 percent of the votes. From the breakdown of the results it is clear that most of her adherents are to be situated in the west of the country while Weah gained most support from the east side of the country. Despite some claims of corruption and fraud, the national and international observers were pleased with the results.

Johnson-Sirleaf does realize the seriousness of the challenged her administration is faced with and uses her position to the fullest to try and gain support from several foreign institutions and governments. She travelled to most parts of the world on a campaign to gather the necessary financial support to realize the governments’ objectives. She finds the most support with the United Nations who are present in both the military and the administrative branch and that all over the country. Although most of the challenges are only to be dealt with on the long term, in January, right after her inauguration, the president launched a ‘150 days action plan matrix’ in which she points out the crucial issues her government would like to see addressed. In August 2006, during my stay in Liberia, that matrix was published in one of the newspapers with an update of the status of all those projects. The objectives in this action plan ranged from the development of a “credible, capable, and democratically accountable

29 In Grand Gedeh County for example he obtained 96,4 percent
military force”\textsuperscript{30} to the plan to “provide electricity to Monrovia”\textsuperscript{31} The reports at that time varied from ‘completed’ over ‘ongoing’ or ‘underway’ to ‘cancelled’.

Despite the extensive power of the president and the executive power in Liberia the influence of both the House and the Senate are not to be underestimated. The diversity in both legislative branches is great and therefore opens possibilities to establish balanced coalitions which could lead to inclusive policies when it comes to reconciliation and reconstruction (Harris 2006: 393).

Apart from national politics, policy making has largely been influenced by the international community. As the fighting intensified in the beginning of 2003 the UN decided to appoint Jacques Paul Klein as a Special Representative for Liberia to support and follow up the 3,000 strong ECOWAS multinational force. After the signing of the CPA in August of that same year the UN Security Council ratified resolution 1509 and thereby authorised the deployment of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) which consisted of 15,000 military personnel, 250 military observers, 160 staff officers and up to 1,115 civilian police officers. Hereby including several formed units to assist in the maintenance of law and order throughout Liberia.\textsuperscript{32} The mandate of the mission has four main pillars: to give support for implementation of the ceasefire agreement, to provide protection for UN staff, facilities and civilians, to give support for humanitarian and human rights assistance and to support the security reform. This mandate implies a far reaching influence on different domains of policymaking. The UN mission for instance assisted with the registration of the voters and the organisation of the national elections. One important objective is to work closely with the national authorities, national and international NGOs and the civil society to promote and monitor the “effective and sustainable reintegration of Internally Displaces Persons (IDPs), Returning Refugees, Ex-combatants and other war-affected populations.”\textsuperscript{33} For the reintegration of ‘ex-combatants’ the UN supports the Disarmament, Demobilisation, Reintegration and Rehabilitation (DDRR) program that is supposed to turn the former fighters back into ‘ordinary civilians’ according to a specific step by step plan. I will look into this process later on. Altogether we can say that the main objective of this mission is to assist in the restoration of the precarious situation in which Liberia finds itself today. The UN mission in Liberia is headed by Alan Doss who worked in Côte d’Ivoire and Sierra Leone before

\textsuperscript{30} Government of Liberia 150 day action plan matrix, published in ‘New Democrat’ August 18, 2006
\textsuperscript{31} Government of Liberia 150 day action plan matrix, published in ‘New Democrat’ August 18, 2006
\textsuperscript{32} UN Security Council Resolution 1509
\textsuperscript{33} www.unmil.org (last consulted: 12/01/2007)
coming to Liberia. His trajectory is indicative for the intended far reaching collaboration between the different ongoing UN missions in the West African region.

Although the UN presence is highly appreciated by many Liberians, there are some critical voices that start to come up. The most heard argument here is that the influence of the UN intervention is too dominant. I will make this clear when I discuss the position of youth in Voinjama in my further analysis.

To recover from the violent past, it is not enough to just start anew and reconstruct the damage that has been done over the last decades. To move forward one must look back and deal with the past. Although most Liberians agree on this, the way to do so is often a point of discussion. Obviously, there is more than one way to deal with a violent past. All over the world several trajectories, with varying outcomes and success, have been explored. Sociologist Luc Huyse (2006)\(^\text{34}\) distinguishes between three possibilities to deal with a violent past: tribunals, amnesty and truth commissions. The problem he sees with tribunals is that there is hardly ever sufficient proof to build a solid juridical case. In this system most of the attention is focused on the perpetrator and the victims of the violence are left out the whole process. To deal with the past trough tribunals you also need considerable infrastructure, financial means and classified personnel to manage the process (Huyse 2006: 102-103). The author concludes that tribunals often fail to achieve their objectives due to material and political reasons (ibid: 107). Amnesty is an even more tricky solution to deal with the past since there is not dealt with the past in any way and it moreover projects the burden of the past on the victims rather than the perpetrators (ibid: 119). Therefore, the chance that history will repeat itself is not unlikely. The third way to deal with the past, that of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), seems to provide a more sustainable solution. According to Huyse this institution focuses on exposing the truth and gives the victims the opportunity to be heard. By knowing the truth, it can be dealt with accordingly. It is, however, important to realise that it is not the truth that is being told, but rather a truth as it was experienced by those who gave their testimony. A TRC breaks the silence and therefore lies are often revealed (ibid: 157-158). For Africa in particular the best known example of a TRC is that of South Africa after the regime of apartheid. More and more analysts dare to be optimistic and talk about the success of this process. It must be said that this relative success is partly due to the specific context in which it took place. The massive international financial support, the large media coverage and iconic figures as Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela

\(^{34}\) For a review of this book (in Dutch) by Dr. Annelies Verdoolaege: http://cas1.elis.ugent.be/avrug/forum_0606/trc_huyse02.htm (last consulted: 25/04/1007)
together with a large nation building project contributed to the positive outcome. This implies that, although it is probably one of the more durable solutions to deal with a violent past, it is not evident to just transfer this universal format to another context, as that of Liberia, and expect it to have a similar outcome.

When I talked to both the perpetrators and the victims during my fieldwork it became clear that there is no consensus on the installation of a TRC in Liberia. Some clearly stated that they wanted the perpetrators on trial and that they should be punished for what they did. One lady who worked as a housekeeper for the staff of an international NGO told me how she saw her husband being killed before her eyes in a horrible way and that the man responsible for this is walking around in the village. “I can see him today and I can feel bad”. If I asked her whether she would give her testimony to the TRC statement takers she convinced me that she “would never go there” and that “she wants him before court”\(^ {35}\) While others realised that this is not a real solution of the problem and that it is more important to know the truth and to move on from there. They nevertheless assured me that they could forgive but never forget what happened during the war.

One question that is often raised when it comes to the installation of the TRC in Liberia is whether its investigations will be conducted thoroughly. One problem may be that the line drawn between victims and perpetrators is never a clear one. A great deal of those who engaged in the fighting were forced to do so after their family were murdered. One informant found it important to distinguish between those who were forced to fight and those who chose to fight. He believed that both categories deserved a different treatment\(^ {36}\). A second important issue when it comes to the installation of the TRC is that the initiative is supported by a majority of the population. During my fieldwork I encountered several individuals who denounced the idea of the installation of a TRC for several reasons. During a public awareness campaign on the TRC (cf. below) one man passed by and shouted that all this is just another trick of the government and that the authorities “eat all the money”\(^ {37}\) so he will not go to give his statement. During that same awareness campaign both non-combatants and ‘ex-combatants’ were briefed on what the TRC is and how it will affect them. When I spoke to one of the ‘ex-combatants’ afterwards he complained about the fact that “they say it’s not a court, but it is a court”. He believes that when they force him to go and make a

\(^{35}\) Foday, 25/08/2006

\(^{36}\) Konah, 28/08/2006

\(^{37}\) Voinjama, 05/09/2006
statement it will “spoil his character”\textsuperscript{38}. It is clear that the issue of the installation of the TRC is a hot topic today in Liberia and that it is often point of discussion. I will return to this issue in the section where I address the position of youth to see how they use this in order to gain political and social power within the community.

Under part nine of the CPA there is an article devoted to the refugees and displaced persons who are offered to return to their homes. When UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan visited Liberia on July 4, 2006 he expressed his proud to the fact that all IDP-camps were closed and that all those people had returned home. I however found a different story. I believe that the category of IDP concerns does not only apply for those who are enlisted in one of the many camps. Mostly young people, of which some are ‘ex-combatants’ still have not found the means to travel home again. They sometimes do not even know whether their parents are still alive or not, and vice versa. Next to the IDPs there are returning refugees who resided in refugee camps abroad during the war. All over the country, but especially in the

\textsuperscript{38} Foday, 04/09/2006
border areas, there are transit centres to receive and welcome back the returnees. Even today, for some, it is the first time to return ‘home’ for many years. When families were together in the camps they often send one family member back to see how the situation is, whether their house is still standing up, and how to overcome the biggest difficulties. I found a distinct difference between those who arrive in the transit centres and those who have returned for some time earlier. The predominant feeling of those just coming back is one of overwhelming joy and happiness to be back in their home country or town. Even young people who do not remember what their home environment looks like are very excited to return. One of the reasons that they gave to me upon asking where that feeling came from was that “there is no place like home” and that life in the camps was not at all pleasant. Some coped better with that fact than others and started a small business to earn some money while others tried to see the positive site of being in a secure environment.

4.2 ‘Ex-combatants’

4.2.1 Categorization ‘from above’

As I have shown before, the UN is present in different domains of policy making at every level. This is no different when it comes to the reintegration of ‘ex-combatants’ who reside all over the country. In 2003, when the UN mission arrived in Liberia, they implemented the Disarmament, Demobilisation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration programme (further referred to as the DDRR programme) to deal with the large number of young people who got actively involved in the conflict. Liberia is not the first country where they apply this programme in the face of post-conflict recovery and reconstruction. In 2000 the UN issued a general guideline that highlights the major challenges relating to the implementation of a ‘successful’ DDRR. This guideline is mainly limited to operational questions rather than addressing the larger social, political or economic consequences that the programme entails. Despite this, it is interesting in the light of my subsequent analysis, because of the light it sheds on how to approach and interpret terms as ‘ex-combatants’ or ‘reintegration’.

