
III Vignettes

1 'The Cocaine Saga': secrecy, visibility and the truth of politics and the economy in Sierra Leone

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Act one: Under the palm tree, Makeni January 2012 — Of African Minerals and (un) humanitarian business.

Together with Maberr¹ and Pius I'm sitting in the scarce shade of an oil-palm tree, drinking Momo's freshly tapped palmwine. As every Sunday, Pius has attended the mass with his wife and has joined us afterwards. Yet there is not much of the church's solemnity to be sensed in Pius anymore. Furiously he comments Sierra Leone's national politics. Maberr has provoked him for having lost a huge sum of money given to him by his wife. Instead of paying his tuition fees, Pius had 'invested' the money with the *Wealth Builders*, an investment company allegedly promoted by the president of Sierra Leone, which turned out to be a fraudulent scam. In Pius' eyes the government should protect its citizens from fraud, instead it complies in criminal activities as every government before. He lists people who had financed the president's election campaign now sitting in prison. Though, he adds, the majority has left the country due to connections into highest political ranks. Pius mentions the favourable license conditions and tax exemptions granted to mining companies in exchange for the construction of several 'presidential mansions' around and outside of the country. As many others in Makeni, Pius suspects the mining companies of not only carrying iron ore to the port, but also diamonds and gold. Some weeks before a *debul*, a bush spirit, had haunted the region. As many people in Makeni, Pius reads this as an alert for the immoral mining activities which had unearthed the spirit. Yet, instead of stopping the activities, as many people had asked for, the President had sent powerful experts to catch the *debul* and to ensure the continuation of mining.² Selling the country to foreigners, the president had become the richest man in Africa in only four years of presidency. Pius' voice cracks with anger:

1 All names are pseudonyms.

2 Due to the limits in length for this vignette, I cannot elaborate on this particular narrative of the *debul* haunting the materially, morally and socially wounded landscape. People identified "free-masons" — or "free-mansions" as they often called them, linking them and their invisible powers to the unfathomable riches of the national elite — as the extraordinary powerful experts trying to appease the *debul*. The narrative is part of people's negotiations of and discussions about power, value and morality in northern Sierra Leone, as I investigate into in my doctoral dissertation.

"*African Minerals*³, the 'Timber Saga' [...] and you remember the 'Cocaine Saga'? Foreigners can land with tons of cocaine. When they found the cocaine in [the airport], the brother of the minister of transport was involved. The minister had to step down. But he only went for medical treatment to the diaspora. Now he is back as a presidential advisor. The plane they used, it was a Red Cross plane. Now they say, it was fake. How can I believe them? They are fake politicians! The Red Cross did this before. [...] During the war they landed in Kabala or Mayagba, bringing weapons which the rebels paid with diamonds. White men, rebels, the president, everybody made big money. [...] Now the NGOs go away, but the companies come. [...] Last month police confiscated a container of *African Minerals*. They bring cocaine and go with our minerals. [...] A big blow for the president, after the 'Timber Saga'. He brought them in. But nothing will happen. [...] You see those moneymen now building their mansions? Like here in Makoro. Nobody knows what exactly is going on there. People disappear when they do their rituals. One thing is sure, we, the people, we pay the price" (Fieldnotes, Makeni, January 2012).

Stories about secret mansions and human sacrifices for acquiring political power are ubiquitous in these days, but Pius' remarks about NGOs and the *Red Cross* being involved in dubious activities arouse my curiosity. Since I came first to Sierra Leone, I have heard various war stories about Ukrainian mercenaries, about soldiers, vehicles and aircrafts bearing insignias of 'humanitarian' organizations, yet acting 'inhumane' or profit-oriented. It is for the first time, though, that somebody so comprehensively and explicitly claims historical continuity with war-time trickery and exploitation when accounting for today's criminal activities. These accounts of present criminal activities, these 'sagas', go beyond people's everyday experience with violence and exploitation. They involve huge amounts of money and highly illustrious individuals – stretching people's imagination to its limits. Pius' stories might sound excessive, yet they reflect the travesties of Sierra Leone's present economy and politics. They share commonalities with other narratives in which different people claim to penetrate surfaces of dissimulation to unveil the underlying secrets behind people's endeavours to enrich themselves.

