The Violence of Numbers: Consensus, Competition, and the Negotiation of Disputes in Sierra Leone

Madame Marianne Ferme

Cite this document:

Document generated on 02/06/2016
Abstract
Representations of the civil war in Sierra Leone have remained within the exceptionalist discourse characteristic of much of the literature on crises in Africa since the 1970s. By contrast, this article argues that in order to understand the logic of wartime violence, one must focus on its ordinary, structural forms, which are at work in the apparently technical procedures of peacetime governance. It examines the "normal" operations of democratic politics (especially elections), dispute resolution, and the state's techniques of enumeration and classification (the census, taxation, development planning). In all cases, the search for clear outcomes—such as the creation of winners and losers in elections and court cases—alternates with ambiguous strategies that undercut the presumption of finality in such processes. These strategies are deployed by the state's subjects, in efforts to construct alternative subjectivities that escape the exceptionalist logic of modem forms of power.

Résumé
La violence du dénombrement: consensus, compétition et résolution des conflits en Sierra Leone. — Les analyses relatives à la guerre civile sierra-léonaïse ont surtout mis l'accent sur la vertu d'exception de ce conflit à l'instar de la plupart de la littérature consacrée aux crises qui affectent l'Afrique depuis les années 1970. À l'inverse, cet article tente de montrer que pour saisir la logique de la violence guerrière, on doit concentrer l'attention sur ses formes structurales, lesquelles sont également à l'oeuvre dans les procédures techniques normales de la gestion des affaires publiques en temps de paix. L'auteur décrit ainsi les opérations "normales" de la vie politique démocratique, en particulier les élections, la résolution des conflits ainsi que les techniques étatiques de dénombrement et de classement (recensement, fiscalité, développement). Dans tous ces cas, la recherche de résultats tranchés (gagnants et perdants des élections ou des procès) contraste avec les stratégies ambiguës qui contrarient les fins visées par ces processus. Ces stratégies sont développées par les citoyens de façon à construire des niches subjectives qui échappent à la logique d'exception qui caractérise les formes modernes de pouvoir.
Visible and Invisible Violence

During the 1990s, the violence associated with civil wars fought in Sierra Leone and Liberia was defined as “exceptional” and gruesome. Images of the war exhibited mutilated victims and trophies made with body parts, often displayed by smiling armed youths dressed in military uniform, women’s wigs and attire, and carrying children’s toys. The fact that the body—both of victims and of perpetrators—is the privileged terrain for staging violence is common to all warfare, and therefore not unique to the Sierra Leonean case. What must be emphasized, however, is that this strategy restricts definitions of violence to its more visible (that is,

* I am grateful to Gerry Berreman, Nelson Graburn, Bogumil Jewsiewicki, Kent Lightfoot, Donald Moore, Laura Nader, John Ogbu, Aihwa Ong, Janet Roitman, and Liu Xin for comments on earlier drafts of this article. I alone am responsible for having only selectively followed their advice. Luca D’Isanto’s advice and support have helped all along.

1. For a detailed analysis of the Sierra Leonean conflict through 1996, see Richards (1996) and Riley (1996). Abdullah (1997) takes issue with these accounts, but this and other articles on the Sierra Leone civil war in a special issue of Africa Development appeared after this essay was written.

It suggests that there is always a relationship between violence and its visibility, while its other forms "tend to be ignored and, in the process, forgotten or devalued" (Weber 1997: 82). This distinction between visible and non-visible violence is centered on their relationship with mortality. Through the institutionalization of the other as enemy, wartime exhibits violence, always in proximity to death, as "the form of an act performed by one subject upon another... War makes death into a spectacle that can be observed by spectators who can, for the time of their inspection, forget that it is also an endemic condition that resists all representation and calculation" (ibid.: 99).

This article does not address visible violence, but privileges instead its structural forms, in the modern projects of state administration, rationalization, and governance. My argument is that one must focus on these practices to understand even the more "spectacular" manifestations of violence, the exceptional outbreak of war. But what is the relationship between the exercise of force that threatens the body's integrity and survival, and other forms of structural or symbolic violence? This very distinction is a disputed theoretical problem, because it is predicated on the existence of a "pure" state of violence, which is a radical break from peacetime. The problem with this position is that extreme forms of symbolic violence do endanger life—they produce casualties through practices such as neglect and marginalization. Likewise, extreme forms of power are violent: "symbolic violence really adds a dimension to violence, without which the latter would generally not be possible. In other words, violence could not organize and generalize itself, nor sustain itself subjectively (indeed, one might ask whether there really is a violence without rationalization..." (Balibar 1995: 10-12; my translation). Balibar's point is that though the threshold between physical and symbolic violence must be identified in particular conflicts, it is virtually impossible to sustain such a distinction on an analytical level in the long run.

Thus this article examines violence in unfamiliar places, in domains where the disciplinary projects of state administration, government, and modernization unfold—the practices sometimes associated with the peaceful control of an open society (for example, by Habermas and Popper). I argue that among some rural Sierra Leoneans, these processes are perceived as violent because they are governed by a logic of "winner-take-all" which is considered a factor of social fragmentation and polarization for example, in electoral politics. The very notion of open political competition is viewed as potentially dangerous and violent. By contrast,

2. The distinction between structural and symbolic violence is discussed in SCHEPER-HUGHES (1997a). The former is associated by the author with state and other institutional practices, whereas the latter is discussed by Bourdieu in several of his works, as an aspect of hierarchical relations in small-scale societies, forms of religious piety, "honor," the monopoly of "cultural capital," etc. (see BOURDIEU & WACQANT 1992: 116-149).
the same social actors who view these processes with suspicion champion the social cohesiveness of consensus-building in “traditional” African political idioms, such as the Mende practice of “hanging heads”. While there are violent elements in processes such as “hanging heads”—the suppression of dissent that is necessary to reach the fiction of social consensus—their open-ended and provisional form is often better suited to hold conflict at bay, than the finality of vote counts in competitive elections.

The Rhetoric of Exception

Though the bulk of this article is devoted to the ordinary domains of structural violence outlined above, one must note that the issue of its exceptional forms is linked to the more general problematic of sovereignty in political theory, and in jurisprudence. This topic has been of particular interest to theorists who, following Carl Schmitt, Hannah Arendt, and Michel Foucault, have analysed the increasing normality of the suspension of ordinary law and rights in modern forms of state sovereignty and governmentality. Carl Schmitt’s definition of sovereignty as “a borderline concept” bears repeating here:

“Sovereign is he who decides on the exception.