In the first paragraph there is mention of the fact that DDRR programmes are especially relevant in countries that encountered internal and civil conflicts while there is no mention of inter-state conflicts. This is an implication relating to the idea that ‘ex-combatants’ are not professional soldiers in the army of the government but rather civilians who got caught up in the violence. This immediately explains the point of the many reintegration programmes
which are said to return the former combatants to civilian life. The definition provided by the UN guidelines on ‘ex-combatants’ states that:

“Reintegration programmes are assistance measures provided to former combatants that would increase the potential for them and their families’, economic and social reintegration into civil society. Reintegration programmes could include cash assistance or compensation in kind, as well as vocational training and income generating activities.” (UN 2000: 15)

This is merely a description of how the reintegration programmes are supposed to be structured and what is to be achieved once the programme is finished. The problem here is that the final goal is not specifically defined. The UN does situate the reintegration of ‘ex-combatants’ as the last step of the “natural continuum in the peace process” (UN 2000: 16). Despite the fact that they see the developments as coming from a context of open violent conflict to one of long-term peace as a continuum through which the boundaries between the different steps to be taken are flexible and very likely to overlap, according to this programme, every step is strictly separated:

“Where disarmament terminates, demobilization begins and where demobilization ends, reintegration commences. Reintegration programmes can overlap with long-term peace-building programmes and some activities can start at any stage in the peace-making process, even as early as the initial ceasefire.” (UN 2000: 17)

The idea of a natural continuum between the different steps of the programme holds some important consequences for those who participate in the reintegration programmes. This step-by-step plan implies that only those who carried a gun during the conflict are to be reintegrated into society. As I showed in the previous chapter (cf. chapter 3), carrying a weapon of any kind is only one possible way, and not necessarily a good one, to identify someone who participated in the conflict. A lot more people were (actively) involved in the conflict and never held a gun or fired at an enemy. Nowhere in the text is a distinction made except for the category of child soldiers in order to address their special needs. The target groups for disarmament are all kinds of fighting fractions ranging from government troops, over opposition and civil defence forces, to irregular armed groups or armed individuals. Because of the existing continuum those are also the groups that are up for the reintegration programmes while many – in this ideology – ‘non-combatants’ are left out of the proposed framework. This idea is made explicit in the presented guidelines as well:
“Ex-combatants who served in service support units, such as communications, supply and transport, engineers and ordnance, already possess skills for civilian employment. The majority of the ex-combatants, however, served in positions that provided them with only combat skills. They often lack qualifications for civilian professions. It requires capital-intensive training programmes to provide ex-combatants with marketable skills for employment in civilian life” (UN 2000: 79)

Although those who served in service support units appear to fall under the category of ‘ex-combatants’, they get a special statute which implies that they do not need to be trained and because of their skills are able to return to live their lives as civilians. The reality of everyday life and practice, as I already indicated, shows that there is no strict line to be drawn between different categories.

The whole idea of reintegration an sich also generates some interesting questions. The idea of reintegration can be seen as a return to civilian life through which the former is considered the only ‘good’ way of living your life. The UN guideline even explicitly expresses the idea that living life as a combatant is like living the life of a criminal and therefore deserves to be punished:

“the ex-combatants commit themselves to refrain from any future military activity. Violations of the declaration constitute a criminal offence and will be prosecuted. Therefore, it is important that the terms of acceptance are fully explained to the ex-combatant and that each document is verified and endorsed by the implementing authority.” (UN 2000: 74)

This vision contrasts with the idea I presented in chapter two where I pointed to the fact that the actions undertaken by the social agents involved in and constituting the conflict can be seen as a social context just like any other. In this model for example, it is very difficult to explain the conflict in Liberia as a ‘revolution of youth’ as some try to do (e.g. Utas, 2003). Fighting as a means to bring change to a given social situation and existing social inequalities does not tally with the assumptions as they are presented in these guidelines. Those who carry a weapon are considered to be ‘bad’, that is why they are to be brought back to a – ‘good’ – civilian life. In that case what is the point of engaging in the fighting when, in the end, everything is brought back to the situation as it was? This interpretation leaves little room for the negotiation of social relations. On the other hand, this interpretation corresponds with the theory on social navigation in which those in power take actions that define and consolidate their space. My experience in the field however leads me to draw different conclusions. I shall therefore take a closer look at how this process develops in Liberia today. In his analysis of
the reintegration process in Sierra Leone, Krijn Peters (2006: 136) suggests the use of the term ‘align’ rather than ‘reintegration’. Although he does not explain why he believes this would be a ‘better’ term, I believe it better reflects the dynamism of the concept. While ‘reintegration’ is more teleological in that it refers to a certain endpoint. A linguistic analysis of the term reintegration shows that it excludes reflexivity: one has to be brought inside by others. This implies the presupposition of a boundary between inside and outside. In terms of power this further implies that those inside control the reintegraction of the outsiders (Blommaert and Verschueren 1991: 524-525). This analysis also corresponds with the idea of social navigation where those in power strategically set out the rules to control those who tactically the social terrain that is set out.

The UN implemented the DDRR programme upon their arrival in Liberia. As was mentioned before, this programme starts with the disarmament of the combatants. In February 2005, the UN had disarmed and demobilised over 100,000 combatants while they only gathered some 30,000 weapons (Human Rights Watch 2005: 45). This striking difference in numbers can have different reasons. It could, for instance, be that the rebel forces were severely lacking in arms. Another reason I encountered during my fieldwork is the fact that many of those who were not directly involved with the fighting managed to register for the programme. The motivation to do so is boosted by the promise from outsiders that an official statute as ‘ex-combatant’ which allows participants to gain economic, social and political capital, comes with the registration for one of the programmes. The programmes offer a range of trainings/schoolings from agricultural training over workshops for carpentry, hairdressing or engineering, computer skills to formal education. Upon their registration the ‘ex-combatants’ have the choice to enlist in any programme they like. It is important to note that the shift from combatant to ‘ex-combatants’, as they hand in their weapon, is made official when they receive an identity card. This way, they enter an institutionalized structure in which their every step is monitored. The identity card has four letters (A-B-C-D), each symbolising one step towards complete reintegration. The A is indicated at the cantonment site with the surrendering of the weapons and signifies the receiving of the sum of 150 USD. The B is indicated as proof for the second instalment payment of another 150 USD. The participation in one of the reintegration programmes is indicated by the C. When the D is punched, the ID-card is no longer valuable and the ‘ex-combatant’ is considered fully reintegrated into society. The importance of this ID-card is not to be underestimated. It holds several economic, social and political consequences. It serves, for instance, as an admission pass to the advantages provided through the programmes. The importance in this sense became clear at one site where
the participants of an agricultural programme gathered to receive the payment arrears. The authorities that were present at the scene strongly emphasised that only those who could present a valid ID-card were qualified to receive the money due:

“for this particular mission here is to make sure that we satisfy all those legitimate validated ex-combatants, all those [...] with a valid ID-card. You should not have been in any other programme cause this programme is one time benefit. [...] if you came with your brother card, your pa card, your sister card, your daughter card into this programme, call that person who card you holding to come with you”.

In an interview, one of the local NCDDRR representatives that day explained to me that the ‘ex-combatants’ use the ID-card as a credit card and that a business exists via which the ID-cards are passed on, traded, sold, stolen or re-used. This results in many ‘ex-combatants’ missing out on the advantage that is promised them. During my fieldwork many ‘ex-combatants’ came to me with questions regarding what they had to do when they lost their ID-card. Others who lost their card did not want to go through the trouble of applying for a new one, even though this meant that they did not receive the benefit that came along with it. For many ‘ex-combatants’ the ID-card does not serve as a means of identification but rather some sort of access card that opens doors towards economic gains. From the perspective of the official authorities the ID-card implies that there is no room for differentiation between different categories of ‘ex-combatants’. The only relative distinction that is made is the one between child soldiers, who are said to have special requirements, and older combatants. In Voinjama, the programmes for child soldiers did not provide their students with money but instead offered them a warm meal every day.

The story ‘from above’ is one that strives towards optimal efficiency and coherence in order to manage the situation. However, the framework that is set out does not work without the signing on of members of the target group. In the next section I shall discuss how the ‘ex-combatants’ deal with the situation they are confronted with and the way in which they experience the search for their own trajectory towards reintegration.

39 Registered at introductory comments during the payment to students of an agricultural program, Voinjama, 07/09/2006.
40 National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilisation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration
4.2.2 Multiple trajectories towards reintegration

The conversations with my informants and DDRR representatives clearly show that the authorities are aware of the fact that the ‘ex-combatants’ try to find their own way towards reintegration. The citation above shows that, on the one hand they acknowledge the fact that there is a business in ID-cards while on the other hand clearly stating that this does not tally with the way in which the programme is set out to operate. Secondly, this process is an example of how ‘ex-combatants’ navigate tactically the social terrain that is strategically set out by the official authorities. As I intend to establish in this section, the boundaries that are set out by those in power within the space they made their own are explored and bent to their own benefit (Vigh 2006). This also shows that rather than each level operating independently, both levels are inextricably bound together and interact accordingly. The first misconception in the DDRR programme is that the category of ‘ex-combatants’ form a homogenous entity. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter (cf. chapter 3), heterogeneity and diversity have been the case from the start of the conflict. This is not different when the conflict has officially ended. The label ‘ex-combatant’ is only one possible way to position oneself and articulate an identity. This identity moreover holds several social implications. Where some young combatants took up arms to climb the social ladder and gain more upward social mobility, the power that they acquired by carrying a gun has been taken away which leaves them once again at the bottom of the social hierarchy again. The DDRR programme places the participants in a subaltern position and labels them victims. Since the dominant discourse towards ‘ex-combatants’ distinguishes between them and the ‘community’, they are placed outside of that community in a waiting room where they have to accumulate a certain amount of economic, social and political capital before re-entering society. Despite their return to the margins of society they manage to step into the circle of society and claim their position. One example of this movement is that of the ‘Master-General’, a significant personage living in Voinjama.