Act two: In the INTERPOL office, Freetown December 2011 — The (un)intelligibility of Red Cross drug flights.

I never took people serious when they warned me about the cold that *harmattan* would bring from the Sahara in December. The chilly breeze I'm feeling now, hits me thus rather unprepared and I'm thankful for the hot *Nescafé* David has offered me in his Freetown office of the INTERPOL (International Criminal Police Organization) *National Central Bureau*.⁴ Dressed in a black suit, David only feels comfortable with the air conditioning turned to the maximum. Sitting in a heavy leather arm-chair, he carefully sips his coffee from a cup bearing the banner of 'Manchester United FC'. Only his head looks out from behind

- 3 *African Minerals Limited* exploits iron ore deposits in northern Sierra Leone. The unprocessed gravel containing iron ore is mainly shipped to China. Employing a considerable number of people and investing in different visible infrastructure projects, many people in Makeni assessed though the company's impact on the socio-economic landscape far more positively than Pius. Although links between *African Minerals* and drug trafficking could never been substantiated, rumours persisted among people in Makeni.
- 4 David is a fictitious person assembled from the various officers I talked with in national law enforcement agencies. These people did neither exclusively work for INTERPOL and the Sierra Leone Police in general. I opted to defamiliarize identities to protect my informants which talked about highly sensitive issues.

a notebook and a desktop computer, and the files piling up on his desk. While explaining to me the rationales, the successes and the failures of TOCU, he is constantly interrupted by phone calls and people bumping in. “Sorry, man, there is this operation going on, and I have to coordinate”, David apologizes. “It’s at the port, we have intelligence about drugs in a container”.

As will learn during my research, ‘intelligence-led’ and ‘centrally co-ordinated’ operations are the two guiding principles and *raison d’être* of Sierra Leone’s INTERPOL branch, cited in every document produced by and about the agency. Accordingly, David emphasizes the lack of coordination in the past leading to failures in the fight against organised crime. In his story of the day, the mere availability of intelligence, which is gathered by various agencies is a minor problem, subordinate to the lack of coordination⁵:

The year before, a helicopter had landed on one of the most prominent hospitals in Freetown, provoking hysteria, confusion and rumours among people witnessing the landing, but also among law enforcement personnel. A newspaper article reported:

“Panic gripped the environs of the Choithram Memorial Hospital yesterday when a white Helicopter landed without the knowledge of the authorities of the hospital. [...] Past experience that bothered on clandestine Helicopter landing at the Choithram Memorial Hospital with alleged consignment of cocaine revisited the minds of the people. By then, word had gone round the City of Freetown that Chief Tony, as usual has landed a consignment of suspicious material” (Standard Times 2010).

In David’s understanding of proper coordination and standards of procedures, the aviation authority should have been informed about the landing of the helicopter. They should then have passed the information onto the *Office of National Security*, which would have given a clearing: A white Puma, D-HAXR, registered in Germany – formerly flying for the *Bundesgrenzschutz*, then for the *United Nations*, and now for the *West African Rescue Association* –; an emergency flight carrying medical drugs to the hospital. Yet the information got stuck somewhere. Local police was called, journalists rushed to the hospital, and everybody spread her own version of the landing of the huge white helicopter, resembling a UN, Red Cross or NGO helicopter. David concludes his account:

“We learned in the end that the helicopter carried medicine for a foreigner who had been bitten by a rabid dog. But the people around saw that something was offloaded [...] and it could easily have been something like cocaine. [...] All this happened because of the lapsing coordination” (Fieldnotes, Freetown, December 2011). Over the coming months I met David several times in Freetown. For some weeks I lived in his house, where we indulged in our passion for tennis and football, yet also discussed his job and its challenges. When I ask him one day in a bar in central Freetown about the rumours of containers arriving up-country, packed with excavators, generators, and narcotics which are repacked for further shipment, he admits TOCU’s difficulty to generate intelligence about the flows of drugs.