Only this definition can do justice to a borderline concept. Contrary to the imprecise terminology that is found in popular literature, a borderline concept is not a vague concept, but one pertaining to the outermost sphere. This definition of sovereignty must therefore be associated with a borderline case and not with routine... the exception is to be understood to refer to a general concept in the theory of the state, and not merely to a construct applied to any emergency decree or state of siege” (Schmitt 1985 [1922]: 5).

In a provocative essay, Giorgio Agamben saw in the concentration camp the manifestation of “normal” modern sovereignty. Though the camp as a space of exception found its extreme manifestations in twentieth century Europe, it was invented and first applied in nineteenth century colonial settings like the South African Boer war (Agamben 1997). Indeed, the exclusionary logic of South Africa’s apartheid regime—and the routine suspension of rights under its states of emergency—were a prime example of the normalization of exception in totalitarian states. Mahmood Mamdani has argued that far from being unique to South Africa, apartheid was “the generic form of the colonial state in Africa” (Mamdani 1996: 8)—considered the exception, it was in fact the rule. Whether one agrees or not with the larger points Agamben and Mamdani have made, the fact that the logic of exception (and the camp) was most fully developed under colonial jurisdiction has significant implications for postcolonial forms of authority and law.

Thus it is not surprising that the discourse of exception has crept into
the rhetoric of “crisis” featured in African studies since the 1980’s. Through litanies of misery where scenarios of uncontrollable birthrates and ecological degradation alternate with narratives of crisis that emphasize how corrective measures work everywhere, “except in Africa,” an imaginary Africa has been produced (Roe 1995: 1065). This discourse on exception uses analogical thinking as a substitute for comparative analysis: in the absence of a fitting analogy, African models—whether of the peasantry or of the state—can only be excluded from similarities with other parts of the world (Mamdani 1996: 11-13). The focus on crisis and warfare ignores the continent’s diversity, and the healthy economic, political, and social phenomena that are invisible because excluded from the official statistics that support its scenarios.1

Scholars have countered these representations of violence in Africa by emphasizing that particular conflicts are best understood in the context either of geopolitics and regional inequalities, or of a local perspective on cultures of violence.2 Alternatively, systemic violence and crisis are seen as distinctive features of everyday life in postcolonial Africa (e.g., Bayart 1993; Mbembe 1992; Mbembe & Roitman 1995). What still needs to be emphasized is that moments of violence always have their own distinctive, culturally and historically informed semantics. They “are shaped by each society’s particular history and myths of collective identity and are energized by sedimented memories of threats to the collectivity” (Coronil & Skurski 1991: 289).

3. See, for example, the World Bank’s 1989 report, Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth, which documented the debt crisis of the preceding decade, and the failure for political reasons of efforts by international donors to impose economic reforms through structural adjustment programs, as a condition for further loans or debt relief. This influential report triggered countless scholarly responses on the subject of “crisis” in Africa (e.g., Mbembe 1990; Ravenhill 1990; Richards 1995; Sandbrook 1990; Watts 1989).

4. Consider how Africa observers have characterized the “lost decade” of the 1980s: “The litany of statistics that marks the continent’s declining living standard is staggering. Africa’s economic growth rate is 1.5 percent—the world’s lowest and it claims 32 of the bottom 40 countries on the U.N. annual development index, a measure of comparative economic and political progress. Food production is 20 percent lower now than it was in 1970, when the population was half the size” (Michaels 1992/93: 95-96). By contrast, studies of African political economies on the ground observed in the same period proliferation of “alternative modes of accumulation outside the formal circuits of the national economy,” for example through savings associations that handled enough capital to pose a serious threat to the official banking sector (Gschwend & Konings 1993: 22). On the subject of conflict, works on Africa that have analyzed the end of warfare rather than its proliferation have been largely ignored (see Marchal & Messié 1997).

5. Besteman (1996, 1998) and Lewis (1998) have engaged in one such debate over violence in Somalia leading up to and following the fall of Siyaad Barre in 1991-92. In this debate, Besteman took the first position I have outlined, whereas Lewis analyzed the continuities between this modern conflict and long-standing traditions of social banditry and warlordism in the region.
Even spontaneous outbursts of violence are expressed in familiar cultural idioms, for instance, of clan warfare, or of hunters who harness supernatural agencies to become invisible and invulnerable to bullets. This does not mean that these shared idioms are not also used to express new situations and ideas, or to accommodate different configurations of forces in modern conflicts. The most apparently irrational, random, and “bizarre” violence has its own logic (minimally, that of appearing irrational, so as to undermine efforts to organize against it), which can generate movements of counter-violence in the name of the same idiom.6

State repression also operates through shared cultural idioms, where “officialdom and the people have many references in common, not the least of which is a certain conception of the aesthetics and stylistics of power, the way it operates and expands” (Mbareebe 1992: 9). These idioms of power are often inscribed on the body and its functions, as the crisis of meaning precipitated by violence makes it a privileged terrain on which to reorganize the encompassing “body politic” (Coronil & Skurski 1991: 290). Hence “the politics of the belly,” which, as Bayart (1993) and others have demonstrated, has become a common idiom of power in Africa.

Paul Richards has argued that the idiom of power in the Sierra Leonean conflict is shaped more by “the media flows and cultural hybridizations that make up global modernity,” than by the geopolitics of the Cold War that had characterized earlier African conflicts (Richards 1996: xvii). As evidence, Richards points out that young fighters in Sierra Leone and in other African conflicts are steeped in the imagery of popular film characters, and are as likely to draw on Rambo as on the regionally-resonant lore of forest hunting for their symbolic inspiration.7 More to the point, global information flows channeled through the media can increase awareness of common predicaments among youth separated by vast distances. In April-May 1992, youth gangs fighting in the streets of Mogadiscio learned of the racially-charged Los Angeles riots through radio news broadcasts, and saw connections between their own struggle and that of the African-American “brothers” they dreamt of joining (Marchal 1993: 299).

6. On the relationship between historical memory of violence as a factor in renewing conflict, and on the idioms of violence among Hutu refugees in Tanzania, see Malkki (1995: 89-99). In a different setting, K. Wilson (1992) analyzes idioms of violence in the Mozambican war, where Renamo harnessed supernatural forces and power magic in waging its bloody civil war, but was countered by government forces and grassroots anti-war movements through similar techniques. Both the Tanzanian and the Mozambican cases point to the fact that idioms of power and violence are often shared by perpetrators and victims (Wilson 1992: 559-561).