Only a few days after I arrived in Voinjama and I explained the purpose of my stay several people told me I definitely had to talk to the Master-General. It was not too hard to find him for, one day, a man came to me and told me “I want to talk to you”. I was happy to have my guide with me because otherwise I would not have understood his Liberian English. This 56yearold man joined the national army in 1971 but

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dropped out again when he felt that “discrimination and tribalism” constituted the everyday policy. During the civil war he joined the LURD forces and commanded the troops in Voinjama and just over the border in Guinea. He does not see himself as a rebel but rather fought to make right what he considered to be wrong. When the conflict was officially over, he claims he was “the first to surrender”. Despite this he holds strongly to his title of Master-General, which he claims to hold for the rest of his life. In his house the wall is decorated with a large picture of himself in his military uniform to support this vision.\footnote{Sekou, 12/07/2006}

Respected by many, maligned by others but known by almost everybody in the area he sees himself as a “volunteer for peace” and participates in the reintegration of the ‘ex-combatants’. His presence is tolerated at many occasions and gatherings and his opinion is valued highly. One example is a land dispute where the land commissioner appointed the Master-General as an intermediary between the conflicting parties who had to inform the man who occupied the land he had one month left before he had to move out.

While some, especially young people who did not participate in the conflict, mock him as if he is nothing more than a village idiot, local authorities rely on him to use his influence on the many ‘ex-combatants’ present in the region. On ‘cleaning day’, the day the town is cleaned up to prepare for independence day, he managed to mobilise quite a number of ‘ex-combatants’ to do the heavy work. A lot of people were unhappy with this action because they had to break down their shops. When I met him later that day he expressed his displeasure regarding the fact that, when he reached the town quarter where the mayor resides, he was told to stop the cleaning campaign and leave everything as it was. He could not accept this because he thought it a sign of discrimination and ordered his ‘troops’ to continue as they did in other places.\footnote{Cleaning day, 18/07/2006}

The fact that the Master-General holds on to his title points to the fact that there is a continuum between war and peace. With his title comes the respect he earned during the conflict. It is hard for the authorities not to involve him if there are important decisions to be made. The fact that he still has a significant influence on many ‘ex-combatants’ shows that the demobilisation is not entirely finished yet. His position and standing within the community and the relation he maintains with the ‘ex-combatants’ is not necessarily problematic. In certain cases he operates as a medium which achieves reintegration for some. For many ‘ex-combatants’ the Master-General is someone they can trust: someone they can turn to if they have questions. And since he identifies himself as a “volunteer for peace” he manages to direct the ‘ex-combatants’ in the right direction. Or in the words of one ‘ex-combatant’ discussing the position of the Master-General:

\footnote{42 Sekou, 12/07/2006}
\footnote{43 Cleaning day, 18/07/2006}
“he is a good man, when you are vex, he can talk to you and calm you down. If you have a problem he would call you and ask you ‘wa happen’ and help you”

This attitude towards the former commander is also an illustration that strong relations of trust were built during the conflict, something which is often eclipsed by the breakdown of ‘traditional’ social relations. The ideas, then, that the reintegration of ‘ex-combatants’ can only be achieved when social disintegration takes place after the war in an attempt to break with combatant bonds has to be questioned. I shall discuss this type of relations further in this section (cf. below). Another example that shows the ways in which ‘old’ relations between ‘ex-combatants’ are helping to achieve reintegration is one where an ex-commander is brought into the structure of a local NGO dealing with the reintegration of ‘ex-combatants’. He operates as a contact person that serves as the necessary link between the organisation and its members. I shall discuss this in more detail in the next section when I discuss the position of youth in a post conflict context.

The following part of this section is dedicated to the ways in which ‘ex-combatants’ experience their position which seems to deny them any form of power. This proposed powerlessness is to be considered relative and always contextually embedded. The aim here is not to evaluate the reintegration process, for I believe it is simply too early to do so, but rather to present the experience of exploring different trajectories towards reintegration. In his analysis of the reintegration process in Sierra Leone, Krijn Peters (2006) also presents some personal stories to indicate how ‘ex-combatants’ explore the different trajectories towards reintegration. He moreover also claims that it is too early for a thorough evaluation. In his analysis he therefore focuses on the “complexity of the changing society into which ex-combatants must attempt to reintegrate” (Peters 2006: 136). When discussing the process of reintegration, one should acknowledge the idea that reintegration shows itself in everyday social practices, in different contexts and through the articulation of different identities (Shepler 2005b: 199). It is therefore interesting to pay attention to the smallest details. During the conflict it was a common practice for boys and men to plait their hair. Now that the conflict is officially over, the change of haircut is considered to be a sign to break with one’s past as a combatant. The morning following independence day a number of ‘ex-combatant’ friends gathered in their small shop to undo their friends hair before he went to the barber. I went with him to the barber shop where he, since he is quite well-known in the area and

44 Togar, 18/09/2006
possibly also because of my own presence, attracted the attention of passers-by who observed the events with care. After his hair was shaved he proudly stated that he now was “a changed man, a clean man”\(^{46}\).

The concept of reintegration, as I mentioned before, raises some questions. Reintegration is for example often seen as a teleological process but hardly ever is there a clearly defined endpoint. In a way this makes it a never ending process. Especially since the idea of reintegration implies that the object is put outside the community in the first place and depends on others to be reintegrated. He is, in other words, subject to the measures of those in power, those who define the boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’. This means that there is little room for outsiders’ opinions on their own reintegration. Therefore the accumulation of different sorts of capital as is proposed by the DDRR programmes is best seen as one possible stage in the larger process. This also means that there are other roads that can be chosen. Two ‘types’ of those trajectories alongside the official one presented by the DDRR programmes will, based on personal stories, make this clear. The first is one of an ‘ex-combatant’ who openly denounces the official instances and tries to find his own way while the second one finds the balance between his personal and the official stipulated trajectories.

More and more often I heard about a place many referred to as ‘the ghetto’, where many ‘ex-combatants’ are supposed to spend their days. Exitied about the idea I could find some interesting stories there, I asked one of my informants to take me there. The first time I got there, and it was definitely not the last, the place was packed with ten to fifteen ‘ex-combatants’, most of them relatively young and all male. That day there was only one who did the talking. A somewhat pigheaded young man told me about how he refused to go through the disarmament programme to avoid the label of ‘ex-combatant’. Despite this he stressed that he had given his weapon to his commander at the time the war was officially over. With a certain pride he showed me the scar that indicated the fact that he took a bullet during the fighting. For him, this scar symbolised his personal ID-card. He took arms during the conflict because his father was humiliated and murdered in the centre of the town because he belonged to the “wrong tribe”. By means of arms he wanted to protect his family. Today, his family lives in Monrovia and refuses any type of contact with him because they do not agree with the decision he made. This is also one of the reasons he does not like to be associated with anything that has to do with his past as a fighter or with the conflict in general. He found himself a job as a security guard with an international NGO and holds an important position as a centre-back in the local soccer team. His choice for informal reintegration also has to do with the fact that he feels betrayed by the government because they do nothing for him. The same goes for LURD commander Sekou Konneh because he supposedly lives in a big house in Monrovia and completely forgot about all those who fought at his side during the war. His last words

\(^{46}\) Ballah, 27/07/2006
During the lively conversation I had that day it became clear to me that most of the ‘ex-combatants’ in the room had few kind words for the government or their former leaders (cf. below). In this particular case, this is a reason not to take part in the programmes that are set out. For this young man it is more important not to be labelled an ‘ex-combatant’ and have to bear the stigma that comes with it than to receive the benefits that accompany this statute. He also strongly defends his own position towards his friends and blames them for registering for one of the programmes. His position does not tally with the fact that he often visits the ‘ghetto’ where only ‘ex-combatants’ are spotted (cf. below), which accounts for the bad negative reputation the place has in the area. This does point once again to the fact that strong relations have been established during the war. Moreover, these contacts prove to be important in light of reintegration. Many ‘ex-combatants’ rely on each other to support each other in their struggle against imminent exclusion. The fact that his parents refuse any kind of contact on the other hand illustrates the fact that ‘traditional’ bonds are in fact broken. This particular example also shows that the replacements of these ‘traditional’ bonds are not the only ones to be able to lead a life as a good civilian, which is still the goal of the many reintegration programmes.

Another group of ‘ex-combatants’ who live at the outside of the town also did not register for an official reintegration programme. They live near a small mountain where they go every day to cut stones they then sell to mostly international NGOs or other organisations. The core group consists of three friends who met during the war and receive occasional help from other, not necessarily ‘ex-combatants’, young people. The three friends were building their own house close by. This example also shows that the DDRR programme is one possible way to become a ‘good’ civilian again.