“But we can gain insights by comparisons with other countries such as Guinea-Bissau. The countries are so similar. Cocaine is there. So why should it not happen here? [...] There

5 INTERPOL and other national law enforcement and security agencies rely on various sources providing intelligence. Whereas David stresses the problems of coordination, another problem is given by the difficulty of generating intelligence and getting access to available intelligence which is often retained by international agencies which are meant to collaborate with national agencies.

are signs which you can read and which tell you, if something is suspicious. [...] To bring the truth to light, you have to be clever and know to read hidden patterns. You make your analysis and interpretation based on the evidences and experiences you have. I like to learn from other experiences, I read assessment papers from other countries. And we have our own experience with the past. I told you about transports under wrong flags. Or the flags are authentic, but the load is different to the specification. [...] But we are always one step behind. You remember the helicopter, which carried medicine? We arrived late, because there was confusion. Somebody made confusion. We are not sure, if there was not something else. [...] Like with the container where we found some cocaine. There must have been much more. Perhaps they trans-shipped it at the key or on the sea, we don't know. [...] We have clues from the past in which certain people played a very unfortunate role" (Fieldnotes, Freetown, December 2011).

In his daily work, David relies thus on his personal translations of information he gathers from various sources, spanning through time and space. He combines or coordinates these disparate evidences to meaningful and convincing truths about criminal activities. For this he delves into the unknown and invisible. He breaks through the sometimes illusively transparent, sometimes opaque surface, bringing to light and making graspable the actual truth underneath, struggling though with its constant elusiveness.

Act 3: In the arm-chair, Konstanz 2014 — Delving into secrecy and visibility.

Ordinary people see themselves similarly confronted with the visible impacts of flows of people, goods and capital moving into and out of the country, but also into gated communities and fenced-off production sites where these flows undergo secret transformations which escape people's gaze and perception. With their narratives, as for example the 'Cocaine Saga', the 'Timber Saga' or the saga-in-the-making about *African Minerals*, people make the hidden and secret activities visible and understandable, trying to approach and better cope with the forces that they will never be allowed to touch. Secrecy and visibility, and their dialectical tension are familiar tropes in Sierra Leone where secret societies and secret knowledge characterize local and national politics. Secret societies spectacularly perform their secret knowledge of powerful secret transformations. Diviners, hunters and warriors enter the dark — the night and the bush — for appropriating forces for the visible rejuvenation of themselves and the community. Current juxtapositions of visibility and secrecy therefore touch upon local cosmologies and actualise "predisposed public opinions" (Ferre 2012). Different rumours thus spread about the involvement of the government, NGOs, the *Red Cross* or transnational companies in disquieting secret activities which have very visible and often violent impacts on the country and common people's lives. These institutions become the target of rumours exactly because of their bifurcated existence: on the one hand, their everyday activities are highly visible and supposedly well-known; on the other hand, they engage in a highly secret sphere of crucial and inscrutable negotiations and productions from which they extract their unfathomable power.⁶

6 Due to spatio-temporal restrictions for this presentation, I abstained here from explicitly embedding issues of rumours, in/visibility, in/explicability, suspicion and occult economies into (anthropological) theoretical debates. See e.g. Ashforth 2000; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, 2002; Geschiere 1997; West and Sanders 2003; White 2000, 2001.

David has a university degree and went through extensive training abroad, which, as he says, “enlightened” him. He has left his village and its traditions behind, joined a Pentecostal church and claims to believe only in “scientifically provable evidences”, contrary to many of his fellow citizens trapped in “superstitious beliefs” in rumours. He can rely on intelligence generated by various agencies and has access to internet to gather information. Yet, at the same time, access to certain information is foreclosed for David by institutional and infrastructural obstacles. He has to rely on his experience, his wits and ability to interpret and construct a whole out of pieces. In their narrative constructions of and claims to truth about current criminal or immoral activities, law enforcement officers and ordinary people similarly rest upon pieces of past experiences and specific ‘cultural’ knowledge of secrecy and visibility. Eluding irrefutable verification, these narratives might further veil the hidden ‘truth’. As much, however, it makes them appealing for tentatively approximating and acting on the invisible ‘truth’.

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