However, an emphasis on the common thread of a global youth subculture obscures how its idioms and images are appropriated in particular circumstances, for specific conflicts. Mary Moran has shown that Liberian history and culture provide a different understanding of the eclectic cross-cultural borrowings of young warriors from their portrayals in the visual imagery of the war. War reports had focused on the bizarre practice of Liberian fighters conducting massacres in women’s wigs and négligés—a practice also adopted later in Sierra Leone. In the context of warfare, the juxtaposition of elements of feminine eroticism with military attire appeared grotesque to these observers. By contrast, Moran argued that this practice could be seen “as an attempt to retrieve the power of the indigenous warrior as well as an implicit protest against the soldier as the agent of an oppressive state” (Moran 1985: 81). In a context where warrior status could be achieved by both men and women, crossdressing bespoke a choice of this historically resonant identity over that of modern masculine soldiers associated with the militarization of Liberian life under Roe’s dictatorship (1995: 79-82). One might add that the question of disguise in warfare—whether across gender lines or not—needs to be addressed in order to understand the cultural logic of such practices.

In modern Sierra Leone, there are similar links between warfare and cross-dressing. The ceremonies marking the end of men’s initiation into the Wunde society are replete with warlike symbolism, as is befitting an institution intimately linked with the history of warfare in Kpa Mende society (Abraham 1978: 253-254; Little 1951: 240). These large-scale initiations are attended by high-ranking national politicians, business people, and otherwise prominent figures. Their final ceremonies unfold like military exercises: dozens, if not hundreds, of spear-bearing “warriors” stage mock battles with spies and enemy groups. But the procession of warriors that marks the initiates’ return to town from the initiation “bush” is led by men dressed as women—whose elaborate feather headaddresses account for their being called “birds.” During the 1985 Wunde initiation in Taiama, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sierra Leone was among the dignitaries in cross-dress leading the parade, and among this group were men in full drag, with women’s wigs, stuffed brassieres, makeup, and jewelry.

The gendered symbolism of conflicts in this region of West Africa reminds us that certain forms and idioms of violence remain concealed because they do not “count” as such. In part this is because, as suggested above, the relationship of these forms of violence with mortality is denied. The description of war symbolism in this region as “bizarre”

8. Moton (1926: 247) referred to these kamakworsia (lit., extraordinary, marvelous eagles) as “peacemakers,” a role also historically linked to women. During a 1985 Wunde initiation in Taiama, kamakworsia were also referred to as spies, who unnoticed like birds in the sky—or apparently harmless women supply the intelligence crucial to warfare.
says more about the observer's inability to associate female cultural domains with life-taking instead of life-giving capacities, than about alternative idioms of violence". However, as I will show later, countervailing strategies are also ignored—primarily the emerging forms of subjectivities that arise in response to the state's politics of numbers, its taxes and fines, imposed court appearances, and humiliating imprisonments. These strategies counter the ambiguous use by the state of purportedly technical and transparent counting—and accounting—operations, with ambiguities at different levels.

Case Studies in the Politics of Numbers

In Sierra Leone as elsewhere, structural forms of violence are often linked to processes of enumeration and classification—the politics of numbers—embedded in elections, the census, development planning, and taxation. However, numbers are also crucial in documenting such violence. This is particularly true with political violence involving state institutions like the police, which have the means for suppressing the circulation of information (see Van der Veer 1997: 189). Victims demand to be counted, often against efforts of state institutions to conceal the effects of political or structural violence (Das 1985: 4). The latter is especially difficult to account for in terms of numbers of victims, whose counting must work against the grain not of deliberate concealment, but of bureaucratic indifference, and in the absence of accurate documentation in official records about causes of mortality and disease (see Scheper-Hughes 1997b). Van der Veer also points to the irony that in India, it is often "the politics of numbers in deciding modern elections" that is the precipitating factor in communal violence, and yet its victims demand body counts and forms of accountability that inscribe themselves within the same logic.

However, purportedly beneficial development projects also depend on the politics of numbers. When decisions are made to build schools, dig wells, or improve roads, they are made on the basis of demographics—population numbers, settlement size, and so on. In the spring of 1990, after years of attempts to have a well dug in Kpuawala, residents were told that the minimum number of inhabitants for qualifying for the program was 250.10 Employees of the development scheme in charge of the well

9. Conversely, Mende women appropriate the idiom of warfare while performing clitoridectomies in the context of Sande society initiations, and while assisting in childbirth, two potentially life-threatening situations. Kpuawala midwives would incite women in labor do "fight this battle" (a muni ndapi ji giò).

10. Fieldwork in Wunde Chieftdom, Sierra Leone, was carried out for two years in 1984-86, and for several months in 1990 and 1993. Funding for this research, and support for periods of writing, is gratefully acknowledged from the Fulbright-Hays program (U.S. Department of Education), the Carter G. Woodson Institute
program also said that since the project was nearing the end of its funds, the fact that this particular village was barely above the cutoff point—with only 254 inhabitants—meant that it probably would be bypassed in favor of larger communities that still did not have good sources of drinking water. The Paramount Chief insisted that the 1985 census figures which put the village population at 254 were not accurate. He claimed that people were intimidated at the sight of government census officers, and hence concealed in the bush, failing to be counted.

During the same period, the community was trying to get an extension of the chiefdom headquarter’s primary school established in town. Here too, the Ministry of Education’s minimum of 40 enrolled children had to be met in order to be assigned a resident teacher. Since there were not enough children in the right age group, at first other ages were included in the enrollment lists, then pupils were recruited from neighboring villages, and finally town elders began putting pressure on parents who had children in other chiefdom schools to bring them back and enroll them locally. Most of the numbers required for development projects seemed to underscore the equation between “bigger” and “better.” Ironically, by 1993 the population in Kpuawala had swollen by over a third of its size during the previous decade, due to the influx of rural people displaced by the civil war. By then, the main problem with qualifying for development or food aid connected with United Nations and other war relief programs was that one had to be registered as a displaced person. This could be done by moving into UN camps, or to Sierra Leone’s larger towns, where food distribution centers were located. However, if personal safety permitted it, most rural Sierra Leoneans tried to avoid moving to camps and towns during the war, given the prevalence there of disease and crowded living conditions. At the same time, aid organizations and government personnel were encouraging rural populations to stay put and absorb those in their midst who had been displaced by the war, through increased agricultural production. To this end, in 1993 tools, seed rice, and vegetable cuttings were brought to the Wunde rural areas, but no arrangements were made for feeding people in the months leading up to the harvest. In the face of this contradictory behavior, rural people displaced by the war became adept at playing the government’s own numbers game. The same people registered in the rosters of several refugee camps and support centers, and travelled between them to collect food on the different distribution days. The redistribution of these resources in rural areas surrounding Wunde chiefdom averted the food crises that occurred later on in the war, when the systematic destruction of villages caused greater levels of population displacement.