A large number of ‘ex-combatants’ did, however, register for one of the DDRR programmes. They have the tendency to take over the NGO discourse and adopt the position of a victim that is still very vulnerable. By doing so they stress the need for education and training to get out of the position they find themselves in. They moreover often stated that they were forced to fight and there was no way out of it. During the conversations they rarely used the term ‘reintegration’ but rather talked about the benefit they received when they finished one of the programmes. In their words, they did it for their own future and

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47 Patrick, 21/07/06
development. This attitude serves as an example of how social relations are negotiated and identities are articulated. By making this deal, they on the one hand accept the label of ‘ex-combatant’ and the stigma that comes with it while on the other hand receiving the economic benefits that help them to rebuild their lives. For outsiders these benefits are a reason that sometimes leads to frustration towards the ‘ex-combatants’. They blame them the fact that they participate in the programmes only because of the payment at the end of the month while they are not interested in what they are learning. Many of the people who feel this way told me that when the ‘ex-combatants’ receive a set of tools to start their own business at the end of the programme, they immediately sell it because of the money and because they do not know how to use them.\textsuperscript{48} Another outing of this frustration came from a local schoolteacher who had a number of ‘ex-combatants’ in her class. She complained about the fact that they are the ones who disturb the lessons and are rude to teachers and other staff. In her opinion, the ‘ex-combatants’ throw their lives away on alcohol and cigarettes and some of them are definitely not ready to reintegrate.\textsuperscript{49}

The second trajectory is one of a young, male ‘ex-combatant’ who I will call Ballah. He holds together a group of around seven friends, all of them ‘ex-combatants’, and has a wife whom he met during the time they were fighting and an eighteen-month-old son. When he makes some money from the shop he owns together with one of the friends he provides for all of those people. The following narrative describes how I experienced his attitude and his relation with others on different occasions and in different contexts.

When I was walking through town together with Ballah one day, we ran into the Master-General. He enthusiastically stopped us because he wanted to talk to us. Ballah reacted quite uncomfortably to this because he did not like to be seen with the Master-General like this. His discomfort grew to a climax when the Master-General started explaining how Ballah served as his right-hand during the conflict when they were both fighting for the LURD-forces. The conversation did not last very long since Ballah insisted that we move on.\textsuperscript{50} When I talked to him about this encounter afterwards he explained his respect towards the Master-General but nuanced it by stating that he did not like to be associated with his past as a combatant so openly. On several occasions he stressed that he is no longer the man he was when he was fighting. He is a registered ‘ex-combatant’ and takes one of the skills training programmes and actively participates in one of the local NGO projects that organises educational workshops on several subjects. As he states himself, a lot of people in the community like him. This also shows in the fact that, during my stay, he was asked to speech at the graduation ceremony of both the skills training programme, where he

\textsuperscript{48} Zoumo, 12/07/2006
\textsuperscript{49} Schoolteacher, 20/07/2006
\textsuperscript{50} Voinjama, 27/07/2006
spoke compellingly, and the NGO programme. In general you could say that he is comfortable with his position as an ‘ex-combatant’. Although, in my presence at least, he never used the term ‘reintegration’. He did, on several occasions, emphasise that he loves his ID-card. The main reason for this is the benefits that come from it. They are supposed to help him with his future. He does acknowledge the idea that people in the community may think bad about you if you are labelled an ‘ex-combatant’ but that is the deal you have to make. In his case, this label does not seem to bother him that much. Like no one else, he masters the NGO discourse and argues that it is the international community’s responsibility to come and support all the victims of the war, for instance because his fifteen-year-old friend is seriously traumatised. In his shop, which allows him to make some money and support his friends and family, the most popular products he sells are cigarettes, alcohol and drugs. In his philosophy of good reintegration he proudly states that he only sells these products without using them. On an occasional, unannounced visit, I caught him smoking and drinking but every time, he managed to laugh it away.

One day he called me away from some friends because he wanted to show me something. With some spare money he bought himself a brand new backpack which he carried around all the time. I always had the impression that the bag was empty but that day he opened it and the only thing that was inside was a picture. Before showing it to me he explained to me that he did not show this picture to many people which only increased my curiosity. The picture showed a group of young combatants waving around with AK-47s. These were the friends whom he fought alongside during the war. He kept this picture to remember, for old time’s sake.

This story shows that ‘ex-combatants’ constantly shift from one position to another. The label they get is not a fixed identity. They manage to negotiate their position according to a different context. It is clear that towards the outside world Ballah is presenting himself as reintegrated, dedicated to his training skills and no longer the ‘bad’ man he once was. In a more private environment he is often tempted to reflect on his past which clearly influences him up to this day. All his close friends are people whom he was close to during the war.

Finally my informants identify a third group of ‘ex-combatants’. This group is considered to be problematic by many organisations as well as with the rest of the community. They are popularly referred to as ‘hardcore ex-combatants’, those who refuse to reintegrate. They maintain the appearance and the attitude that is associated with combatants, they are not registered on any of the programmes, they are said to be responsible for most of the crime committed in the area, etcetera. This category even gets comments from other ‘ex-combatants’ who lay laziness and stupidity at their door. You can find some of these hardcore ‘ex-combatants’ at the gates of the UN troops each and every morning where they hope to be chosen to do some work in return for a bag of food at the end of the day. The reaction of other ‘ex-combatants’ to this attitude is one of rejection. They realise that the UN

51 Ballah, 21/08/2006
will not be in the country forever and that they will not benefit from continuing this fashion at all.

It has become clear that reintegration is often a topic of discussion. This is especially the case among the ‘ex-combatants’ themselves. The place where I was confronted most with this type of discussions was a small shop in the centre of town. If you would not know it was there you would just pass it by. As a place it is not that impressive, as a social space on the other hand it holds some important implications. In the remainder of this section I shall discuss this place in greater detail.

The first time I heard about this place I was standing among the staff of a local NGO concerned with the reintegration of ‘ex-combatants’. The image they presented regarding this place was not a positive one. They claimed that it housed those ‘ex-combatants’ who are difficult to reach when their reintegration is concerned. They referred to the place with the term ‘the ghetto’. Since I was not able to fully understand the conversation at that time I did not pay a great deal of attention to it. When I spoke with two ‘ex-combatants’ who participated in an agricultural training programme about how they saw themselves in relation to the community they both stressed that they had changed and no longer wanted to be associated with those ‘ex-combatants’ who do not reintegrate. The ‘ex-combatants’ who waste their time smoking and drinking in the ghetto belong to the last group. Curious about what this ghetto looked like, I asked one of my informants whether she would take me there. At first she was a bit hesitant because of the negative atmosphere that surrounds the place but in the end I managed to convince her and she decided to join me. As we walked down the main street in Voinjama she suddenly stopped and pointed to some corrugated sheets that almost fell apart, the windows covered with sheets which give it all a slightly more obscure touch.

When I entered the place, it was incredibly hot and overcrowded. To be comfortable, the maximum number of visitors would be about eight. At that time, there must be around fifteen people. All of them were relatively young men of whom some were obviously under the influence of either alcohol or marihuana. One of the first things they explained to me after the initial commotion regarding of my presence there had died down was that they do not refer to the place as the ghetto but merely call it a shop. For some the place is nothing more than just a shop where they enter, buy what they want and leave. Others, in contrast, spend hours in there every day. The fact that the term ghetto is only used by outsiders symbolises

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52 Peter, 20/07/2006
the way in which the ‘ex-combatants’ are placed outside of the community. Even the negative atmosphere that is ascribed to the place needs to be nuanced. The frequenters of this place consist almost exclusively of ‘ex-combatants’ of which the majority are young men. I only met female ‘ex-combatants’ there once or twice. Those who needn’t be there stay away from the place. One day, for example, there was a young girl who was selling food passing by. One of the ‘ex-combatants’ inside bade her to come closer because he intended to buy something from her. At first she hesitated but when the men inside insisted she gave in and came as close as the door. The ‘ex-combatant’ complained that he could not see what she was selling and that, therefore, she had to come inside. She refused to do so, grabbed her basket with food and left again without selling anything.

The shop is owned by two friends, both ‘ex-combatants’. They maintain a schedule that makes sure they both open the shop at given hours. The place is open everyday from early in the morning till late in the evening. The owners have a central seat in a big chair close to the

Figure 3: ‘Ex-combatants’ gathered in their ‘shop’, aka the ‘ghetto’

53 Voinjama, 22/09/2006
merchandise they sell. The others are seated around them. The walls are decorated with a poster of former LURD leader Sekou Damate Konneh and a large poster with pictures of Osama Bin Laden, George Bush and Saddam Hussein about the war in Iraq. When I asked them about the poster of Sekou Konneh they explained that it definitely does not serve as a tribute to him. He is often subject of mockery and said to be the cause of many ‘ex-combatants’ frustration. One ‘ex-combatant’ for instance, explained to me that “he made them walk like a turtle”, referring to the way they sometimes had to march during the war.

The poster of the war in Iraq on the other hand is often a point of reference when they are discussing the situation they find themselves in today. One example is when one ‘ex-combatant’ explained to me that he is not Osama, he is not a bad man, when he was talking about how, sometimes, people can think bad of him because he is an ‘ex-combatant’.

That shop is more than just a shop since the past, the present and the future are said to come together there. Those labelled as ‘ex-combatants’ in this context can be described as constituting a “community of experience’, sharing specific ordeals, praxis, perspectives and positions within a given terrain and thus sharing certain points of spheres of reference” (Vigh 2006: 19). When they are among each other the ‘ex-combatants’ go back in time and talk about their past as a fighter. At such moments you can hear people declare: “I love my gun” in the same way that same person in a different context, today claims to love his ID-card. The shop is also the place where the different trajectories towards reintegration meet. Reintegration is therefore often a topic of discussion among ‘ex-combatants’ as well. The discussions are nevertheless not limited to this subject. The floor is open to any kind of discussion. Every topic that is raised can openly be talked about. The topics range from religion, (inter)national or local politics, personal relations, gossip, etcetera. More than once I was told how this place operates, contrary to outside opinions, as a “place of love” where everybody is welcome and where you are not judged by your personal background.