(University of Virginia), the Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies, and the Hellman Family Faculty Fund (University of California, Berkeley).
Size held the advantage on the national political arena as well. During the 1986 parliamentary elections, Kpuawala was the polling station for five nearby settlements that were less accessible by road, an area for which the 1981 electoral rosters used for the occasion listed about 1,178 voters. This figure was considerably higher than the total population for all the communities in the electoral circumscription. For Kpuawala alone, the rosters listed about twice as many voters as the total resident population. To account for this number inflation, one must keep in mind Kpuawala’s encounter with “development demographics” in its efforts to qualify for a well and a school. But other factors were at work as well. In the 1980s, census and electoral lists were used to allocate—through the member of parliament (MP) for a particular constituency—the rice donated to the Sierra Leonean government under international aid programs. This rice was supposed to be sold to constituencies at government-controlled prices during the rainy season, when food was scarce. Instead, it became a powerful tool in expanding the MP’s personal political networks. When in the 1986 rainy season Wunde people complained to the MP’s local supporters about the absence of subsidized rice, they were told that this was because the government had not allocated enough for the chiefdom population. This deficit only reinforced their conviction that they were not accounted for—nor were they accurately counted—in the government’s calculations.

Taxation and Identities

There were advantages in underreporting numbers as well, as was made implicitly clear by the Paramount Chief’s claim that people hid at census time and hence were not counted. This was because census figures were used for taxation purposes, and “heads of household”—most adult males and a few independent women supporting themselves through trade—were in no hurry to be counted among the ranks of taxpayers. In January, the time for paying annual taxes, delays in the government’s delivery of receipt books to the chiefdoms prevented most of the male population from traveling, for fear of being caught at police checkpoints without evidence of payment. In the 1980s, many rural Sierra Leoneans did not have identification cards, so tax receipts with a person’s name and residence were the only evidence of identity and citizenship—no representation without taxation. Unless people could bribe policemen at the myriad checkpoints set up along motorable roads, they could be summarily roughed up and detained. Further, regardless of one’s tax status or sex, or of the time of the year, dealing with the delays caused on urban and rural roads by ad hoc road blocks set up by policemen and others in search of supplementary income has increasingly become a “normal” feature of life in Sierra Leone and other postcolonial African nations—
one of the banal, everyday abuses of authority by state agents (see Mbembe 1992).

In Sierra Leone, this use of state authority to pursue private gains must also be seen within the context of the government’s failure to pay regular living wages to its employees. The latter responded to this impasse with creative enterprises of their own. In the late 1980’s, a group of employees of the Sierra Leone Public Works Department took the initiative of periodically maintaining on their own a tract of the notoriously treacherous, unpaved road linking the town of Kenema to the Liberian border—just West of Kailahun. They also set up a checkpoint to exact a toll for their labor from passing motorists, whom they stopped and threatened if they refused payment. Having refused to pay, I became involved in a tense argument, during which the men eventually made the compelling point that it was only fair for them to be compensated for privately repairing a public highway, given that its maintenance—and their salaries—were no longer state priorities.\(^{11}\)

Though taxes in Sierra Leone are levied on persons, in the rural Mende hinterlands they are still known as “house taxes,” a reminder of the colonial “hut tax” that was collected beginning in January 1898—two years after the region became a British Protectorate. Indeed, collection of this tax sparked an insurrection in 1898, which the British administration referred to as the “Hut Tax War,” and which is still remembered in Mendeland as the “British War” (puu ga).\(^{12}\) For the Sierra Leonean hinterland at least, taxation and loss of sovereignty became coterminous. “Normal” aspects of the incorporation into the colonial state—whose successor, a century later, still used the tax receipt as a crucial marker of citizenship.

Through the beginning of the civil war of 1991, visits to Mendeland by government officials—District Officers and others—who toured rural areas in January to collect taxes were still referred to as the “coming of the white people” (puu bla tua wua), even though the civil servants were Sierra Leoneans. Their visits were preceded by the same preparations as the treks of British colonial civil servants. Chiefdom clerks toured villages to ensure that latrines were in sufficient numbers and properly built, that houses were in good repair, and that births, deaths, marriages, and initiations had been properly licensed and recorded. The inevitable discovery of sanitary and other infractions, or of the failure to declare deaths and

12. Puu na has more complex connotations than Britishness; it refers to the recent colonial power, but also more generally to Euro-Americans and others who come from overseas for limited amounts of time, especially on development or government-related business. In Mendeland, for example, African American “Peace Corps” volunteers are also called puu bla (pl.), but not so missionaries (madesia, fathers, sistesia, sisters), and South Asian (India bla) and Lebanese (Sui bla, “Syrians”) merchants long established in Sierra Leone.
births, led to fines, followed by the injunction to repair the offensive latrine, procure the missing document, etc., before the arrival of the D.O. At the same time, Paramount Chiefs would call for mandatory road maintenance labor, collective hunting parties, and for rice and oil donations to feed the visiting dignitaries.

Thus numbers, taxes, and labor extraction have long been linked projects of incorporation by colonial and postcolonial states, with specific resonances in Mende historical consciousness. The politics of numbers appeared to be driven by a contradictory logic, where undercounting was preferable in some instances, and overcounting in others. Given the ambiguity of the state’s use of numbers—sometimes to benefit, other times to benefit from its citizens—many rural Sierra Leoneans saw counting and defining as contentious issues. To them, these were not technical procedures for neutrally recording statistical information to be used by a bureaucratic apparatus, but rather political acts aimed at exposing and controlling people, in ways that inevitably led to violence. As I show in the next section, these forms of control shaped not only the outcome of political processes, but also their idiom. Census counts, electoral and taxpayers’ lists were “documents whose manifest rhetoric [was] technical (that is, positivist, transparent, and neutral) but whose subtext [was] contestatory (in regard to superiors) and disciplinary (in regard to inferiors)” (Appadurai 1996: 121). Nowhere was this more obvious than in the reduction of complex political relations to a matter of votes—votes courted or bought, and ultimately counted—that accompanied electoral politics. Often, political contests were mediated by an idiom of fear, shame, humiliation, and potential resentment. The response of Sierra Leoneans to the opacity of the state’s use of instruments like votes and numbers to expose political alliances and fiscal responsibilities was often to deploy an ambiguity of their own—to exploit the contestatory subtext of enumeration. I now turn to two arenas where both this ambiguity and the potential for violence that generated it were manifested: electoral politics and court cases.

Countering the Logic of Out-Voting

Numbers may not be considered concrete or final, not only because they are thought to be inflated or under-reported, but in the larger sense of not carrying the weight of conclusive empirical evidence. Thus in Sierra Leonean elections, the vote outcome marked less the end of strategic maneuvering for political office, than its continuation through other events. The vote count established winners and losers, a relationship expressed through the idiom of consumption (winners “ate” losers, taa ti mee lɔ), or of physical weakness (losers “fell,” or were “knocked over”
by winners, *taa ti gula, taa gula*. These events pertained to the public realm, but parallel to this was the domain of covert politics. The articulation of public and secret negotiations was not peculiar to electoral politics; it was also an aspect of “hanging heads,” the process of reaching consensus that was seen by participants as a central feature of Mende political processes at other levels. What made the ballot particularly odious and potentially violent was its clear identification of winners and losers, and the resulting allocation of victory’s spoils to the former—with nothing but debts and humiliation for the latter. By contrast, in the consensus-building processes I describe later, the final outcome at least appeared inclusive of all participants (see Murphy 1990). The search for consensus thus contaminated electoral politics as well, where—at least at the local level—efforts were made to have candidates run unopposed.

In the history of modern Sierra Leonean politics, elections were usually contested, a fact belied by the practice of discouraging competition by convincing challengers to drop out of races. Part of the reason why contested elections were thought to lead to violence had to do with the dynamics of competition in single-party elections, which had been the norm in Sierra Leone politics for over twenty years preceding the 1996 multi-party ballot. In the absence of multiple parties, and with relatively open conditions for candidacy, competition shifted from the national to the chiefdom level, where political rivalries were potentially more divisive and violent, because they reproduced pre-existing factional oppositions between ruling families.

In the 1986 national elections in Wunde chiefdom, for example, a challenger to the incumbent—who was running for reelection—was asked to drop out of contention in order to avoid dividing the constituency. The stakes were raised by the fact that, as was often the case in Sierra Leonean electoral politics, both candidates were related to local chiefly families (Kilson 1966; Tangri 1978: 166). After lengthy negotiations that took place mostly behind the scenes, Vandi Jimmy (VJ)—the challenger—appeared to withdraw his candidacy. The public rhetoric accompanying requests that VJ drop out of the race had pointed to the value of unity in electoral politics. This constituted a rejection of the competitive element from elections, which was seen as leading to violence. Part of the expectation of violence was built on the recollection of past ballots, especially the one held in 1982. In that election, four years earlier, the division of a neighboring constituency between two candidates from the same area resulted in unprecedented violence. Several people died, and

13. The Mende version of English electoral terminology was also used *ti winna* for s/he won. I discuss the implication of the use of the English *politisi* to keep distinct the domain of electoral politics from other forms of power negotiations in FERME (forthcoming).

14. For a detailed analysis of the elections discussed in this section, see FERME (forthcoming).
entire villages had been burnt and never rebuilt (see Kandeh 1992: 96; Hayward & Dumbuya 1985: 80-81). Many survivors from those events were now living in Wunde, and were among the audience to whom this precedent was being given to justify having a ballot with a single, unopposed candidate.

During the 1986 campaign, the production of consensus was construed as a “traditional” Mende political value, and as an alternative to competitive elections. However, the autocratic potential of this rhetoric of unity was reflected in its appropriation by the state in the 1970s, to legitimize the transition to the All People’s Congress (APC) single-party rule (Ferme, forthcoming). The argument then made by President Siaka Stevens was that the post-Independence multi-party ballots in Sierra Leone had become increasingly violent because of the growing identification between each party and particular ethnic groups. In order to prevent ethnic divisions in national politics, Stevens proposed to modify the Sierra Leone constitution to legalize single-party rule—whose consensual basis, he suggested, was more consistent with “African” political forms. However, the increasing violence surrounding elections in the 1970s must also be linked to a de facto turn to single-party rule, in a system where the government party, the APC, prevented an oppositional politics (through the use of various strategies, including physical aggression).

In Wunde, the 1986 parliamentary elections were fraught with ambiguity and violence, partly due to the prospect of a divided constituency, and the memory of the previous ballot. By contrast, the same elections were characterized by Western observers as among the least violent and most “democratic” of the post-independence period (Hayward & Kandeh 1987: 27). For social scientist, of course, the absence of physical coercion, the presence of rational debate, and the peaceful exercise of free individual choice are the hallmarks of liberal democratic forms of participation.

During the early phases of the 1986 electoral campaign—when VJ was supposedly being persuaded to withdraw—public speeches in support of Dr. Dabo, the incumbent, were later disavowed through letters or personal communications with VJ’s supporters. Even VJ’s brother—who ruled one of the chiefdom’s four subdivisions—took every opportunity to say in public that he had tried his hardest to convince him not to run. Thus from the beginning public pronouncements and negotiations alternated with often contradictory covert practices. These stages coexisted, rather than alternating dialectically, because people presumed that political allegiances were multiple and overlapping. This was due, among other things, to the fact that the same people were bound by ties of kinship, marriage, and patronage to both candidates.

Both candidates in the 1986 ballot belonged to the same party, and thus deployed its symbol and development-oriented electoral platform. But there were significant contrasts as well. Dr. Dabo, the incumbent,
drove around in a Mercedes and appeared at rallies surrounded by a “Unity Force” of supporters dressed in the red and white party colors. By contrast, VJ, the candidate for change, never wore the colors, nor did his retinue. More substantially, VJ’s rhetoric underscored his links to a prominent Mende lineage in the region, which included among its ancestry a famous anti-colonial war chief. VJ followers stressed their candidate’s roots in the land by displaying symbols such as palm leaves and fruits during meetings. The choice of this particular emblem inscribed VJ’s challenge not only within the rhetoric he was fond of expounding that of a “son of the soil” intent on upsetting the entrenched power of a chieftdom elite of “foreign” (Mandingo) origin, whose fortune was instead based in trade and urban, professional employment. The palm leaf also was reminiscent of liberation struggles in the past—for example, of the 1898 insurrection against British authority, where it supposedly served as a signal for coordinating the insurgency while maintaining the element of surprise. In the more recent history of modern electoral politics, the palm leaf was also the emblem of the now suppressed Sierra Leone Peoples’ Party (SLPP)—which was strongly identified with the Mende region. Thus the use of such polysemic imagery by VJ’s supporters served both to legitimate his political challenge through an appropriation of historical symbols with deep local resonances, and more specifically to raise the specter of an oppositional politics even under the APC’s single-party rule.