Because of the war a lot of young people lost one or both their parents. Others are separated from their parents since they had to seek refuge during the war. When they come together as friends today they are able to talk about the problems they experience and together they can try to

54 Ballah, 24/07/2006
56 “I love my gun” upon expressing his satisfaction about the AK-47 he carried during the war (Victor, 17/08/2006), “I love my ID-card” was the answer I got when I asked another ‘ex-combatant’ about his feelings towards the label ‘ex-combatants’. He specifically “loves” his ID-card for the benefits that come with it (Ballah, 21/08/2007)
57 Ballah, 24/07/2006
find a solution. Or as one ‘ex-combatant’ pointed out to me: “if I have something today, I will share it with my friends; if my friends have something tomorrow, they will share it with me”\textsuperscript{58}. Finally I would like to address my own position at the time I visited this shop. The first time I entered the place there were a lot of eyes gazing at me and I could feel the people present were quite reserved but as time went on and I visited the area more regularly people started to open up to me. Some of them even invited me to their house and offered me a meal. The shop was the place where the network of ‘ex-combatants’ is anchored. From there on, I got in contact with several groups of ‘ex-combatants’ who each had their own way of dealing with the position they found themselves in. My regular visits to the place were not always accepted in gratitude by other members of the community. Across from the shop there was a small mechanics workplace and each time I was about to enter the shop they shouted whether I was going to smoke drugs. I never managed to make my arguments clear to them.

The ways ‘ex-combatants’ explore and experience the different trajectories that lead to reintegration serve as a first example of how the navigation of a social terrain operates. In the following section, I will describe another group within society that struggles to gain political influence and obtain upward social mobility.

4.3 Youth

4.3.1 Youth as a category?

A first example from my fieldwork discusses the issue of categorisation and the relevance of talking about youth as a social construct. The example is set in Zorzor, a town in Lofa County about a hundred kilometres southwest of Voinjama, where I accompanied one of the UN civil affairs section staff members to the interreligious council. The point of this meeting was to identify causes of conflict and find a solution in dealing with them. Present at the meeting were representatives from different ethnic groups and religions.

\begin{quote}
The first part of the meeting consisted of speeches to introduce the issues that were to be dealt with. Several preachers talked about their experiences before, during and after the conflict. The atmosphere at the centre was a little tense and I could feel that some wanted to express badly how they felt about the present situation and their relation to others. After the first section, the whole group was divided in different categories. The organisation proposed four main categories. A first group was Muslim, the second
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{58} Philip, 04/09/2006
Christians, a third group represented Traditional Beliefs like Poro, Sande and Zoes together with the clan chiefs, and the last category was reserved for youth and ex-combatants. All these groups were asked to go and sit together and discuss among each other the causes of tensions and how they think those tensions can be solved in the future. Upon the question whether everybody agreed with the proposed categories, some asked what they had to do when they felt they belonged to more than one category. One young man, for instance, noted that he belonged both to the category of youth and that of Christians. The organisation answered that he had to make a choice between both categories. The second part of the meeting brought all groups back to the same place where they could openly discuss their ideas. Every group brought stressed that they wanted to express their arguments and ideas in their own language so there was an interpreter to translate everything that was said, mostly from Mandingo to Loma and vice versa. At times the tension rose because of the question whether the interpreter gave a correct and accurate translation. To present their arguments, the youth were the only group that made use of English. At the end of their explanation, the moderator alluded on this issue with the question whether everybody understood because “youth have their own language”.

In this example the first three categories that were proposed all concern religion while the fourth is about age. The category of youth does not seem to fit in with the rest of the framework. It does therefore not come as a surprise that the question of what to do when you felt you belonged to different categories came up. Within the last category there is another significant distinction made, namely that between youth and ‘ex-combatants’. This is especially interesting since most of the ‘ex-combatants’ are young people. This can also be linked to the argument I presented in the previous section. Is it impossible for young ‘ex-combatants’ to be considered as youth? It definitely shows that the label ‘ex-combatant’ holds social consequences which determine their position within broader society.

The proposed identities are moreover remastered by the participants. A good example of this can be extracted the presentation of the Muslims, during which the spokesperson explicitly made the connection with the ethnic group of Mandingo. A strong reaction from the mayor of Zorzor who also attended the meeting followed. He stated that he is a Mandingo and born a Muslim. Several years ago he converted to Christianity and all of his children are now baptised Christians. Despite this he remains a Mandingo so the immediate connection made between Islam and Mandingo is not as logic as it is represented. His story got a lot of negative reaction from the audience at the time. The presentation of the ideas of the first three groups all came down to the same issues: lack of respect from the others, interreligious marriage, land disputes, etcetera. The arguments raised by the youth on the other hand, differed a great

59 Although the issues that were discussed are important in the light of interreligious dialogue, they are less relevant for the purpose of this thesis. I shall, therefore, not discuss them in greater detail here.

60 Organization at the interreligious council in Zorzor, 08/08/2006
deal from the previously presented ones. This also shows that the categorisation that was applied was not that logical. Young people talked about concrete problems they encountered. Some talked about the problem of finding money for gas which they needed for their generator, others raised the issue of education and the problems to get from high school to university. The general tenure of their arguments came down to a lack of opportunities to acquire the necessary economic and social capital to have an independent life. Once the spokesperson of the youth finished his presentation another young man stood up amidst the public and, out of the blue, started talking about the fact that ethnic or religious background did not matter to young people and that the label of ‘ex-combatant’ did not help to reintegrate those who had participated in the war. After the meeting was over he explained that he was the president of a local youth group called Concerned Youth, since they are concerned about the position of youth within broader society. This organisation does not operate as an NGO but rather tries to establish their influence in broader society to defend the interests of young people. The fact that the base of this organisation is the identifier youth is interesting because of its institutionalised character. I shall discuss this in greater detail when I talk about LOYA, the youth organisation in Voinjama (cf. below). Both organisations have the same ideas about the position of youth in Liberia today and how best to move forward. They are also in touch with each other to exchange ideas. The use of English by young people is not a coincidence. It is a significant aspect of the expression of their identity. It supports the idea they disregard their ethnic background since English is not affiliated with any ethnic group. By doing so, they also moreover obviously distinguished themselves form the rest of the participants that day. The allusion to this issue made by the moderator of the debate made that difference even more explicit.

This example shows how identity is determined by time and context. On this specific occasion, concrete aspects of identity were made relevant and articulated by the participants. In short, we could state that the relevant identity is negotiated here in relation to others. This context is an exception in the sense that the identity is made explicit in a more or less official, institutionalised setting. Most of the time the articulation of identity is less obvious and explicit. In the following paragraphs I want to return to the situation in Voinjama to discuss how social relations are negotiated with respect to youth by mainly focussing on two organisations. The first organisation is called the Lofa Youth Association (LOYA), and the second the National Ex-combatant Peacebuilding Initiative (NEPI). The first organisation is,

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Chairman Concerned Youth, 08/08/2006
like Youth Concerned, a ‘grassroots’ organisation and consists of local young people who want to change the situation they find themselves in. The second organisation is the sub-office for Lofa County of a national NGO concerned with the reintegration of ‘ex-combatants’. As will become clear, their work and ideas reach much further than just the reintegration of their target groups. The ideas they have are much the same as those of LOYA and they therefore often engage in the same activities.

The first time I got into contact with NEPI was when I met with the Master-General in the hope that he could bring me to a group of ‘ex-combatants’. When we sat together in Mandingo quarter, the Master-General explained the purpose of my presence to about seven ‘ex-combatants’, they were all quiet and respectfully listened to what he had to say. One of the listeners explained that it would be best if I returned in the afternoon since they had a workshop at one of the schools. Upon my arrival at the school I started talking to some of the participants. Although the majority of them were ‘ex-combatants’ there were also ‘non-combatant’ youth present. A majority of them were male but also a significant number female. The workshop consisted of a session on good governance. This was part of a larger educational programme which lasts for about six weeks and which ends with a graduation ceremony at which the participants receive a certificate. Partly because of my presence there, the session got a lot of attention from both in- and outsiders. At one particular moment an older man came in and took over the session. He ordered everybody to sing and dance to improve the withering attention. One of the participants explained to me at the end that this man used to be a commander during the conflict and today he is engaged in assisting the reintegration process of ‘ex-combatants’. When I spoke to the organisers later that week about their vision on reintegration, they explained that they thought the inclusion of former commanders is necessary to reach more ‘ex-combatants’ and convince them to enter one of the programmes.

My first encounter with the members of LOYA was more of a coincidence. When I was walking through town about a week later I heard a lot of noise coming from a church so I decided to go and take a look. There was a meeting going on to introduce the National Youth Policy. The speaker was a representative for the Federation of Liberian Youth (FLY), the national youth organisation in Monrovia. They were invited by the Lofa Youth Association to explain the purpose and content of the National Youth Policy, which is regarded by some as the “bible” for the young people. The participants, who were about fifty, were all interested and motivated. The meeting was very interactive and democratic so that everybody could give their opinion.

After the meeting Johnson, a young man and member of the organising committee, clearly stated the objectives his organisation is striving towards. In his plea he talked about how

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62 I use the term ‘grassroots’ here to indicate that the social actors in the field perceive this movement as emerging ‘from below’. This label is therefore relative and contextually embedded (cf. Chapter 1) rather than determined. It is furthermore extremely difficult to determine the origin of these movements.

63 Voinjama, 13/07/2006

64 Representative for the government on youth and sports, 22/07/2006
young people in Voinjama are marginalized and excluded from different economic and social fields. He complained about the fact that local youngsters are excluded from the job market because they are said not to have the necessary qualifications. Because of that most organisations bring in international staff or send people from Monrovia all over the country. In the eyes of Johnson this attitude does not lead to a sustainable development of the region. He therefore pleads for a severe decentralisation of national politics and to give more autonomy to the respective counties. They also have an outspoken opinion on the issue of ‘ex-combatants’. They believe that the label these people have leads to stigmatization and therefore not to reintegration. They insist that most of the ‘ex-combatants’ are young people and therefore the label youth is more appropriate because they believe it will improve the reintegration.

4.3.2 Navigating towards the ‘Right’ Horizon

Since the members of LOYA refuse to think of their organisation as an NGO they experience some difficulties to legitimate their position in a field that is crawling with NGOs and the ruling discourse is that of NGOs. The following encounter shows how the organisation operates in search of acknowledgement and voice. The context of the meeting is the pursuit of a solution in land dispute that has been going on for several months. The meeting takes place at the UN civil affairs office.

At the meeting there were eight men present, two staff members of the UN civil affairs section, the town sheriff who is responsible for the execution of the judge’s decisions, one elder man who is the owner of a carpentry shop that is located on a land that is not his own, two men who work at the place, a religious representative who is present because the dispute has a religious aspect since the shop is owned by Mandingo while the land is owned by a Loma woman, and myself to observe the meeting.

This was not the first time the issue was discussed. Like many land issues today in Liberia, there is the problem of documents that are missing or never even existed because the agreement was a result of a mutual understanding or a gift that was never documented. The court had decided several months ago that the owner of the shop had to move from the area and he was given one month to find a new location for his shop. Since land is a difficult issue, they had not found a satisfying solution up to that moment. There was a significant difference in attitude between those involved in the issue and the UN representatives and the sheriff. The latter stressed the importance of the verdict from the court in the light of the “establishment of the rule of law”, while the former clearly expressed a lack of confidence in the juridical system and tried to come to a gentlemen’s agreement without putting anything on paper. After

65 Interview: Voinjama, 17/07/2006
about twenty minutes three men entered the room and gave a new incentive to the ongoing discussions. They stated that “as a youth”, they “can engage in the problem”. They went to see the superintendent to deal with the issue. He appointed the Master-General to inform the owner of the shop he had one month to find another place. The LOYA spokesperson seized this occasion to broaden the perspective to sustainable peace building. He stated twice that as a youth, they can sensitize others and be actively involved in finding solutions for land disputes which, according to the youth representatives, lead to the last war in 1997. Towards the end of the meeting they also mentioned they wanted to organise a convention that includes youth organisations and young people in general from all over Lofa County.

This example corresponds to what Bierschenk and de Sardan (2003) note in their article on the context of decentralisation in Benin. They argue that on a local level there is often no favoured locus to deal with political problems. The implication that politics are practiced at several loci at the same time has, according to the authors, two consequences: firstly, “political power is exercised not solely by official political authorities […], or by officious ones” (Bierschenk and de Sardan 2003: 159), instead an important role in the negotiation of power is allocated to the civil society. Secondly, local representatives are often asked to act beyond the reach of their competences. This results in a complex, fluid, flexible and arbitrary structure which allows constant negotiation of social relations. This approach also corresponds with the idea, presented by Stephen Ellis (1999), that Liberian society – like any society – can be compared to a spider’s web. He turns to the model presented by Human and Zaaaiman (1995) who state that:

“[i]n web-like societies, social control is fragmented between different centres. The whole can be seen as a web where no single strand of social control holds the societal fabric together. It is rather held together by a network of strands. […] Numerous systems of justice, allocation and social control operate simultaneously.” (Human and Zaaaiman quoted in Ellis 1999: 310)

The narrative above serves as a good example of these assumptions in the sense that all different web strands come together. Firstly, there is the fact that the meeting took place under the supervision of the UN civil affairs section who, as they claim, are not responsible for this type of issues. Secondly, the participants in the discussion are there for different reasons. That those involved in the dispute are present is understandable. The religious representative on the other hand was there because he felt he could include more general issues on the position of Muslims in the discussion. The same goes for the presence of the youth representatives who

66 Registered Voinjama, 02/08/2006
have no actual business in this specific land issue but rather grasp this occasion to establish their position within the field. And finally, the whole issue was dealt with in court which issues a sentence. Despite that decision, the different parties try to get around it by going to the UN representatives. This dispute found its way to the office of the County Superintendent who tried to find a solution by sending the Master-General to deal with the situation. This last development also shows the flexibility of the line between the official and officious instances that work complementary rather than oppose each other.

Another remark concerns the position of young people throughout the meeting. They burst into the meeting about twenty minutes after it had started when they heard about it from outsiders and almost immediately made their presence clear. They obviously wanted to help in finding a solution to the issues that were dealt with, while on the other hand, it was equally important for them to set themselves up as a possible party to include in this type of negotiations. They did so by opening this discussion to a broader context of peace building while claiming that youth can play a significant role in avoiding further conflict.

4.3.3 Mobilizing other Youth

The former example shows how members of LOYA try to establish their position at a higher level. In the following example I look at how they mobilize other young people ‘from below’. As I mentioned before (cf. entering the field), Liberia is preparing to organise a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to deal with its violent past. To increase the public awareness regarding this initiative, the Federation of Liberian Youth (FLY) launched a campaign in collaboration with USAID to sensitize the people and inform them about what they can expect from the TRC. The local youth organisation in Voinjama grasped this opportunity to bring young people from various backgrounds together and come forward to the community speaking in one voice. Members of LOYA and NEPI therefore organised a two-day workshop which was supposed to be the start of a one-month campaign in which they had to reach as many people as possible.

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After breakfast was served, the first session of the day consisted of different explanations on what the TRC is and why this commission is organised in Liberia. The meeting took place in the local church and was packed with young people. The respected elders, who attended nearly every meeting that is organised, were absent during that day. Since the organisation had lacked of the personal background of the participants, this event brought ‘ex-combatants’ and others together as one. The first day there was an obvious distinction between both groups which sat at a different side
of the church. After the official sessions, there was an opportunity to ask questions about what was said. Most questions at that time came from victims of the war who wondered about what the TRC could do for them. One example is that of a young boy who explained how his parents and his brother were killed during the war and that, since his father supported him to go to school, he now does not attend school anymore. He asked whether the TRC could pay for his school fees. The negative answer to this type of questions stirred the crowd and provoked some frustration in the participant and resulted in expressions like “we may forgive but never forget”. Most of the ‘ex-combatants’ that spoke that day seemed quite satisfied with the fact that they only had to tell the truth and that they had to be forgiven by their victims. When the organisers explained that the TRC is there to hear the truth and to try to reconcile the different parties rather than to judge on right or wrong, one of the participants concluded in a short statement in Liberian English that, for the most part, “the TRC, da trouble”.

The second day of the workshop I noticed a significant change in the atmosphere. Firstly, there was a huge row about the fact that there was no breakfast served and that everybody was hungry. The main aim of that second day was to explain the practical side of the campaign. The distinction that existed between the ‘ex-combatants’ and the others the first day disappeared once the organisers explained that the T-shirts and the umbrellas that were promised to the participants so that the community members they want to reach with the action can recognise them, would not be distributed that same day. It was like the participants found each other in their frustration towards the organisers.

When I asked one of the organisers how it is possible that ‘ex-combatants’ are involved in this campaign, since they are the perpetrators and will be asked to account for their actions during the war, he explained to me that this campaign is merely a public awareness campaign and that anybody can do that. The way he sees it, it is just “youth sensitizing other youth, regardless of their background”.67

This initiative, also referred to as ‘youth for truth’ brought young people together, not only to launch a campaign on the TRC, but also to create a feeling of solidarity among young people. Even for the organisers, it is not clear whether the TRC will turn out to be positive for the future of social relations. They are convinced that this is a tricky question but for now it is a special opportunity to bring youth together and to come out to the community under that identity marker.68 The complexity of identity is shown by the problems that rose the first day with the distinction between ‘ex-combatants’ and the others. Another difficult question with regard to identity in the TRC process is the rigid distinction that is made between the perpetrators and the victims. I recorded many stories of ‘ex-combatants’ who started fighting because their parents got killed during the fighting and they had nobody left to turn to. In this sense, they are both victims and perpetrators at the same time. The language in which the workshop was conducted was English, this corresponds with what I presented about the

67 The TRC launch campaign organised by LOYA and NEPI took place at Voinjama, 31/08/2006 and 01/09/2006
68 Johnson, 01/09/2006
interreligious council in Zorzor. Here too the stress is on the identity as youth and therefore, the ethnic or religious background is less relevant. Although a lot of the explanations had to be simplified so that everybody could understand, English serves here as a neutral language.

What members of the youth movement try to establish is not an easy task. Since the organisation was founded only one and a half years ago, they are still working on their program and trying to establish their position in the social field. Up till now they did not manage to convince everybody about their ideas. This became clear in a conversation I had with one of the organisers about the participant’s frustration because they did not receive what was promised to them. His first reaction was the expression of anger and frustration. He could not understand the “selfish greed” expressed by the participants. He explained that he is not in this for the money. The only reason why people know him everywhere he goes is that he talks to them and tries to explain what it is he stands for. “The first thing is to make them understand what we want for the future. And that is change”.

Figure 4: LOYA members launch the ‘Youth for Truth’ awareness campaign

Johnson, 02/09/2006
At the end of the second day I had a talk with one of the members of LOYA to discuss the general objective of the youth organisation. The organisation was officially founded January 15, 2004 under the official motto ‘Peace, Unity, Reconciliation & development. As “concerned Youths” they felt they could make a difference. But to do so, they had to get organised and structured. They wanted to change the mentality from one of war to one of development. Regarding the opposition between elders and youth he said that the elders seem to feel as if they are in control, in power. But because of the young people are getting organised, the elders start feeling threatened. He talked about claims and counterclaims. In the eyes of the elders, the youth are responsible for the destruction of the country during the war while the youth, in turn argue that the war came to Liberia because of the bad governance by the elders. What happens now is that the elders reclaim the positions they held before the war. If this attempt will be successful, many young people fear there will be no change whatsoever and everything will return to the way it was before the war. An important question that was raised during an interview with some of the leaders of the organisation concerned how they interpret the notion of youth. They all agreed that youth cannot be limited to the issue of age. Although one of them explained that, to belong to the category of youth, one should be under the age of thirty. Since he is very actively involved in the organisation I asked him whether he would just leave everything behind when he reached the age of thirty. He then responded that as long as he gets a positive response from other youth and they think he is doing a good job, he will continue his work. They believe they can set an example by proving to be a role model for others. Therefore “its not age that matters, it’s a mentality” whereby a difference is made through positive actions. Upon the question what distinguishes them from elders they became more assertive. The elders, they claim, are responsible for the past but youth “do not count on the past”, they on the contrary “count on the present day and the future”. The motto “youth for change” therefore indicates what they stand for. Up till now, however, they still feel marginalised to a certain extent. With their organisations they “try to be included” within the domain of policymaking because now only the demands of the elders are addressed. This imminent exclusion was also pointed out to me when I was talking to one of the ‘ex-combatants’ who stated that it is extremely difficult for them to get a good piece of land to engage in agricultural production since the distribution of land is controlled by local chiefs.