As election day came closer, those who openly supported VJ were harassed by the Dabo faction. Chiefs found their authority diminished as their subjects ignored their directives and calls to meetings, marriages were strained as in-laws threatened to break up those which crossed political fault lines, and so on. The tension built up over the days separating the ballot from the announcement of results. The news of VJ’s upset victory only briefly interrupted the general anxiety with a celebration—which already incorporated taunts and humiliations directed at his opponent’s backers during the preceding campaign. Soon the same fear of violence, aggression by the opposing party, and public humiliation that had characterized the campaign resumed this time fueled by the suspicion of covert machinations by supporters of Dr. Dabo, the losing MP.

Celebrations for VJ’s inauguration as the new MP at the chieftdom headquarters (this opponent’s territory) were interrupted by a swarm of killer bees, which descended on the crowd and put an abrupt end to the event. VJ’s supporters left the Paramount Chief’s compound in haste, while commenting that this was a sign that their political opponents were not resigned to defeat. In any case, VJ’s followers lost no time in evening scores, and began harassing their erstwhile harassers. The beatings and public humiliation to which Dabo supporters were submitted were partly in retaliation for similar actions of their own during the campaign when it appeared that their own candidate had the upper hand. However, this
violence was also considered part of how winners made losers of their opponents in the ordinary course of electoral politics. Consequently, even those on the receiving end of violence and harassment seemed to expect it; they would comment on the badness of their situation, but were not surprised by it, and conceded that they would do the same as winners. This attitude also left room for suspicion that losers were always working behind the scenes to overturn the outcome of elections—an attitude that appeared to be justified by successive developments in this particular case.

During the months following VJ’s election and inauguration, supporters of the Paramount Chief and his brother were chased from villages under suspicion of having been spies, and those in chiefly positions were replaced. However, a few months after the election, VJ lost his seat—and very nearly his life—when he was implicated in an alleged attempt to overthrow the national government. Rumors circulating in the chieftdom attributed VJ’s implication in the coup attempt to the covert machinations of Dr. Dabo and his supporters. According to this perspective, this was the logical follow-up to the bee attack unleashed by the disgruntled losers. At this point, those who had taken a strong position in favor of VJ after the electoral results—and had felt safe harassing his political opponents—found themselves on the receiving end of violence, fines, and public humiliation. Those who from the beginning had doubted the finality of electoral results felt confirmed in their skepticism by this outcome. They also suggested that VJ’s demise despite his electoral victory pointed to the necessity of maintaining multiple and ambiguous allegiances—and of negotiating them both publicly and secretly—in order to avoid losing in politics.

In this perspective, even after the votes were in, counted, and made public, the electoral outcome had not been decided. The deciding factor in the elections was concealed in the domain of covert politics. Public and covert politics, peace and violence, ambiguity and the desire for transparency were central to the logic of the ballot, and these were simultaneous elements, not dialectical stages alternating with each other. The logic of power was seen as one of dissimulation, a practice more consistent with the indeterminacy and apparent inclusiveness of consensus-building than the wins and losses of the ballot. Individual success in politics was predicated on the management of ambiguity. This process included creating the perception that one had the support of occult agencies of power, such as witchcraft, which could turn the political tide in one’s favor even in the face of a clear electoral loss. This perception was conveyed, among

15. Another factor that accounted for the fact that vote counts were not intrinsically persuasive evidence of an electoral victory was the suspicion of tampering and fraud accusations that always accompanied the ballot. But this was a problem of defective, or failed, execution, and hence did not address the logic of voting that I am interested in exploring here.
other things, by the consultation of ritual specialists and the acquisition of substances thought to enhance one's oratorical and political charisma, or to provide protection from the evil designs of adversaries. The widespread belief that politicians resorted to such secret practices shaped how people decoded public political events. It explained, for example, why there had been considerable skepticism at the news of VJ's withdrawal early in the campaign, and little surprise when it became apparent that he had not in fact abandoned the contest. This gap between expressed and unstated intentions has become an integral part of modern Sierra Leonean electoral politics—its major symptom being the frequency with which candidates dropped out of contests, or entered them, at the last minute.

Violence and the fear of it shaped outcomes of elections and successions to power at all levels, including local chiefships. The common triggers of violence were shame (ngufé) and the resentment it generated, which often targeted the opponent's body discursively, in lieu of physical harm. Political opponents were shamed by singing in public songs that revealed embarrassing, concealed physical deformities, the infidelity of a spouse, or quirky personal habits. As with physical violence, in this case too the body was a privileged site for reworking the political order—its weaknesses and defects becoming the grounds for social exclusion. This kind of humiliation was seen as a byproduct of the logic of outvoting. Far from being an inevitable element of power-sharing in the democratic process, losing the ballot became identified with fundamental physical and social weaknesses. Conversely, winning was associated with special physical and supernatural attributes. And the creation of opposing camps of winners and losers was considered both a product and a harbinger of violence. Often, this logic of winner-take-all was rejected in the power-sharing arrangements devised after elections, in efforts to curtail the buildup of resentment that could scuttle and reverse the electoral outcome in the long run—as happened with the Wunde case discussed here.

In the final analysis, these elections, like most elections under single party rule in Sierra Leone, staged a performance of consensus and unity that, on the surface, seemed inimical to democratic competition. And yet VJ's upset victory did unseat an incumbent who had controlled proportionately more of the economic and political resources normally necessary to win elections. Furthermore, the use by VJ's supporters of palm tree symbolism suggested that even under single-party rule people continued to appeal at other levels to an oppositional politics. But this was a politics whose violence was ultimately overdetermined by its inscription within the oppositional idiom of winners and losers. To this violent logic, people opposed the ambiguity of secret political allegiances and negotiations alongside public ones, which relativized its effects.
The Everyday Logic of Disputes

One of the reasons why electoral contests were seen as inherently violent was that they produced, through the logic of counted preferences, clear, opposing camps of winners and losers. This logic was shared with warfare and court cases, which were also productive of longterm resentment and violence. One of the standard features of Mende political and juridical practices has historically been the alternation between collective, public, and open proceedings to air disagreements, with the retreat of the opposing parties to “hang heads” (*ngu hite*) in separate settings, for secret talks. Hanging heads was the process through which contentious issues and honest feelings could be expressed and worked out, to reach a consensus in the public arena, where a final decision or judgement was rendered. More generally, people retreated to hang heads whenever they needed information necessary to competently act in public, or to address a gathering. Visitors to rural communities retreated to hang heads with their host in the course of formal introductions to the collectivity, to ensure that they gave “greeting kola” (*fama loli*) appropriately to representatives of all the major categories of leading citizens (town chief, ward chiefs, imams, leading women, blacksmiths, labor groups, etc.). Thus though hanging heads was not limited to the dispute process, it was a domain for holding discussions that either were unacceptable in public, or provided background information for public acts and words.