70 Draft Constitution and Bye-Laws for the Lofa Youth Association
71 LOYA Spokesperson, 01/09/2006
72 LOYA board members, 09/08/2006
Young people, especially those who engaged in the fighting, are often allocated inferior pieces of land for their farms.

4.3.4 Institutionalized and Structured Identities

One of the major points on the LOYA agenda is a rethinking of the Liberia as a nation state. On several occasions different members of the organisation expressed their frustration about how they are not given the same opportunities as for instance the people from the capital. The overall unemployment rate in Liberia is around 85% but despite this there are still people coming from outside Liberia to occupy the more important positions, especially when it comes to the presence of international NGO’s. Members from LOYA find this hard to accept since they believe that in Lofa County there is enough qualified personnel to occupy those positions. The same goes for people coming in from Monrovia. In the preamble of the organisation’s draft constitution it is clearly stated that they are “totally gearing at progressive Developmental programs and activities, for the Development of our County and indeed the improvement of the living standard of the entire Lofians”. The geographical focus on the County leads them to urge for an increasing autonomy by decentralising economic and political activities. Some see this time as an opportunity to rebuild Liberia anew and are willing to go as far as reshaping Liberia as a federal state rather than a nation state. By handling geographic boundaries as a means of categorisation they take away the attention away from more common ways of identification. They say to “seek welfare […] beyond all reasonable doubts irrespective of Origin, Tribe, Religion, Customs, Traditions, Creed, Colour [sic] or Affiliation”.

4.3.5 NEPI, LOYA and Social Practice

The concern with broader social and political dynamics and changes is shared by members of NEPI. In contrast to what their name might imply, they are busy whit a lot more than merely the reintegration of ‘ex-combatants’. The latter nonetheless remains their main focus group. In what follows I will demonstrate the broad scope of issues the organisation is dealing with. Their main activity is the organisation of workshops on different subjects. Both ‘ex-
combatant’ and non-combatant youth are allowed in these classes. There is no explicit
between both groups. The ID-card for ‘ex-combatants’ is not required. The organisers stressed
that they bring the participants together under the denominator youth. The distinction between
both categories is therefore made irrelevant. The workshop is being held at different locations
in the town and conducted by different instructors to make them accessible for as many
people as possible. One example is the session on good governance which I already
mentioned before. This session comprised of an initial explication of what good governance
is. The teachers draw on a general guideline that helps them to organise the meeting. In
addition of the speech, which they have to ‘break down’ so that everybody is able to
understand and follow the session, the teachers make use of illustrations to make their point
clear. This also has to do with the fact that some of the participants are not able to read very
well since they dropped out because of the conflict. The sessions are kept practical in the
sense that they are highly interactive. People are made to think about what they are learning.
In this particular session the participants were asked to think of examples of both good and
bad leadership in their own community starting from their own family. More important was
that they had to explain why they believe this is the case. This could often lead to discussions
because of the various backgrounds of the participants. But the organisers strongly hold to the
principle that everybody’s opinion is worth listening to and has to be respected. One of the
main issues addressed throughout these sessions is the self-awareness of the participants and
their ability to make a difference. At the end of every series of sessions the participants
receive a certificate that can serve as a reference when they try to find a job later on. The
graduation is celebrated during a whole day of ceremonies and activities like drama
performances or football games where the emphasis on youth is always articulated. In a way
these gatherings are organised by and for youth.

Their working methods do not always stroke with those of other organisations. One of
the leaders of the organisation explained to me how he foresaw the failure of a first attempt to
disarm the combatants in 2004 which led to another outbreak of fighting. He even wrote a
letter to the authorities to explain the importance of involving the former commanders in the
post conflict transition whereby ‘ex-combatants’ need to be reintegrated. Today NEPI has
some of the former commanders from the region employed to reach as many young ‘ex-
combatants’ as possible. They still have a serious influence over some ‘ex-combatants’. This
is clear in the example of the TRC launch campaign earlier in this section. Here the former
commander was mobilised to talk about what was going to happen. The man spoke movingly
and with a lot of authority. Whenever somebody tended to fall asleep or was not paying
attention he picked on them or made them stand up and repeat what he said. Even merely the fact that he spoke at this meeting is surprising since there is a good chance that he will be identified as a perpetrator once the TRC comes to Voinjama. He openly talked about how he committed several severe crimes during the conflict and can happen to him when the TRC comes into Liberia. At that particular moment in that context he is there because of what he did in the past but there is a difference with the label of ‘ex-combatants’ since he is not their in the position of a victim but is rather involved in a constructive way whereby his experience is appreciated by the organisers and the participants.

Later that week, after the TRC meeting, there was another graduation ceremony for the participants of the NEPI workshops. This graduation was however somewhat different than others.

A few days before the ceremony a small delegation from Monrovia arrived to participate in the activities and to evaluate the office in Voinjama. Despite several obstacles like the terrible road conditions during the rain season, there is regular contact between Monrovia and Voinjama. Most of the time, staff from Voinjama travels to Monrovia but because of this initiative the delegation chose to come to Voinjama. In the morning there was an official ceremony that was no different than other ceremonies. On the program were drama performances, games and speeches from trainers and participants. As is the case in almost any meeting there also were some representatives from the local authorities and international organisations present. The official ceremony ended with music whereby everybody started dancing and celebrating. For the first time since long I sensed an extremely positive atmosphere among the participants. One of the participants expressed his feelings by saying that by being part of this program, he got something that will definitely help him with his future. He was also convinced that all youth “speak the same language”. A young woman who complained to me about the trouble of finding any money to buy food came to me that day and, since food was being distributed that day, stated: “I’m part of the program now, I eat well!”

In the afternoon there was the start of a two day sports event which brought young people together. The men played football while the women played kickball, a special and very popular version of baseball played with a football that is kicked into the field. The competition was open for all youth regardless of their participation in the program. The different teams that entered the competition were divided according to the different quarters in Voinjama. All of the participants were very enthusiast about this initiative, especially because they got brand new outfits that were brought by the delegation from Monrovia. The competition also evoked some tensions between the different teams. The sense of belonging was comparable to the desire to win the competition. Some started ‘palava’ because some of the teams were said to include players from outside their quarters. While the teams were playing at the public school football field they attracted a lot of spectators from all over town. Some came to see

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75 Workshop participant, 08/09/2006
76 Workshop participant, 08/09/2006
the game. Others just hung out with their friends and enjoyed the music that was playing. Under the motto ‘sports for peace’ youth played together for two days sending out a strong message to the community.

During one of the breaks I was at the NEPI office where the organisers expressed their frustration about the lack of interest by UNMIL to support their initiative. Even my efforts to advocate for the initiative did not change that attitude. The conversation quickly shifted to a related subject. Those present at that time all agreed that prices at the local market increased because of the international presence in town. “Something that used to cost five dollars, today costs thirty” one man stated. Johnson, one of the NEPI leaders, refused to just ascribe this to the presence of the international community. He argues that “it is a problem of our community, they don’t think of their future. They know the reality for the people in Lofa County, they suffer so there is no use to raise the prices. They should help each other instead of just taking advantage of the situation”. His talk mainly focussed on the geographic area of the County. He hardly talked about these questions in terms of the nation. He for example also expressed to be a born Lofian. This attitude corresponds with that of members of LOYA who strife for more autonomy on County level.

The above presented narrative is interesting from several perspectives. First of all it shows how young people, again regardless of their background, are brought together. Although that feeling is not the same for everybody, some are just there to play football, the representation towards the rest of the community strongly emphasis the importance of the notion youth. The same goes for the graduation ceremony where they show the local and international authorities how local youth are able to provide an answer to the current situation and cope with the many difficulties they encounter. The fact that the authorities do not recognise the organisation and their initiatives is significant for the difficulty to gain influence in the field of power. The second point is closely related to this. The statement by Johnson demonstrates the commitment of the leadership and the awareness of their independence. He denounces the position of a victim. Instead of ascribing the difficulties within the community to the presence of the international community he turns to the community in search for a cause. It is also important to consider the context when talking about the notion of identity. Although, in general, the participants came together as one group there emerged an intra-group distinction shift in identity when it came to the division of the teams. The division between the different quarters in town is not completely harmless. Some inhabitants on several occasions tried to convince me that everybody is allowed to live wherever they like. Others, on the other hand, stated that people are “living next to each other and not with each other”. The boundaries between the different quarters are not to be interpreted as a rigid demarcation of single units.

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77 The man is talking about Liberian Dollars, not USD.
78 Musa, 05/09/2006
79 Abigail, 26/08/2006
but rather as flexible borders between different groups mostly along ethnic and religious lines. One striking example to illustrate this occurred when I was walking through town with a Loma woman. When we reached Mandingo Quarter, which is inhabited by a large majority of Mandingo, she refused to pass through their area and suggested we would make a detour.