In the literature on legal processes in this region, there is a more or less explicit distinction between activities that take place in the “native courts” established by the colonial state and its successor, and what has sometimes been referred to as local-level “moots.” The distinction is often implicit: one finds that anywhere legal proceedings “in the chief’s courts” is being described, these correspond to the highest order chiefs—Paramount Chiefs—whose courts are also the lowest-level ones in the national administration of justice. This is a court where written records are kept, and where written summons are served by uniformed chieftdom

16. However, see Nader (1990) on “harmony ideology” a product of missionary and colonial legal systems both as a result of direct intervention, and as a self-imposed feature of “native” courts, to preserve some degree of autonomy. For British colonial constructs of African consensus-based rule, see Asad (1973), and for how this was developed through courts, see Chanock (1985).

17. Though kola nut still has important economic, social, and ritual uses—including in formal introductions—money is what changes hands in these transactions. Hanging heads in the context of giving greeting kola is necessary to inform outsiders about groups that have formal representation in village-level administrative, legal, and political procedures (such as in court cases, or whenever major decisions for the collectivity are taken), as well as to help them give appropriate amounts of money. Greeting fees are seen as tokens, and their amount is therefore seldom questioned, at least in public. However, they should be given in amounts that reflect status differentials among categories of recipients.
police. The latter also assist in the enforcement of verdicts, including imprisonment (see Little 1951: 185ff; Abraham 1978: 126-7; 130; Wallis 1905).

By contrast, the lower-level legal proceedings—respectively, in the courts of ward-heads, village chiefs, and section chiefs—are considered “informal” proceedings, and often referred to as “moots” (see Bohannan 1957; Gibbs 1963). It is precisely this level that is open to the “therapeutic” logic of consensus, with its emphasis on not assigning blame, but rather on airing all perspectives on the disputes involved, and in avoiding punitive measures against any losers when it is unavoidable to have these. By contrast, the higher level courts are seen as much more feared and harsh in their deliberations, and in their sharp assignation of blame and victory (Gibbs 1963). Thus, moots are about the quest for consensus and reconciliation, whereas court cases are about assigning blame—they create winners and losers. Indeed, for this very reason, the courts are deliberately sought out by those who within a moot setting are not likely to receive a fair hearing (Booth 1992; Chanock 1985; Colson 1974).

However, it is important to see both the search for consensus and the logic of winners and losers as part of a continuum. This links the normal procedures for solving everyday disputes with extraordinary measures—appeals to higher courts—taken by those who feel they have suffered an unbearable injustice. For most Wunde people, the term, *kəti*—a deformation of the English “court”—referred to all contexts of litigation. People did draw a distinction between *sumansi*—being summoned to the chiefdom court several miles away, through a written document delivered by an officer in uniform—and *məjəge*, the generic Mende term for lawsuit. The proceedings falling under these categories also involved different amounts of money: both lawsuits and fines resulting from them became increasingly expensive as one moved from the village to the chiefdom level.18 This was one incentive to settle disputes through consensus at the lowest possible level, but it did not always work—partly because of the perception among litigants that people closer to them might also be less impartial. Thus the perception that dispute settlement processes formed a continuum, rather than being qualitatively different, was reinforced by the fact that appeals to the next level were common.

There were also crucial differences between court cases heard inside the house and those held in the chiefdom headquarters. Fines levied in the latter were not only bigger, they also went partly to the court, while the offended parties were only reimbursed for their legal expenses. This

---

18. The Paramount Chief’s verdict could also be appealed, either to another neighboring Paramount Chief, or to the District Officer’s court in the Provincial Headquarters, Bo. But the latter seldom happened. During my first two years of residence in Wunde, I learned of only one case where this happened, and it involved an agent in a development scheme based in Bo, outside the chiefdom court’s jurisdiction.
was a general feature of colonial and postcolonial courts elsewhere in Africa (see Chanock 1985). By contrast, fines levied in domestic, ward, or village cases were often shared among community elders and the aggrieved party. More importantly, these court cases could also have inconclusive outcomes (which were not necessarily "therapeutic" compromises), through the skillful handling of the alternation between secretive "hanging heads" sessions and public hearings, or the oratorical skills of witnesses to the dispute.

In one case that grew out of an evening gathering in a compound, a disgruntled visitor complained to the ward head about his host, who had not delivered a promised consignment of palm oil for a third party, the plaintiff's friend. The visitor also claimed that his host had demonstrated his bad faith by never making an effort to meet his obligation. The dispute was hijacked by another guest in the household, who began to question what the accuser meant by "deceit," and how it fit with ordinary local usages of the term. As a result, the hearing did not conclude with a clear assignation of "apologies" to one side and the damning accusation of "having lied/being in the wrong" to the other. (The Mende formula for closing court cases, bi leele, bi lei mole, translates as "you have lied, or you are in the wrong, but apologies to you"—words that the person presiding over the hearing says while pointing in turn to the losing and the winning party). Nonetheless, elements of the original complaint were woven into the apparently unrelated philosophical discussion of deceit. It was ascertained that the host in question had indeed approached a young man to cut palm fruits for him, since he himself was incapable of climbing palm trees. This went some way towards convincing the visitor that his host had at last intended to comply with his promise. The young man who had been hired to cut the palm fruits had done his job, but had failed to inform anyone of this—probably, the elders speculated, because he hoped to process the oil for other uses. By the end of the evening, the young palm-fruit-cutter had been called in the presence of his elders and was told to process the oil, and deliver the goods by the next day. This he did, and the hearing—which had been adjourned the previous night to a non-specified date after the oil delivery—never formally continued, or ended. This outcome resulted not from an inability to clearly assign blame, but from tactics of ambiguity and deferral employed by the contending parties, which often resulted in the indefinite adjournment of hearings. Future disputes between the same parties might then bring back to light these previous offenses. Thus in the court setting, as in the domain of politics, it was the accumulation of past, everyday wrongs—and their re-presentation in other contexts—that triggered the danger of renewed disputes and violence.
I have argued that practices and institutions in which the modern projects of democratization, rationalization, and modernization are embedded in Sierra Leone—electoral politics, the court system, the census, taxation—are often seen as violent and exclusionary because of the turbulent history of their introduction into the territory. Though taxation existed in many parts of precolonial Africa, what made it more onerous in many colonial states was the fact that the latter integrated the majority of their subjects through strategies of exclusion. In Sierra Leone, these were strategies that differentiated between “natives” and settlers, colonizers and colonized, Protectorate and Colony, and which excluded subjects classified under one or the other category from the same legal rights and social services. Indirect rule, customary law, and various forms of racial segregation were among the forms of this process of inclusion within the colonial state through the exclusion from equal rights. At Independence, this historical legacy, which has largely remained intact in local administration and justice systems, was supplemented by the political tools of more egalitarian forms of state rule, whose violence was exposed, however, in the process of translation.

It is not easy to represent these forms of violence because they usually lack the “televisability” of the exceptional outbreak, with its inscription on the body. However, more visible forms of physical violence must be related to some of the ordinary, structural abuses to which Sierra Leoneans have been subjected on an ongoing basis. Among other things, it is in relationship to this structural domain that one can understand the idioms of violence and power specific to particular conflicts. Rural Sierra Leoneans have historically experienced violence in connection with the purportedly technical, ordinary procedures of state integration and control (taxes, elections, the census, and so on), and hence continue to see these domains as highly contentious sources of social disruption and inequity. This experience has been strengthened by the post-independence politics of single-party rule, and by the punitive and apparently arbitrary economy of development.

The political nature of domains constructed as being outside politics, such as the courts, is underscored by the fact that they are seen instead as being governed by the same ambiguous logic of electoral politics. In both settings, people use the same Mende-ized English language of “winning” and “losing.” They also express their distaste for such outcomes, and a preference for a negotiated consensus, for fear of the retribution and violence embedded in openly competitive political processes. This even though some prefer the clarity and finality of a court decision for strategic reasons of their own, and many in practice recognize that the process of reaching consensus can also be violent. At the same time, the ambiguity masked by numbers and clear distinctions between winners and losers is exposed in countervailing strategies of appropriation, which limit the violent effects of imported ideals of liberal democratic politics. The
constraint of having to choose one side to the exclusion of another violates the perception by rural Sierra Leoneans that they are members of overlapping kin and patronage networks. Thus they address this conflict by strategically manipulating public and covert politics, and by subverting the significance—and the very outcome—of elections and court cases. Ironically, as the cases discussed here suggest, the outcomes of such processes can be democratic and just in spirit, if not in form. This region’s troubled history suggests that it is precisely through the ambiguous articulations of public and secret practices that the devastating effects of warfare—as well as of more ordinary forms of violence—have been mitigated and, sometimes, reversed.

Department of Anthropology,
University of California, Berkeley.

REFERENCES

ABDULLAH, I.

ABRAHAM, A.
1978 Mende Politics and Government under Colonial Rule (Freetown: University of Sierra Leone Press).

AGAMBEN, G.

APPADURAI, A.

ASAD, T.

BALIBAR, É.

BAYART, J.-F.
Bensman, C.

Bohannan, P.

Booth, A. R.

Bourdieu, P. & Wacquant, L.

Chanock, M.

Colson, E.

Coronil, F. & Skurski, J.

Das, V.

Enloé, C.

Ferme, M.

Geschiere, P. & Konings, P., eds
Gibbs, J.

Hayward, F. & Dumbuya, A.

Hayward, F. & Kande, J.

Kandeh, P.

Kande, J.

Kilson, M.

Lewis, I. M.

Little, K.

Malkki, L.

Mamdani, M.

Marchal, R.

Marchal, R. & Messiah, C.
MIRIAM H. A.

MIRIAM H. A. & ROFFMAN, J.

MICHAELS, M.

MIGLIOLO, F.

MORAN, M.

MURPHY, W.

NADER, L.

RAVENHILL, J.

RICHARDS, P.

RILEY, S.

ROL, E.

SANDERSTOCK, R.

SCHEPER-HUGHES, N.
Representations of the civil war in Sierra Leone have remained within the exceptionalist discourse characteristic of much of the literature on crises in Africa since the 1970s. By contrast, this article argues that in order to understand the logic of wartime violence, one must focus on its ordinary, structural forms, which are at work in the apparently technical procedures of peacetime governance. It examines the "normal" operations of democratic politics (especially elections), dispute resolution, and the state's techniques of enumeration and classification (the census, taxation, development planning). In all cases, the search for clear outcomes—such
as the creation of winners and losers in elections and court cases—alters with ambiguous strategies that undercut the presumption of finality in such processes. These strategies are deployed by the state's subjects, in efforts to construct alternative subjectivities that escape the exceptionalist logic of modern forms of power.

**Resume**

La violence du dénombrement : consensus, compétition et résolution des conflits en Sierra Leone. Les analyses relatives à la guerre civile sierra-léonaise ont surtout mis l'accent sur la vertu d'exception de ce conflit a l'instar de la plupart de la littérature consacrée aux crises qui affectent l'Afrique depuis les années 1970. À l'inverse, cet article tente de montrer que pour saisir la logique de la violence guerrière, on doit concentrer l'attention sur ses formes structurales, lesquelles sont également à l'oeuvre dans les procédures techniques normales de la gestion des affaires publiques en temps de paix. L'auteur décrit ainsi les opérations “normales” de la vie politique démocratique, en particulier les élections, la résolution des conflits ainsi que les techniques étatiques de dénombrement et de classement (recensement, fiscalité, développement). Dans tous ces cas, la recherche de résultats tranchés (gagnants et perdants des élections ou des procès) contraste avec les stratégies ambiguës qui contrarient les fins visées par ces processus. Ces stratégies sont développées par les citoyens de façon à construire des niches subjectives qui échappent à la logique d'exception qui caractérise les formes modernes de pouvoir.

Keywords/Mots-clés: Sierra Leone, Mende, Census, Court, Election, Structural violence, Sovereignty, Taxation/Sierra Leone, Mende, élection, fiscalité, recensement, souveraineté, tribunaux, violence institutionnelle.