There is a strong link with the position of youth in post-war Sierra Leone where the opening and closure of social spaces and the articulation of identity fits the model of social navigation in similar ways as in Liberia. Ruben Eberlein (2006) argues that a re-territorialisation of power and domination occurred because of the massive interventions from the outside world. On the one hand these transfers of social, economic and political capital were applied to reconstruct local rule. The major beneficiaries of these interventions were the ‘traditional’ authorities and the chiefs. This reinstallation of ‘traditional’ rule in a local context might suggest that nothing changed compared to the situation as it was before, and that eventually led to the outbreak of violence. Contrary to this interpretation Eberlein argues that change has happened. One example is the significant change in the connotation of the term ‘youth’:

“It was widely used to describe marginalised actors in the services of political entrepreneurs before and during the war. Today, independence and individual autonomy vis-à-vis those actors as well as social development are central issues for respective organisations and their activists. Their practice mirrors both a rejection of gerontocracy as well as its continuation in a new form.” (Eberlein 2006: 27)

This interpretation shows how social relations draw on what happened in the past. Against this background social relations are constantly infused by ‘new’ spheres of influence from both inside and outside that lead to a renegotiation of the existing relations.

The stories I presented in this section reflect a constant shift in the position that is held by local youth within a moveable social field. This shift is complex and dynamic which implies a constant renegotiation of the existing relations. It is therefore difficult to draw solid conclusions on the origin of these movements and the causes for which they came into existence. It is even more difficult to foresee how far the influence of these movements will carry both in time and space. It is clear that both LOYA and NEPI are recently established organisations. One could say that they only just entered the room and are about to get a seat at the table where the negotiations take place. Leaders of both organisations are stepping forward with their ideas and thoughts and try to reach out to others. Their successful mobilisation of other youth to engage them under that denominator demonstrates the openness
towards the changing social relations. I believe it is therefore not possible, or at least not very
difficult to evaluate the occurring dynamics. In my analysis I merely try to grasp the
complexity of the social reality within this post conflict setting.
Chapter Five: Conclusion

In the introduction of this thesis I presented one general issue which I addressed throughout my analysis. Assuming that it is possible to renegotiate social relations I looked at how these dynamics occurred in the Liberian context. In this chapter I shall try to set out some general concluding remarks based on the analysis I presented in the previous chapters. The aim here is not to present a solid, incontestable conclusion that closes every possible discussion. I rather bundle some general thoughts by making the link between the historical dynamics, my own empirical data and the analytical concepts as they are presented in the first chapter. These reflections are – to stay within the terminology – open for negotiation and further discussion.

In the first chapter I presented the theory on social navigation based on the work of Henrik Vigh (2006). From there I moved on to present some reflection on the notions of conflict and violence to end with the theory of articulation in order to analyse the politics of identity. For this chapter I shall move in the opposite direction and start with the politics of identity to end with the theory on social navigation as I see it in post conflict Liberia. One commonality between all of these theoretical assumptions is that they all stress that social dynamics are contextually embedded. This implies that a certain flexibility is needed in order to interpret the occurring events.

The general argument I raise throughout this thesis goes against a determinist interpretation of any social context. In chapter two I elaborate extensively on how the distinction between the settlers and the indigenous groups cannot be interpreted as absolute or natural. With this approach in mind I shed my light on dynamics that shaped the history of Liberia. A scale sensitive analysis of these dynamics shows how both geographic (e.g. national, regional) and social boundaries are never fixed, nor impermeable. By starting from the example in Côte d’Ivoire (Chauveau and Dozon 1987), I showed how the Liberian nation state emerged because of interaction between protagonists and antagonists. The influence of the articulation of an ethnic identity further infused the ongoing dynamics when the Liberian hinterland was included into the scope of the settler regime. This identity cannot be seen as merely imposed by the settlers but was the result of a negotiation because of a shift in the social terrain. This ethnic identity is, as I have shown, only one of the multiple identities that constituted the complexity of the social reality.

The question of identity is addressed even more explicitly in chapter three where I present a deconstructed image of young people in Liberian society. Although the analysis in
this chapter is very specific – with a narrow focus – it gives an idea of the complexity of the social terrain within which agents try to negotiate their position through the articulation of identity. From this perspective, it becomes clear that youth is best to be approached as a social category. They navigate the structures that attempt to position them. Two different visions (e.g. Murphy 1980, Moran 2006) on how to interpret this process demonstrate that this navigation is never a one-sided story. The focus on the politics of identity and the position of youth during the conflict further elaborates on this. Firstly, this analysis corresponds with the assumption that conflict is best to be approached as a social project constituted by social agents. While part of chapter two accounts for the conflict from an outsiders’ perspective, chapter three goes further in the sense that it represents the views from an insider’s point of view. This perspective, without ignoring the dynamics that surround it, gives us an insight on the position of youth during the conflict. The focus on the social agents makes it possible to see the involvement of youth in the conflict within the frame of a continuum between war and peace. This continuum proves to make sense when addressing the occurrence of different types of violence and how these shift over time.

The identity of combatant youth has proven to be complex and flexible. Moreover through the different articulations of identity, which are most explicitly shown in social practice, young combatants managed to influence the existing social relations. The complexity of the social context and, accordingly, that of categorization are also a relevant issue in this chapter. The starting point in this analysis is the position of youth. I therefore focus on the position of young people who were actively engaged in combatant. This implies that I do not address the issue of ‘combatants’ in general. The same goes for my analysis in chapter four where I address the position of ‘ex-combatants’. Here too, my focus is on young people who are labelled as such rather than an inclusive account for this group. This further implies that there is no strict distinction to be made between the category of youth and those young people who engaged in the fighting. I found it important therefore to include a brief section addressing the position of non-combatant youth as well. Apart from an internal differentiation of the identity marker ‘combatant’ which I elaborated more thorough, it is important to realise that the label non-combatant also serves as a possible articulated identity.

In chapter four I sketch a rather complex picture of post conflict dynamics. Based on empirical data I gathered during three months of fieldwork I present a cohesive and comprehensive image of how social relations are (re-)negotiated through the articulation of identity in a non-transparent social terrain that is always in motion. The distinction I uphold between the category of ‘ex-combatants’ and ‘youth’ may appear as strict or rigid but nothing
stands further from the truth. This distinction mainly serves an analytical purpose. My argument here is that categorisations are never clear-cut. Upholding the assumption that the category ‘ex-combatants’ is simply imposed ‘from above’ while the category of youth emerges ‘from below’ raises some questions. Since these movements do not emerge in a socio-political or geographical void it is important to consider the context that surrounds these dynamics. Based on the assumptions I present in my analytical frame (cf. Chapter One) I argue that categories are to be seen as movements within a scale-sensitive model. The actor’s perspective than becomes the focus of analysis. Dynamics ‘from above’ imply that the actors perceive them as coming from above in a downscaling process. Dynamics ‘from below’ on the other hand are perceived as such in a process of upscaling. The analysis I present moreover shows that both identities overlap and influence each other. Neither one of the articulations of identity are exclusive. It is possible to belong to the category ‘ex-combatants’ and at the same time to affiliate oneself with the category of youth. The positioning depends primarily on the context one finds him- or herself in. The identity marker ‘ex-combatants’ is a more expensive one because it has higher requirements based on the formalized and institutionalized demands of the authorities who set out the rules that shape the structure which is tactically navigated by social agents. It is interesting here to note the importance of paying attention to what may at first sight appear to be contradicting opinions. At first these contradiction might work somewhat confusing since this makes it difficult to see a clear consensus on the addressed topics. My analysis shows that leaving out some opinions in order to be able to present a homogenous picture is never a solution. The best example is that of the analysis of the position of ‘ex-combatants’ in the community because it are these different attitudes – or better the positioning – towards the official program that constitute the multiple trajectories towards reintegration.

In this next step I point to the relation between the articulation of identity and the theory of social navigation. The section ‘post conflict transformations’ in chapter four serves primary to point to the emerging socio-political change in the region in and around Voinjama and more generally post conflict Liberia. The shifting socio-political circumstances that are discussed there form the background against which agents seek to position themselves in relation to the social forces that structure and organize the social terrain. It is important to always keep in mind that this positioning results from the production of different identities which, as I have often shown, on their turn are the result of the constant play of history, culture and power (Hall 1990). For the ‘ex-combatants’ this is clear when it comes to the relation they uphold with their former commanders. These relations have taken on a different
from together with the context that has undergone some significantly changes. The same goes for members of the youth movement for whom their motivation to get organized is a reaction to the way elders addressed certain issues. On example of how social agents correspond to the emerging socio-political change and ‘use’ this in their articulation of identity is demonstrated by the ‘youth for truth’ campaign through which the youth were able to present under that category inside the community.

Though the concept of navigation and the works of articulation imply that identities are always multiple and complex, the room for manoeuvre is never completely free. The category ‘ex-combatants’ here serves as a good example to show that the room for manoeuvre is limited. Although they are able to play with the label of ‘ex-combatants’ they also have to account for the opinions and ideas from not only the international community that orchestrates the programme but even more so from other community members. The ‘ghetto’ serves as an example of how the social terrain is differentiated. Inside of their ‘shop’, ‘ex-combatants’ are able to discuss issues of reintegration freely. They are moreover able to discuss the connotations of the label and the stigmatisation that comes with it. On the other hand, from the outside, people regard those who visit the place to be ‘ex-combatants’. This limitation also goes for those who represent themselves primarily as ‘youth’ although the limitations here are far more indirect and implicit because of the less formalized character of their identity. To illustrate this I refer to the problems they experience in their attempts to legitimate their position with the established policy makers. On the one hand the presence of outsiders – the international community – opens the way for the youth to enter the field of power while, on the other hand, their contributions are not (yet) regarded as a valuable which makes that they have to show up at meetings uninvited and try to raise their voice their. The actions undertaken by ‘ex-combatants’ and youth in Liberia however show that tactic navigation makes it possible to make the best of, use and bend the rules that are strategically set out by those who aim at consolidating their position.

In short the play of history, culture and power makes it possible for the politics of identity to make a significant difference when it comes to processes of social navigation towards the ‘right’ horizon. I moreover argue that the politics of identity serve as a main incentive to determine the direction of that navigation which results in the constant renegotiation of social relations.
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